

December 29, 2019

REMEMBERING THE SERIOUSNESS OF SIN AND LAMENTING

Lamentations 1-2

(1 of 3 in a series through Lamentations)

Washington, D. C. is home to the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum. It covers four floors and walks you through the very beginnings of a tragic period where Jews, people with disabilities, and others suffered such atrocities that it would be difficult to speak of them. To walk through the museum itself is not an exciting trip. It will leave you speechless, astounded at the depth of evil, and perhaps even physically sick. One might wonder, then, if that's the case, why have such a museum? The answer, of course, is found in its name. It's not simply a museum but a *memorial* museum. It's there so that we might remember, learn, and never repeat these tragic events again. The museum's website notes that part of its mission is to "advance and disseminate knowledge about this unprecedented tragedy . . . and to encourage visitors to reflect upon . . . their own responsibilities as citizens of a democracy."¹ That, I would imagine, is the purpose for a number of memorials. They cause us to remember, to reflect, and to examine ourselves.

The book of Lamentations is one such memorial that I think has a similar purpose in the Scriptures. Much like the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum, I think one of the purposes of this book is to provide the readers knowledge about this tragedy and encourage us to reflect on our own lives and responsibilities before our God. It should be seen as a memorial because it was written, most likely by Jeremiah, after the destruction of Jerusalem in 587 BC as a lament over this tragic event and lasting memorial of what happened in that year. Jews to this day will gather and read the book of Lamentations aloud on the anniversary of Jerusalem's destruction.

We've noted it before when studying through other texts in the Old Testament (e.g., Jer 52, 2 Kings 25, and 2 Chron 36), but the destruction of Jerusalem was a horrifying scene. In 605 BC, the Babylonians defeated the Egyptians in battle, and from that point forward became the world power. At that same time, Judah was showing itself to be in deep rebellion against the Lord. In fact, in that same year that Babylon rose to power, Judah's king, Jehoiakim, burned the scroll of Jeremiah, demonstrating his rebellion against God's Word. Only a few years later, Jehoiakim showed himself to be as foolish as he was defiant against God's Word by leading Judah to rebel against Babylon. Nebuchadnezzar (king of Babylon) led an attack in response and not only were the Israelites defeated, but Jehoiakim was killed. His son, Jehoiachin, surrendered to Babylon, and they were spared. But it was only a matter of time until another king, Zedekiah, would lead Judah in rebellion again.

¹<https://www.ushmm.org/information/about-the-museum/mission-and-history>; accessed December 19, 2019 at 8:22 AM CST.

Jeremiah preached to Zedekiah, right at the beginning of his reign, telling him to submit to Nebuchadnezzar or the Lord would punish the people by sword, famine, and pestilence (Jer 27), but Zedekiah would not listen. And this time Nebuchadnezzar wasn't going to spare this defiant people. Babylon laid siege to the city of Jerusalem so that no one and nothing could get in or out. The siege lasted eighteen months. The people began to starve to death, and mothers began boiling and eating their own their own children (Lam 4:10) in an attempt to survive. Finally, in 587 BC a breach was made in the city, and the Babylonians invaded, Zedekiah was captured and his eyes gouged out (after being forced to witness the murder of his sons), many people were killed, many others led off into captivity, and the temple, king's house, and every other great house in the city was looted and burned. All that remained were smoldering ruins.²

It would be difficult for us to overstate the tragedy of this moment in Israelite history. The fall of Jerusalem marked the destruction of the center of worship with the temple, of the Promised Land itself as they were taken out of the land to be exiles in Babylon, and of the Davidic line, pictured in Isaiah 11 as a royal tree that was cut down to a stump. But the greatest tragedy of all was that this devastating event was brought on because of Israel's perpetual sin and rebellion against God. In other words, the fall of Jerusalem in 587 BC was an act of judgment by the Lord against his people after years of pleading with them through the prophets to repent—to no avail. And so, in light of this act of sinful rebellion and divine judgment, Jeremiah writes this lament that we begin this morning and will look at over these three weeks.

The book of Lamentations itself is quite poetic. It's broken down into five different poems which are represented as chapters in our Bibles. Chapters 1, 2, and 4 are acrostics, with each verse beginning with the next letter in the Hebrew alphabet, going from the first to last letter in the Hebrew alphabet. And because there are twenty-two letters in the Hebrew alphabet, there are twenty-two verses in chapters 1, 2, and 4. This is most likely Jeremiah's way of saying that he is covering the totality of the devastation—from A to Z, if you will. Chapter five doesn't follow this acrostic pattern, but it does keep the formula of twenty-two verses in this final poem. Finally, chapter 3 is a triple acrostic. It contains sixty-six verses where the author utilizes the first letter of the alphabet in three verses, then the second letter in verses 4-6, and so on. This serves, so it seems, to show this third poem (and chapter) is the climax of the book, which we'll look at next week. But this morning we're going to look at the first two poems, chapters 1-2.

But before we dive into these two chapters let me tell you what drew me to want to take these next three weeks to look at this book of Lamentations. There are really two reasons. The first is simply that it's part of the Bible, and I want to see the whole canon of Scripture preached at least one more time while I'm one of the pastors here. The other reason is because I think the ability to run to the Lord with your lament is one of the most crucial elements in walking in persevering obedience before the Lord. Tragedy, suffering, loss, and confronting our own sin will either lead us to distance ourselves to the Lord or run toward him, and if we do not understand the role of

²This description is drawn from Jeremiah 52 but also from Christopher Wright, *The Message of Lamentations* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2015), 23-25.

running toward the Lord in lament, then we will probably not run toward him at all during those times. Therefore, I want us to look at Lamentations as we end one year and begin the next. And what this memorial book of poems reminds us of in these first two chapters will shape today's sermon. You might even put before each point the introductory phrase, "It is good for us to remember ..." With that said, then, let us start by noting that it is good for us to remember ...

The devastating consequences of sin

As Jeremiah begins this book of laments, he is not shy about describing this tragic scene in gruesome details. He pictures the city of Jerusalem as if it were a woman who was once a princess but now has been brought low and lost everything. He writes, "How lonely sits the city that was full of people! How like a widow has she become; she who was great among the nations! She who was a princess among the provinces has become a slave" (1:1). As if the city is speaking itself, she acknowledges that there is none to comfort and none to help (1:2, 7, 16-17, 21). She asks the Lord to look and see how devastated she now is, saying in 1:20, "Look, O LORD, for I am in distress; my stomach churns; my heart is wrung within me." Then, in perhaps the most painful of section, we read in 2:11-12, "My eyes are spent with weeping; my stomach churns; my bile is poured out to the ground because of the destruction of the daughter of my people, because infants and babies faint in the streets of the city. They cry to their mothers, 'Where is bread and wine?' as they faint like a wounded man in the streets of the city, as their life is poured out on their mother's bosom." The destruction of Jerusalem pains Jeremiah so deeply he vomits. As his eyes fill with tears, his stomach is emptied. It is a devastating scene.

But Jeremiah is also very clear about the reason this has happened. It was no accident of history that the Babylonians laid siege to Jerusalem and ultimately destroyed her. It was because of the sins of God's people. These first two chapters are filled with that acknowledgement, again and again, picturing her unfaithfulness to the Lord in terms of a wife being unfaithful to her husband and chasing after other men. We read for example:

"Jerusalem sinned grievously; therefore she became filthy. . . . Her uncleanness was in her skirts; she took no thought of her future; therefore her fall is terrible; she has no comforter" (1:8-9). And the phrase is repeated again and again, "For the multitude of her transgressions . . . for I have rebelled against his word . . . because I have been very rebellious . . . because of all my transgressions" (1:5, 14, 20, 22).

Brothers and sisters, we are supposed to be sickened by this picture so that we might not forget the devastating consequences of sin. We're supposed to picture Jeremiah vomiting on the ground as he considers this terrible scene so that we might not feel the lure of sin as if it comes for us only bringing pleasure and happiness. And yet this is our temptation with sin, isn't it? The temptation is always to try to remove from our thinking the consequences our sinful actions will bring. The man who commits adultery doesn't sit outside of the hotel room before he meets up with his adulterous lover, staring at a picture of his wife and children and playing out all the painful and lasting implications his actions will have on them. The woman who takes her own life doesn't first contemplate her family finding her body and figuring out how to press on in life with

an empty chair at the kitchen table. The young man who persists in watching pornographic images doesn't contemplate the hardening of his heart, the damaging re-wiring of his brain, or the abusive nature of that world toward women. The young woman who is forcing herself to vomit up her most recent meal in pursuit of a certain body image isn't contemplating the effects of this on whether or not she'll be able to have children or the harm to her own health in other ways. We try to push these thoughts out of our minds, don't we? It's how we attempt to quiet the voice of the Spirit within us as we set out to pursue sin. But Lamentations calls out for us to sit still and look. Get a good and long glimpse of what the devastating consequences of sin are. And though it's painful to look at (imagine mother's eating their children), it's the Lord's provision for us to get a look at the devastating consequences of sin as a third party. What a gift that is! Let's not waste it. This morning, let us not be deceived any longer and repent if there is any area of rebellion against our Lord in our lives.

But that's not where the reminders end. Related to this first point, we also see and need to remember the uncompromising holiness of God.

The uncompromising holiness of God

If we were to read the events of 587 BC in a history textbook, it would tell us that the Babylonians were responsible for the destruction of Jerusalem. And that's true as far as it goes. But that doesn't tell the whole story. You see, the Babylonians were simply the means the Lord was using to bring his own judgment.

In Lamentations, Jeremiah recognizes Babylon as the human means of destruction and enemy of God's people. He notes that the enemy "has triumphed" and "stretched out his hands" (1:9-10) and "prevailed" (1:16). The very last words of chapter 2 are: "Those whom I held and raised my enemy destroyed" (2:22). There is clear recognition that the enemy, identified as Babylon, has done this work of judgment. But Jeremiah is even clearer in stating that the main actor here in bringing judgment is the Lord.

First, Jeremiah ties very tightly together the Babylonians coming and the Lord's providence in this. He writes in 1:14b-15, "He caused my strength to fail; the Lord gave me into the hands of those whom I cannot withstand. The Lord rejected all my mighty men in my midst; he summoned an assembly against me to crush my young men; the Lord has trodden in a winepress the virgin daughter of Judah." So, first, the Lord was the one bringing Babylon against Judah, giving Judah into their hands, and causing Judah to be destroyed.

Then, we see that Jeremiah sees the Lord doing this precisely because of their transgressions. In 1:5, he writes, "Her foes have become the head; her enemies prosper, because the LORD has afflicted her for the multitude of her transgressions." Again, in 1:18, he writes, "The LORD is in the right, for I have rebelled against his word." Then, once more, in 1:22, he writes, "Let all their evildoing come before you, and deal with them as you have dealt with me because of all my transgressions."

And finally, just in case we have missed that all of this is from the Lord, when Jeremiah begins his second poem in chapter 2, describing the destruction of Judah, he makes the Lord the subject of the first eight verses. In 2:1-8, we read that “The Lord in his anger . . . has cast down . . . has swallowed up without mercy . . . has withdrawn . . . has killed . . . has laid waste . . . has delivered into the hand of the enemy . . . [and] has ruined.” God is the one who has done this, but he didn’t do it without warning. For years he had his prophets speak to the people, especially their leaders, but their words were only met with resistance. And so, we read in 2:17, “The LORD has done what he purposed; he has carried out his word, which he commanded long ago; he has thrown down without pity; he has made the enemy rejoice over you and exalted the might of your foes.”

In other words, you and I need to see these events as a picture of the Lord’s judgment against sinners. And it’s brutal isn’t it? I’ve already mentioned the devastation that the siege itself brought, starving those in Jerusalem to the point that mothers boiled and ate their own children. It’s not a picture we look at callously. Jeremiah’s last words of his second poem, in 2:22 are: “Those whom I held and raised my enemy destroyed.”

But brothers and sisters, as devastating as this picture of judgment is, it is a pale reflection of the eternal judgment that is to come. In other words, this is not some exceptional picture of judgment. When Jeremiah compares the Lord’s judgment of his people to an image of a winepress in 1:15 (“the Lord has trodden as in a winepress the virgin daughter of Judah”), here’s what he means: one would make wine by taking the grapes and placing them into a large area where they would be contained, and then you would step into that large container and tread over the grapes with your feet, and as you crushed the grapes under your feet the juice from the grapes would run out and be gathered and stored as wine. Jeremiah is saying that it’s as if the Lord’s people are in the winepress being trodden down by the Lord himself as he looks at the destruction of Judah. But it is in the New Testament that this image of the Lord’s judgment is ratcheted up. When the Lord speaks of his judgment against sinners in Revelation 14, not only does he say that they’ll be tormented without rest day and night forever (vv. 9-11) but pictures his enemies as being trodden down in a winepress as “the blood flowed from the winepress, as high as a horse’s bridle” for nearly 200 miles (vv. 19-20).

We must realize that the Lord’s wrathful judgment is fierce and merciless. And according to the Scripture, there will be many who travel the road that leads to judgment. And the reason why it will be so fierce and furious is because our God is uncompromisingly holy. In other words, just as he told Judah his judgment would come and then did “what he purposed” (2:17), so he has told us that his final judgment is coming to those who walk in “sexual immorality, impurity, sensuality, idolatry, sorcery, enmity, strife, jealousy, fits of anger, rivalries, dissensions, divisions, envy, drunkenness, orgies, and things like these” (Gal 5:19-21), and it will indeed come.

As believers, we never need to lose sight of the fierce, furious, and merciless wrath of our holy God who revealed himself to Moses as the one who would “by no means clear the guilty” (Exod 7). And if we ever forget this, it will have drastic consequences in our lives, and one of the most crucial consequences will be that we will lose sight of the urgency of the gospel. I promise you,

the work of the church in speaking the gospel and urging others to repent and believe in the crucified and risen Lord Jesus Christ will not receive applause in our culture. But many other things will. And the pull that we might feel toward wanting the applause and approval of those around us is always a threat to letting go of the urgent demand of speaking the gospel. But what can keep us focused is remembering this picture of judgment, coming back to this memorial, and letting it do its good work of causing us to remember what is of utmost importance. We speak the gospel because those who do not believe in Christ will one day face his furious, merciless, eternal wrath in hell. And if you're an unbeliever, I want to plead with you to flee from that wrath to come, which leads to our last point.

I want to end this morning on an encouraging note of hope. We must remember the work of Christ for us and our hope in him.

The work of Christ for us and our hope in him

One interesting note is found in 2:15-16. We are told that "all who pass along the way clap their hands at you; they hiss and wag their heads at the daughter of Jerusalem: 'Is this the city that was called the perfection of beauty, the joy of all the earth?'" and they rail against Jerusalem, saying, "This is the day we longed for; now we have it; we see it!" When we read this, it's hard not to think of another moment when Christ's enemies were wagging their heads at him, taunting him for supposedly being great only to now be weak and suffering, and delighting in his destruction. Look at the imagery of Lamentations 2:15-16 as I read to you from Mark 15:29-31, "And those who passed by derided him, wagging their heads and saying, 'Aha! You who would destroy the temple and rebuild it in three days, save yourself, and come down from the cross!' So also the chief priests with the scribes mocked him to one another saying, 'He saved others; he cannot save himself. Let the Christ, the King of Israel, come down now from the cross that we may see and believe.'"

The parallels are all over the place, and there's a reason for it. You see, when Jesus died on the cross at the hand of the Romans, it wasn't an accident of history either. It was part of God's work, just as the destruction of Jerusalem in 587 BC was. We're even told in Acts 4:27-28 that those who killed the Lord Jesus were simply doing whatever God's "hand" and "plan had predestined to take place." Jesus also, like those in Jerusalem in 587 BC, was the object of the wrath of God on the cross. But here's the big difference: Jesus didn't bear the wrath of God for his own sins—he had none. He bore God's wrath for our sins. That is, the picture of wrath given to us in Lamentations 1-2 is wrath that you and I deserve, and yet we'll never bear it because Jesus bore it for us. That's why he died on the cross. And, going back to our last point, if we lose sight of the furious and fierce wrath of God, then we'll lose sight of how glorious the work of Christ is for us. He bore the wrath of God so that you and I, though deserving of that wrath, might never face it.

And because of that, you and I, can find forgiveness in him this morning. Unbeliever, when I said to flee from the wrath of God, I meant to flee toward Christ, flee toward God. Flee to the one who gave his life so that we might not have to die in our sins. Flee to the one who loved us

enough when we were the rightful objects of his wrath to send his Son to die and rise for us. Hope in him.

One interesting element in Lamentations 2 that I don't want us to overlook comes very close to the end. After describing and lamenting the sin and judgment that is all over the place, Jeremiah writes in 2:19, "Arise, cry out in the night, at the beginning of the night watches! Pour out your heart like water before the presence of the Lord! Lift your hands to him for the lives of your children, who faint for hunger at the head of every street." Interestingly, Jeremiah can say "God has done this" and "Look to God and hope in him" in the same breath. And that's a reality we must see as well. Our judge is our redeemer. So this morning, if you're in the midst of suffering—maybe even suffering brought on by your own sin—don't let this drive you away from God but toward him, toward the one who gave his Son so that you might never face his wrath. And that God deserves not only our obedience but our praise and worship. So, let us come and give him thanks now as we come to the table. Amen.