
Sermon Manuscript

The Wounds of God: Studies in the Book of Lamentations

No. 1: "Godly Grief and the Serious Disciple" (Lam. 1)
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INTRODUCTION: HOW MUCH DOES IT HURT?

This morning we begin a new series of studies, to last the next five weeks, which I am entitling "The Wounds of God: Severe Stress and the Serious Disciple." This will be based on the book of Lamentations, one of the very neglected books of the Bible, indeed perhaps the most neglected. Walter Kaiser, in his volume on Lamentations, says:

No book of the Bible is more of an orphan book than Lamentations; rarely, if ever, have interpreters chosen to use this book for a Bible study, an expository series of messages, or as a Bible conference textual exposition. Our generation's neglect of this volume has meant that our pastoral work, our caring ministry for believers, and our own ability to find direction in the midst of calamity, pain, and suffering have been seriously truncated and rendered partially or totally ineffective.¹

The reasons for the neglect of Lamentations are not too hard to discover. To begin with, it is a book of great sadness, and we don't often like to be around sadness, either other people's or our own. Then again, it is sorrow that seems unrelieved throughout the book. When you read Job, you see great sorrow, but in the end Job comes out, if not unscarred, at least largely restored and vindicated. Lamentations does not have a happy ending. Then again, where Job's message is focused around an individual, and for that reason easy to identify with, Lamentations is a national book. It treats the suffering of a whole country and the reasons for it.

Which makes it rather contemporary.

George Orwell, author of *1984*, wrote during World War II of Europe's rejection of God

(which he approved) this way:

For two hundred years we had sawed and sawed and sawed at the branch we were sitting on. And in the end, much more suddenly than anyone had foreseen, our efforts were rewarded, and down we came. But unfortunately there had been a little mistake: The thing at the bottom was not a bed of roses after all, it was a cesspool full of barbed wire. It appears that amputation of the soul isn't just a simple surgical job, like having your appendix out. The wound has a tendency to go septic.²

Judah found that out, too.

I want to begin reading this morning at verse one of chapter one, but before I do, let me give you some background. The author of this remarkable work is the prophet Jeremiah, which explains why the book can be found immediately following his larger work. The time is 586 years before Christ. The scene is the city of Jerusalem, which has recently been plundered by the invading armies of Babylon. King Nebuchadnezzar's troops have entered the city, taken the people captive as slaves back to Babylon, and robbed the sacred precincts of the temple, removing its gold ornaments and implements of worship.

For this reason, Jeremiah sits contemplating what has happened and puts pen to paper to express his anguish.

SCRIPTURE: LAMENTATIONS 1:1-22

- 1 How lonely sits the city
 That was full of people!
 How like a widow is she,
 Who *was* great among the nations!
 The princess among the provinces
 Has become a slave!
- 2 She weeps bitterly in the night,
 Her tears are on her cheeks;
 Among all her lovers
 She has none to comfort her.
 All her friends have dealt treacherously with her;
 They have become her enemies.
- 3 Judah has gone into captivity,
 Under affliction and hard servitude;
 She dwells among the nations,
 She finds no rest;
 All her persecutors overtake her in dire straits.
- 4 The roads to Zion mourn
 Because no one comes to the set feasts.
 All her gates are desolate;
 Her priests sigh,
 Her virgins are afflicted,
 And she *is* in bitterness.
- 5 Her adversaries have become the master,
 Her enemies prosper;
 For the Lord has afflicted her

- Because of the multitude of her transgressions.
Her children have gone into captivity before the enemy.
- 6 And from the daughter of Zion
All her splendor has departed.
Her princes have become like deer
That find no pasture,
That flee without strength
Before the pursuer.
- 7 In the days of her affliction and roaming,
Jerusalem remembers all her pleasant things
That she had in the days of old.
When her people fell into the hand of the enemy,
With no one to help her,
The adversaries saw her
And mocked at her downfall.
- 8 Jerusalem has sinned gravely,
Therefore she has become vile.
All who honored her despise her
Because they have seen her nakedness;
Yes, she sighs and turns away.
- 9 Her uncleanness is in her skirts;
She did not consider her destiny;
Therefore her collapse was awesome;
She had no comforter.
“O Lord, behold my affliction,
For *the* enemy is exalted!”
- 10 The adversary has spread his hand
Over all her pleasant things;
For she has seen the nations enter her sanctuary,
Those whom You commanded
Not to enter Your assembly.
- 11 All her people sigh,
They seek bread;
They have given their valuables for food to restore life.
“See, O Lord, and consider,
For I am scorned.”
- 12 “Is it nothing to you, all you who pass by?
Behold and see
If there is any sorrow like my sorrow,
Which has been brought on me,
Which the Lord has inflicted
In the day of His fierce anger.
- 13 “From above He has sent fire into my bones,

- And it overpowered them;
He has spread a net for my feet
And turned me back;
He has made me desolate
And faint all the day.
- 14 “The yoke of my transgressions was bound;
They were woven together by His hands,
And thrust upon my neck.
He made my strength fail;
The Lord delivered me into the hands of *those whom* I am not able to withstand.
- 15 “The Lord has trampled underfoot all my mighty men in my midst;
He has called an assembly against me
To crush my young men;
The Lord trampled as in a winepress
The virgin daughter of Judah.
- 16 “For these things I weep;
My eye, my eye overflows with water;
Because the comforter, who should restore my life,
Is far from me.
My children are desolate
Because the enemy prevailed.”
- 17 Zion spreads out her hands,
But no one comforts her;
The Lord has commanded concerning Jacob
That those around him become his adversaries;
Jerusalem has become an unclean thing among them.
- 18 “The Lord is righteous,
For I rebelled against His commandment.
Hear now, all peoples,
And behold my sorrow;
My virgins and my young men
Have gone into captivity.
- 19 “I called for my lovers,
But they deceived me;
My priests and my elders
Breathed their last in the city,
While they sought food
To restore their life.
- 20 “See, O Lord, that I am in distress;
My soul is troubled;
My heart is overturned within me,
For I have been very rebellious.
Outside the sword bereaves,

- At home *it is* like death.
- 21 “They have heard that I sigh,
But no one comforts me.
All my enemies have heard of my trouble;
They are glad that You have done it.
Bring on the day You have announced,
That they may become like me.
- 22 “Let all their wickedness come before You,
And do to them as You have done to me
For all my transgressions;
For my sighs are many,
And my heart *is* faint.”

THE ELEMENTS OF GODLY GRIEF

The center of this long chapter is its expression of the depth of godly grief. Make no mistake about it—Jeremiah is grieving, even though more than any other human being he did what he could to prevent the disaster. He had predicted for years that God would bring ruin on Jerusalem if its people would not forsake their idolatry.

In fact, the references to her friends and lovers are ironic notices that the people of the city had given themselves in spiritual adultery to the deities of the nations around them. Jeremiah is grieving that his own prophecies have come true.

So what are the main elements of his grief? First of all, he feels...

Its Loneliness 1-7

Grief is a lonely business. It isolates you and gives you a sense of loss that is overwhelming. In Jerusalem’s case, the losses were severe. For example, the city suffered...

The loss of abundance 1

In verse one we see this: “How like a widow is she, Who was great among the nations! The princess among the provinces has become a slave!” The Jerusalem also suffered...

The loss of allies 2

Verse two: “Among all her lovers she has none to comfort her. All her friends have dealt treacherously with her; they have become her enemies.” This is a thinly veiled irony. Her lovers were the false gods she had worshiped; her friends were the nations around her that professed a common allegiance but turned out to be false friends.

The loss of a resting place 3

Then again, the city’s inhabitants had found no place to call home. Verse three: “She dwells among the nations, she finds no rest; all her persecutors overtake her in dire straits.”

The loss of worship 4

We see the loss of worship in verse four: “The roads to Zion mourn because no one comes to the set feasts. All her gates are desolate; her priests sigh, her virgins are afflicted, and she is in bitterness.”

The loss of prestige 5

All Jerusalem's fine prestige was gone, too: "Her adversaries have become the master, her enemies prosper; for the Lore has afflicted her because of the multitude of her transgressions. Her children have gone into captivity before the enemy." Notice that striking statement: "The Lore has afflicted her because of the multitude of her transgressions." We'll come back to that in a moment.

The loss of courage 6

We see the loss of courage in verse six: "Her princes have become like deer that find no pasture, that flee without strength before the pursuer." It was a long way from David and Goliath at this point.

The loss of prosperity 7

The city also had lost its prosperity. Verse seven says, "In the days of her affliction and roaming, Jerusalem remembers all her pleasant things that she had in the days of old."

When you suffer loss, when you grieve, the losses have a way of making you feel like you're the only person in the world. You come out of the hospital or funeral home and are shocked to find people driving by with smiles on their faces. Trucks still deliver orders. Banks still cash checks. In your affliction, it seems as though the world has stopped, but when you look up, it is still turning. Grief makes you lonely.

In verse five, we have a key to understanding this book. In fact, it is the place from which the title of the series comes: "The Wounds of God." Verse five says, "The Lore has afflicted her because of the multitude of her transgressions." Job is a book about undeserved suffering. Job had done nothing to bring his problems on himself. Lamentations is a book about deserved suffering. Jerusalem had brought her problems on herself.

Just think about it. How would you feel in Jeremiah's sandals? He was nearly arrested; he was excluded from the temple area; he had to deputize his secretary, Baruch, to deliver his written prophecies; when Baruch had delivered his book to King Jehoiakim, the king promptly cut it up and threw it in the fire. In addition, Jeremiah became the most hated man in Jerusalem. After all this, his prophecies came true. It would be tempting, in his place, to gloat. He did nothing of the kind, though the city had brought its problems on itself.

How had this happened? The next four verses tell us.

Its Causes 8-11

The shame sin brings 8

Jeremiah explains: "Jerusalem has sinned grievously, therefore she has become vile. All who honored her despise her because they have: seen her nakedness; yes, she sighs and turns away." Sin inevitably brings shame when it is exposed. It ought to bring shame even if it is not: exposed. But shame and sin are traveling companions. The people of Judah bent the knee to false gods, and it caught up with them, and they were shamed.

The defilement sin brings 9

Verse nine says that sin also brings defilement: "Her uncleanness is in her skirts; she did not consider her destiny; therefore her collapse was awesome; she had no comforter." Sin disqualifies a person for approaching the true God. It brings uncleanness. Our worship is

stained. Worse, our desire to worship is diminished.

The desecration sin brings 10

As a result of shame and defilement, sin often brings desecration, by which I mean the invasion of the sacred by people who are unholy. “The adversary has spread his hand over all her pleasant things; for she has seen the nations enter her sanctuary, those whom You commanded not to enter Your congregation.” In the Jerusalem temple there was an area known as the court of the gentiles. It was so named because it was as close as a non-Jew could get to the inner holy of holies. But when Jerusalem was destroyed, all that became irrelevant. People who had no rights to come near walked right in and treated the most sacred place on earth as if it were a compost heap.

The famine sin brings 11

In Jerusalem’s case, sin brought famine as well: “All her people sigh, they seek bread; they have given their valuables for food to restore life.” The city was surrounded for months. It was so bad that people were starting to cook their infants for food. If you had a pound of gold, that might buy you a crust of bread.

Let me just say a word about the cause-effect relationship here. All this misery was caused by the neglect of the inner life. Jerusalem had a strange relationship with the Lord. It was Jehovah’s temple that gave it its glory, and the temple largely remained the Lord’s temple. But within that temple, in places that were remote from the eyes of the public, there was disloyalty to the true God. There was hypocrisy. The priesthood gave lip service to the worship of Jehovah and set up the idols of other gods.

At that point, they were putting the patience of the Lord to the test. They got by with it for a long time, because God’s patience is very great. But eventually it caught up with them. It always does. If you don’t guard your inner person, your outer one will eventually suffer for it. Psalm 51:6 was written after David’s own tragedy that came through the neglect of his inner life. He wrote, “Behold, You desire truth in the inward parts, And in the hidden part You will make me to know wisdom.”

But if God brings wounds, what is He trying to accomplish? We see in the next section...

Its Purposes 12-17

To turn us back to the Lord 12-13

First this may be deserved suffering, but it is not merely retributive. God is not merely getting something off His chest. He wants to turn the hearts of His people back to Him again. Look at verse 12, where Jerusalem speaks: “Is it nothing to you, all you who pass by? Behold and see if there is any sorrow like my sorrow, which has been brought on me, which the Lord has inflicted on me in the day of His fierce anger. From above He has sent fire into my bones, and it overpowered them; He has spread a net for my feet and turned me back; He has made me desolate and faint all the day.” God turned Jerusalem back from her idolatrous ways, albeit at severe cost.

After the captivity, there were other spiritual problems, but never again was there a significant problem of idolatry. So even deserved suffering has this positive purpose-to turn us back.

To tie us up in our sin 14

Another purpose of deserved suffering is to tie us up in our sin. Verse 14: “The yoke of

my transgressions was bound; they were woven together by His hands, and thrust upon my neck. He made my strength fail; the Lord delivered me into the hands of those whom I am not able to withstand.” That is how sin works: it promises liberation, but yields slavery. It promises unlimited freedom, and yields terrible servitude; it promises great joy, and produces bitter sorrow. But we can learn from, it if nothing else.

To crush us before our enemies 15

A third purpose of deserved suffering is to crush us before our enemies. Verse 15 says, “The Lord has trampled underfoot all my mighty men in my midst; He has called an assembly against me to crush my young men; The Lord trampled as in a winepress the virgin daughter of Judah.” It is easy to live in a fool’s paradise and to think you are adequate for whatever life brings your way. But living independently of His way and His will and His Word eventually produces a contempt for Him and results in painful encounters with reality. Being crushed somewhere along the way seems almost a standard experience for most of us. Otherwise we don’t seem to get the message.

The first step in wending one’s way out of a terrible heartache is described in the final section of chapter one. This time, the grief is dealt with in terms of...

Its Confession 18-22

The city of Jerusalem confesses its wrongs before God. In this she says four things. First...

The Lord has been in the right 18a

In verse eighteen, we read, “The Lord is righteous.” Now this sounds sort of obvious, but it is the key to the whole thing. There are untold numbers of people around who have lived their lives for years, being unwilling to say this from the heart. They have serious doubts about God’s righteousness. Things have happened to them, or to people they love, or to things they love, and they have concluded that God’s ways are wrong, and that He cannot be trusted. But the serious disciple begins with this basic cornerstone of his theology: God is right in what He does. Second...

We have rebelled against His Word 18b-19

Look at verse eighteen again: “I rebelled against His commandment. Hear now, all peoples, and behold my sorrow; my virgins and my young men have gone into captivity. I called for my lovers, but they deceived me; my priests and my elders breathed their last in the city, while they sought food to restore their life.”

The pagan gods they were so fond of were unable to do anything to prevent the wounds of the true God from being felt. Jerusalem says: “God is right; I am wrong.”

We plead for Him to witness our sufferings 20

The confession having begun, the city now turns and pleads for God to witness its sufferings. Look at verse 20: “See, O Lord, that I am in distress; my soul is troubled; my heart is overturned within me, for I have been very rebellious. Outside the sword bereaves, at home it is like death.”

There is a pattern in this book. Look at the repetitions:

Verse 9: “O Lord, behold my affliction.”

Verse 11: “See, O Lord, and consider, for I am scorned.”

Verse 20: “See, O Lord, that I am in distress.”

There is something useful and important here. What do you do if you are in the midst of deserved suffering? You have blown it and you know it and you are having to pay for your waywardness. What is your best likelihood of relief? Simply this: call on God to look at your condition. Because when you do, you are appealing to His mercy, which is also very great.

Remember the Lord Jesus before the tomb of Lazarus? He was weeping not because He missed His friend (He had him back seconds later), but because He was observing the devastating effects of sin on the human condition. He hates it more than we do.

We plead for His requital of our enemies 21-22

Verse 21: “All my enemies have heard of my trouble; they are glad that You have done it. Bring on the day that You have announced, that they may become like me. Let all their wickedness come before You, and do to them as You have done to me for all my transgressions; for my sighs are many, and my heart is faint.” The appeal is made, not because it is Judah that appeals, but because it is simply just.

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Notes:

1. Walter C. Kaiser, Jr., *A Biblical Approach to Personal Suffering* (Chicago: Moody Press, 1982). p. 10.
2. *Christianity Today*, January 13, 1984, pp. 25-26.