

January 19, 2020

LESSONS IN LAMENT

Lamentations 4-5

(3 of 3 in a series through Lamentations)

In 2011 Crossway published a little booklet by John Piper titled, *Don't Waste Your Cancer*. He originally wrote the book after being diagnosed of prostate cancer and prior to having successful surgery to remove it.¹ Obviously the title of the booklet is meant to be shocking. We typically think of not wasting good opportunities that come along in life, and we don't often think of cancer as some glorious opportunity that doesn't need to be wasted. But at the same time, we definitely know what Piper is getting at, don't we? After all, it's not lost on any of us that times of disappointment, pain, and suffering are almost always times when we learn and grow more than those times when we find ourselves in ease and blessing.

Therefore, it is not surprising that when we study a book like Lamentations—written in the midst of pain and suffering—that we find many lessons that can be learned. And the glorious thing for us is that we get to learn them not by having to walk through the depth of Jeremiah's suffering ourselves but by wading into his suffering in looking at his poems of lament. That is the real advantage of this book.

But before we look more deeply at these last two poems of lament and the lessons we learn in them, let me remind you again of the context of the book so that we are re-oriented to its setting. These five poems of lament are written most likely by the prophet Jeremiah after the destruction of Jerusalem in 587 BC. The Babylonians laid siege to the city, preventing anyone from going in out, and so the people started to starve. It was a terrible situation, and then after about eighteen months of that siege, the Babylonians broke through the wall, killed many, took many away into exile, destroyed and burned every major building, and left the city of Jerusalem as a smoldering pile of ruins. And Jeremiah was witness to all of this, even prophesying for years prior to Zedekiah, king of Judah, not to rebel against the Babylonians lest this happen. But he rebelled against Jeremiah's words, just as the people as a whole had been rebelling against God's Word for years. And so the Bible makes clear that these terrible events were nothing less than the Lord's judgment against his rebellious people. Jeremiah, then, writes these five poems of lament in response to seeing the judgment of God against Jerusalem, and today we look at his last two poems—Lamentations 4-5.

What lessons do we then learn as we eavesdrop in on Jeremiah's suffering and lament before the Lord during this time of great travesty? First, we see that suffering can reveal our misplaced hopes and idols.

¹This little booklet is free and can be found here: <https://document.desiringgod.org/don-t-waste-your-cancer-en.pdf?ts=1439242114>.

Misplaced hopes and idols

When Jerusalem suffered divine judgment at the hands of the Babylonians, it wasn't as if the mere idea of some other nations threatening them came out of nowhere. No; they were well aware of external threats. In fact, it had only been a few decades earlier that the Babylonians had squelched Judah's rebellion and killed their king. They knew well that there were external threats to their safety. Moreover, the Lord had warned them through the mouths of the prophets that if they did not repent of their sins, judgment was coming. Why then did they not feel the urgency to turn from their sins and prevent this disaster that Jeremiah is now lamenting? The answer is that their response to these potential threats was to place their hopes in things other than the Lord and hope in them more than in him.

In chapter 4 Jeremiah continues to describe to the Lord all the terrible things that have taken place in this act of destruction by the Babylonians. He mentions in 4:6 that it's worse than Sodom, most likely because Sodom's judgment was relatively quick, while Jerusalem's judgment had occurred with this prolonged siege and starvation. He notes children starving, mothers eating their children, and the people now being scattered in exile. But he also notes at many points that the people of Jerusalem had not hoped in the Lord but in other things. He writes, for example, in 4:12, "The kings of the earth did not believe, nor any of the inhabitants of the world, that foe or enemy could enter the gates of Jerusalem."

You see, Jerusalem was a walled city. And the idea was that because it was a walled city, it was impenetrable. Of course, as we know, this actually became the means of their starvation, as the Babylonians laid siege to that walled city. But here we see how the inhabitants of Jerusalem could deceive themselves into thinking they're okay. Maybe they were saying, "I know Jeremiah has said that God will judge us at the hands of our enemies, but we know that no enemy power—not even Babylon—could get through these walls." They hoped in the walls of the city for their security. But that wasn't their only misplaced hope.

We also read in 4:17, "Our eyes failed, ever watching vainly for help; in our watching we watched for a nation which could not save." You see, one of the continual issues the Israelites faced when they were threatened by their enemies was whether they would turn to the Lord and trust in him or turn to another nation and seek that partnership as their hope. On this occasion, they looked to Egypt to come and help them, but Egypt was no match for the Babylonians (who had already defeated them in 605 BC) and weren't about to get involved in this conflict. And so Jeremiah says they looked for a nation to come and save them, but that nation was not coming. Again, misplaced hope.

Finally we read in 4:20, "The breath of our nostrils, the LORD's anointed, was captured in their pits, of whom we said, 'Under his shadow we shall live among the nations.'" That is, they looked at their king—Zedekiah—and thought, "We'll be fine under his leadership." But when the Babylonians broke through the walls of the city, they murdered Zedekiah's sons in front of him before gouging out his eyes. Putting their hope in the king was foolish and vain as well.

But each of these things is simply an object of misplaced hope, and in as much as they were trusting in each of these things—Jerusalem’s walls, the king, or foreign nations—more than trusting in the Lord, they are idols. And it raises a question for us, doesn’t it? Do we have misplaced hopes? Have we latched onto idols in our lives—things that are more important to us than the Lord?

Do we find ourselves more desperate that a certain politician is elected or defeated than we find ourselves desperate to know and delight in God? Do we trust in our financial stability more than we trust in the power of prayer? Do we rely more on the approval of those around us than we feel the need to know God’s Word? You see, though we’re separated by 2,500 years from the event that is memorialized in these chapters, we are no less prone that those Israelites were to placing our hopes in things other than our Lord and feeling more desperate for things in our lives than we are desperate for him. We are as prone to misplaced hope and idolatry.

So, this morning, let this image of Lamentations 4 sink in. Look closely at what their misplaced hopes and idolatry led to. Picture the gruesome images that we want to turn away from. Consider that they wouldn’t repent but would rather place their help somewhere other than their Lord. Feel their foolishness. And then let us ask ourselves, “Are there areas in our lives where we’re being just like them?” If so, let us take a moment to repent this morning, recognizing that the very God who extended mercy to these Israelites if they had repented is the God who will lavish his mercy on us as well. Next, we see the importance of holiness.

The importance of holiness

Brothers and sisters, I know we live in a day where it seems that holiness is not that big of a deal, especially in the culture at large (and, maybe, in that way we’re like every other time and culture since Genesis 3!). But if there’s anything that the book of Lamentations teaches us it is that holiness is important to our Lord. As Jeremiah laments the scene before him, he begins describing the sin that he sees. He notes the cruelty of the people, saying, “Even jackals offer the breast; they nurse their young; but the daughter of my people has become cruel, like the ostriches in the wilderness” (4:3). Apparently ostriches are thought to abandon their eggs and their babies, and Jeremiah sees that same kind of cruelty in mothers toward their children. We’ve noted it several times in this series, but the pinnacle of such cruelty is found in Jeremiah’s reference to women boiling their own children, as he writes, “The hands of compassionate women have boiled their own children; they became their food during the destruction of the daughter of my people.” But this wave of sin wasn’t confined to mothers toward their children. Jeremiah mentions the sins of the leaders as well. He writes in 4:13-14, “This was for the sins of her prophets and the iniquities of her priests, who shed in the midst of her the blood of the righteous. They wandered, blind, through the streets; they were so defiled with blood that no one was able to touch their garments.”

Now, I don’t know if we’re to hear this literally—as if the prophets and priests were literally killing people—or if they were leading the people to death because of their false teaching and so the text pictures them as shedding blood. But either way, the leaders themselves are involved in

sin and leading others in sinful practices. And all of this builds up to the end of the fourth poem where Jeremiah writes in 4:22a, “The punishment of your iniquity, O daughter of Zion, is accomplished.”

One of the things that we see in this scene is a culture of sin, as if it has spread through the whole of the people. Paul can speak of this in the church in 1 Corinthians 5 in terms of a “little leaven leavening the whole lump.” In other words, sin is contagious. When we witness others tolerating sin, we might find ourselves thinking of something that we once would not have tolerated as being tolerable to us now. And this must not be seen as acceptable in our lives before our holy God. You can’t read your Bible and miss that he cares that we live holy lives.

Therefore, one of the things we do is try to exercise discipline as a church. If an individual is walking in sin and simply refuses to repent, we’ll ultimately remove that individual from the membership of the church and from fellowship at the table in hopes that they’ll repent and be restored to the Lord. But we also do it because we don’t want to send the message to anyone else in the church that unrepentant sin is okay. We don’t want to send the message that sin is tolerable. We don’t want to fan the flame of creating a culture of sin as a church. God forbid that because we ignore unrepentant sin, one of our members thinks it’s acceptable and endangers his or her soul.

But, we also need to understand that in the world we live day-in and day-out in a culture where sin is accepted and is constantly presented to us as a norm. In our media—television, movies, and the like—we are presented with sexual immorality and homosexual relationships, for example, in an attempt to make them feel normal. The mere viewing of sexual immorality on the television and in movies can feel like it’s no big deal. And my fear with believers in our day is that this will be the area where we will show ourselves to have been affected by the sin of the culture at large. It’s almost become less than shocking to see professing believers tout on social media things they’re watching that is simply not in line with the holiness demanded by our Lord.

Brothers and sisters, if we’re looking at the disgusting images of sin in Lamentations 4 and thinking, “How did they get there?” know that they got there by taking small steps in sin until what was once unacceptable began to be tolerated, and with every step they found their hearts more and more hardened. May we not follow them in this. Let’s not take our cues on holiness from the culture but from the Scripture, realizing as we look at this scene of judgment that holiness is demanded by our Lord for his people.

Another lesson we see is the need to approach God in our pain.

The need to approach God into our pain

This has been a theme that we’ve seen before in this book, and we see it again in this fifth poem of lament (ch. 5). As Jeremiah once more approaches God in his pain, he does so by inviting God to see all that he’s suffering.

But let me set a context for how this point might relate to the last. I know of a woman who, when she was a young girl, witnessed her mom leave her dad to go chase after other men. I hate that we live in a world where a little girl would have to live through that. And then it got worse. As she began to get a bit older, amidst all the pain she felt in her heart and couldn't explain, she began to think, "What must be so good about sexual immorality that a woman would leave her husband and little girl to chase after it?" And so, she herself sought to pursue sexual immorality. As she then walked in sexual immorality, she felt how fleeting the pleasure of sin is. It leaves you feeling empty, and instead of addressing your pain, only leaves you realizing it is still there with you, now only compounded by your sin. And so, you pursue the fleeting pleasures of sin again—maybe because you feel like you "deserve" a good sin or because you think the fleeting pleasure of sin can at least temporarily drown out the pain, and so the dreadful cycle—and downward spiral—continues. You run from pain to sin, which only begets deeper pain, and so the spiral goes.

But these poems of lament remind us not to compound our pain by chasing after sin but to run after God in our pain, or—as I've said in this point—to approach and invite God into our pain. This is what Jeremiah does in this last chapter of Lamentations. He begins by asking God to turn his attention to all the pain that has come into his life through the sins of others. He writes, "Remember, O LORD, what has befallen us; look, and see our disgrace!" (5:1). And then he goes on to describe all the pain and suffering that has befallen them. He says, "Our fathers sinned, and are no more; and we bear their iniquities" (5:7), and the suffering that has come is intense. He mentions the raping of their women (v. 11), princes being hung up by their hands (v. 12), the elderly shown no respect (v. 12), and any joy in their hearts leaving them (v. 15). This is once more a raw expression of pain.

But—and this is key—notice that he's not simply venting; he's inviting the Lord into his pain. He's wanting to share his hurt with the Lord. He's fellowshiping with his God even in his suffering. I mentioned this when we looked at chapter 3, but when you're in this kind of pain, such that it seems that it is always at the forefront of your mind, you will either run to the Lord with your lament, calling him to look at your pain, to hear the sorrow your pain has brought you, and the way your pain is effecting you, or you will ignore or run from the Lord. Think for a second, even about our Lord in the Garden of Gethsemane. It is not simply that his prayer expresses his willingness to submit to his Father—though it does that—it is also an expression of his sorrow in considering drinking the cup (that is, bearing divine wrath on the cross). Jeremiah and our Lord both point us to the need to share our pain with the Lord and fellowship with him in our suffering. It is one of the deepest and most intimate ways we experience fellowship with the Lord.

And let me frame for us a second who it is that we're running to when we're running to the Lord in our pain. You're running to your Lord who has said of you, "You will be my child," and then laid down his life for you. Who else would you want to run to in your pain? Share your suffering—even today—with your Lord in prayer.

Finally, we see the call to place our full hope in the Lord.

The call to place our hope in the Lord

As I've noted, Jeremiah has mentioned throughout these laments that the people had misplaced hopes, idols they preferred to trust in more than the Lord. However, as he ends this last poem, he reminds himself of why God must be our only hope and then turns to the Lord in hope. Here's what he writes in 5:19-21: "But you, O LORD, reign forever; your throne endures to all generations. Why do you forget us forever, why do you forsake us for so many days? Restore us to yourself, O LORD, that we may be restored! Renew our days as of old."

Obviously, as Jeremiah reminds himself reigns on his throne forever, there is a reminder of why God is our only hope. He is the one who reigns. He is the one who is in control. Not even a sparrow falls to the ground apart from him. Therefore, he is the one we turn to, which is what Jeremiah does in verse 21. He's now not only asking God to remember, look, and see but to restore and renew. He's asking the Lord to bring the people back to him so that they might walk as his people and he as their God. He's saying, "God, I'm still looking to you as my only hope."

This is the most important lesson in lament. Pain has a way of revealing what is most important. You may be wretched in your soul, hoping that your child will make the sports team he's trying out for, but when he's diagnosed with cancer, your focus changes, doesn't it? Now all the sudden you're longing for things that were easy to neglect and take for granted before. That's what pain can do in regard to our walk with the Lord. It's easy to dismiss prayer or meditating on God's Word or gathering with the saints—those things which illustrate that the most important hope you have is Christ—and then suffering, tragedy, and pain come into your life. And it may reveal some misplaced hopes and idols in your life. It might reveal some ways you've hardened your heart toward sin. It'll move you to cry out to the Lord. But the greatest thing our pain can do for us is to remind us that the most important thing in the world is that we love our God, knowing that he has loved us first. And the most important thing we can pray in times of lament is that God would draw us close to himself, make us more like his Son, and help us to trust, love, and obey him more. It can remind us that he—not money, or relationships, or glory—must be our ultimate hope. Let this book today lead you to make sure that your ultimate hope is in Christ.

The last words of Lamentations are of sorrow and seeming despair. Jeremiah says, "Unless you have utterly rejected us, and you remain exceedingly angry with us" (5:22). Now, we know that isn't true. Paul will tell us in Romans that the calling of God is irrevocable. Paul's conversion alone is a testimony that the Lord will never disregard the people of Israel forever. There'll always be a remnant of believers among them in every generation. However, this is one last look at Jeremiah's pain that he shares with the Lord. He feels despair, and so he tells God. And I think it's a gracious way to end these five poems because it reminds us that we don't trust the Lord because our pain will then go away and all things be bright and lovely, but we trust and run to our Lord even as the pain, sorrow, and suffering lingers. And the reason that's not ultimately crushing to our souls is because we know through faith in the one who lived, died, and was raised for us that suffering will not be the last word. The pain of this life is light, momentary,

affliction the Scripture says, compared to the eternal weight of glory that awaits us at the resurrection. And so we cry with the Lord's people throughout the ages, "Lord, come quickly." Until then, let us come to the table and remember what he has done for us. Amen.