
Sermon Manuscript

The Wounds of God: Studies in the Book of Lamentations

No. 4: "Putting a Name on the Pain" (Lam. 4)
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INTRODUCTION: GOD'S ARTISTRY, MAN'S PAIN

This morning we again look at the song of the sufferer, the book of Lamentations, in the fourth in a series of five studies in which we are considering how to cope with the severe stress that is a part of every human life at some point. For Jeremiah, the author of the book, that severe stress came when he saw his beloved city of Jerusalem invaded by pagan armies and sacked and the people, his own relatives, marched off to slavery and death in a foreign land.

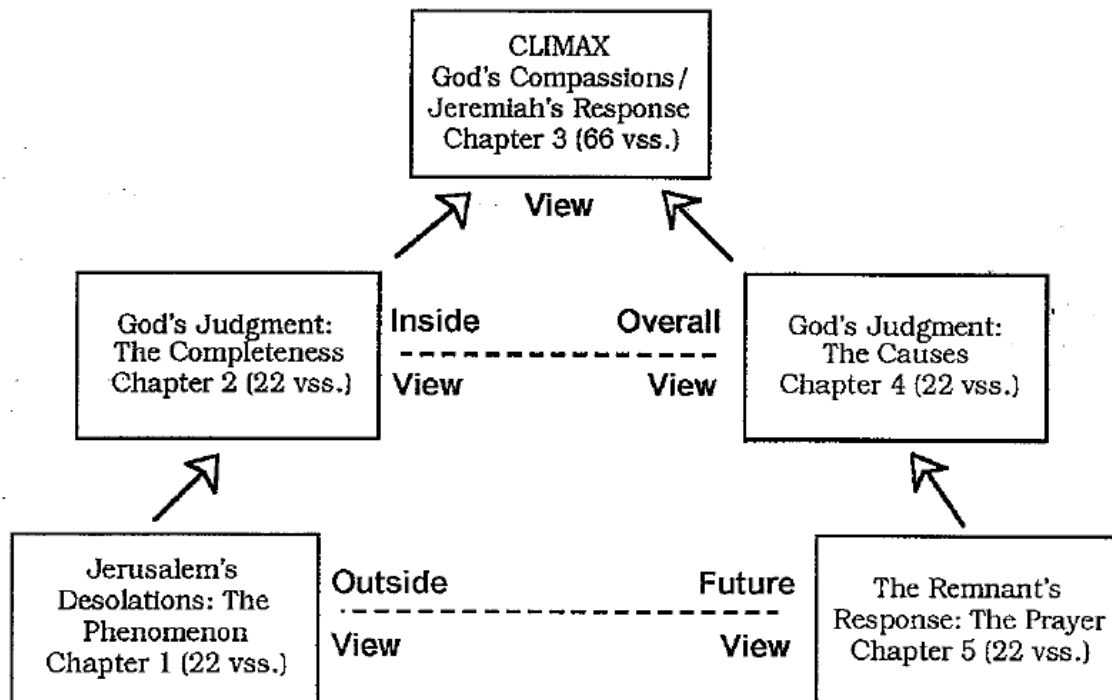
What is practically invisible to the reader of the English text of Lamentations is its literary structure, seen only in the number of verses in each chapter. Chapters one, two, four, and five have 22 verses each, chapter three 66. The numbers are not accidental, and give a key to the structure of the book. There are 22 letters in the Hebrew alphabet. In four of these five chapters, Jeremiah has gone to the trouble to build his laments around the progress of the Hebrew alphabet. He begins each verse with the next letter of the alphabet and in chapter three each letter of the alphabet gets three verses, yielding 66 for the chapter.

It is natural to wonder why you would arrange a mourning song in such a manner. Many reasons have been suggested for this; let me just give you what I think are the three most likely reasons. First, the alphabetic arrangement helps people to remember the progress of the book. These books were memorized by many people, and the acrostic form would be an aid to memory. Almost every child who has studied music has memorized "Every

Good Boy Does Fine” as an alphabetic way of remembering the lines on the music staff. Second, the alphabetic approach may have emphasized the completeness of Judah’s sins. She had been involved in it all, from A to Z; or rather, from Aleph to Tau.

A third reason is more subtle, but very important. Lamentations was a book that was written from a broken heart, but obviously not from a spirit that was out of control. Its artistic beauty tells us of an author who felt the pain of his people, but whose trust in the true God enabled him to keep his head.

The alphabetic arrangement also gives us a clue to the book, which comes to its apex in chapter three. Jeremiah wrote in a stairstep pattern, something like this:



We are now on the downhill side of this triangle as we come to chapter four. Let’s read the prophet’s description of the causes of God’s judgment and the pain it caused him.

SCRIPTURE: LAMENTATIONS 4:1-22

1 How the gold has become dim! How changed the fine gold! The stones of the sanctuary are scattered at the head of every street. 2 The precious sons of Zion, valuable as fine gold, how they are regarded as clay pots, the work of the hands of the potter!

3 Even the jackals present their breasts to nurse their young; but the daughter of my people has become cruel, like ostriches in the wilderness.

4 The tongue of the infant clings to the roof of its mouth for thirst; the young children ask for bread, but no one breaks it for them.

6 Those who ate delicacies are desolate in the streets; those who were brought up in scarlet embrace ash heaps.

6 The punishment of the iniquity of the daughter of my people is greater than the punishment of the sin of Sodom, which was overthrown in a moment, with no hand to

help her!

7 Her Nazirites were brighter than snow and whiter than milk; they were more ruddy in body than rubies, like sapphire in their appearance.

8 Now their appearance is blacker than soot; they go unrecognized in the streets; their skin clings to their bones, it has become as dry as wood.

9 Those slain by the sword are better off than those who die of hunger; for these pine away, stricken for lack of the fruits of the field.

10 The hands of the compassionate women have cooked their own children; they became food for them in the destruction of the daughter of my people.

11 The Lord has fulfilled His fury, He has poured out His fierce anger. He kindled a fire in Zion, and it has devoured its foundations.

12 The kings of the earth, and all inhabitants of the world, would not have believed that the adversary and the enemy could enter the gates of Jerusalem—

13 Because of the sins of her prophets and the iniquities of her priests, who shed in her midst the blood of the just.

14- They wandered blind in the streets; they have defiled themselves with blood, so that no one would touch their garments.

15- They cried out to them, “Go away, unclean! Go away, go away, do not touch us!” When they fled and wandered, those among the nations said, “They shall no longer dwell here.”

16 The face of the Lord scattered them; He no longer regards them. The people do not respect the priests nor show favor to the elders.

17 ‘Still our eyes failed us, watching vainly for our help; In our watching we watched for a nation that could not save us.

18 They tracked our steps so that we could not walk in our streets. Our end was near; our days were over, for our end had come.

19 Our pursuers were swifter than the eagles of the heavens. They pursued us on the mountains and lay in wait for us in the wilderness.

20 The breath of our nostrils, the anointed of the Lord, was caught in their pits, of whom we said, “Under his shadow we shall live among the nations.”

21 Rejoice and be glad, O daughter of Edom, you who dwell in the land of Uz! The cup shall also pass over to you and you shall become drunk and make yourself naked.

22 The punishment of your iniquity is accomplished, O daughter of Zion; He will no longer send you into captivity. He will punish your iniquity, O daughter of Edom; He will uncover your sins!

In chapter three, we came to the apex of Lamentations, which was Jeremiah’s confession, in the middle of great pain, the bedrock of what the serious disciple needs to be able to say in the midst of distress, namely, the truth of Lamentations 3:22-24:

Through the Lord’s mercies we are not consumed, because His compassions fail not.

They are new every morning; great is Your faithfulness. “The Lord is my portion,” says my soul, “Therefore I hope in Him!”

Hoping in the Lord means resting all my aspirations for relief or fulfillment on the living God, and that in turn means committing my anxieties to Him. In order to do that, however, I need to be able to identify them—to put a name on them, so to speak. Jeremiah shows how you can keep your head in severe testing if you do. There are three areas in which we do well to put a name on the pain: In its costs (1-12), in its causes (13-20), and in its conclusion (21-22). Let’s look at each of these in turn.

PUTTING A NAME ON THE PAIN: THREE AREAS (4:1-22)

In its Costs 4:1-12

In the opening section, the prophet tells us that rebellion against God has its costs. He describes it, first...

In theological terms 1-2

Look at verse 2: “The precious sons of Zion, valuable as fine gold, how they are regarded as clay pots, the work of the hands of the potter!” Humanly speaking, the people of Israel had changed from being immensely valuable to being castoffs. Pottery was one of those things that was so inexpensive in the ancient world that it could be tossed out without a second thought. In fact, pottery was commonly used as waste paper in that time and place. If a pot broke, you kept the larger pieces around for writing notes and letters on. One of the earliest pieces of Hebrew that has survived was a schoolboy’s exercise written on pottery shards. The people of Jerusalem were like gold one day, and like common trash the next.

The reason was their own disloyalty to the true God. They had regarded Him as Someone who could be tossed aside as they wished. He merely treated them in justice the same way. Part of the value of this book—possibly the easiest value to overlook—is that it specifies the penalties that one portion of God’s people went through because of their waywardness. That is a mark of God’s grace—that He spells out for us just how seriously He regards disloyalty. The hearts of the people were divided between the true God and idols, and the Lord will put up with that for a little while, but eventually those idolatrous chickens come home to roost, and then there is a cost to be paid. He knows that we are not made for divided loyalties.

Once Mark Twain was lecturing in Ogden, Utah, and he got into an argument with a Mormon hi the audience on the subject of polygamy. “Can you find a single passage of Scripture which forbids polygamy?” asked the man.

“Certainly,” Twain replied, “Jesus Himself said, ‘No man can serve two masters.’”

If that is true on a marital level, it is certainly true spiritually.

In physical terms 3-5

The physical changes that took place in the city of Jerusalem led to some embarrassing results. Jeremiah writes in verse five, “Those who ate delicacies aae desolate in the streets; those who were brought up in scarlet embrace ash heaps.” There were a lot of ash heaps in Jerusalem at that time; these piles were hardly suitable for places of rest, however. Royalty and ash heaps don’t seem, to go together.

A comparison 6

To put the real sting into this, the prophet pulls out a comparison that anyone in that culture would have suffered from. He says that Jerusalem ended up worse off than Sodom. Look at verse 6: “The punishment of the iniquity of the daughter of my people is greater than the punishment of the sin of Sodom, which was overthrown in a moment, with no hand to help her!” Sodom’s end came and went and that was all there was. Jerusalem is dying a lingering death. The comment reminds us of the Lord’s dictum that people who know a lot and have many privileges will be held accountable for a lot.

Everything around the city reminds the people just how great the suffering was. To emphasize this, he now pulls out a series of illustrations of just how severe the costs of disloyalty were.

In illustrative terms 7-12

He begins with what is an obscure group to us: the Nazirites. Verse 7: “Her Nazirites were brighter than snow and whiter than milk; they were more ruddy in body than rubies, like sapphire in their appearance. Now their appearance is blacker than soot; they go unrecognized in the streets; their skin clings to their bones, it has become as dry as wood.”

Some of your versions may say “princes” in verse seven instead of “Nazirites,” but the basis for that is shaky. The word in the text is “Nazirites,” and refers to a practice discussed back in Numbers 6:1-2. There we read, “Then the Lord spoke to Moses, saying, ‘Speak to the children of Israel, and say to them: “When either a man or woman consecrates an offering to take the vow of a Nazirite, to separate himself to the Lord...””

Nazarites were people who separated themselves from the ordinary pleasures of life for the sake of a temporary period of devotion to God. Samuel and John the Baptizer were lifelong Nazirites, but they were exceptions. Most people did this for a time and then went back to their ordinary way of life. But while they were Nazirites, they were professing their serious devotion to the true God. What Jeremiah is saying here is that even people like that were severely wounded in the destruction of Jerusalem.

The really relevant question that follows from all this is, “How did things ever get so bad?” How is it that such suffering came among the people who, of all people, should have been able to avoid it? The question is addressed next as Jeremiah addresses the pain of Israel...

In Its Causes 4:13-20

There are two causes of all this that are listed here. The first was...

Bad advice 13-16

Verse 13 begins with three understood words: “[This has happened] because of the sins of her prophets and the iniquities of her priests, who shed in her midst the blood of the just.”

The sins of her prophets? The iniquities of her priests?

I thought those were supposed to be the people who were above all supposed to be distant from sin and iniquity. But here it says that they “shed in [Jerusalem’s] midst the blood of the just.” The prophets and the priests, the people who were supposed to be close to God, the people who ought to have known the truth, were telling lies to the people. In fact, they

were doing their best to lock up all the genuine prophets in prison, or even to hunt them down and kill them.

There is no more deadly proof of the presence of Satan in the world than the easy accessibility of bad advice. All you have to do is flip on a TV set and it is everywhere. To find someone who will tell you the truth, on the other hand, can be terribly difficult.

And what happened to these people? They have finally received their comeuppance: “They wandered blind in the streets; they have defiled themselves with blood, so that no one would touch their garments. They [that is, the survivors of Jerusalem] cried out to them [the prophets and priests], “Go away, unclean! go away, go away, do not touch us!” They were rejected by their countrymen, so they left. Did they find things better elsewhere? “When they fled and wandered, those among the nations said, ‘They shall no longer dwell here.’”

The prophets and priests who led so many people down the primrose path eventually had to pay for it, but before that time they had led untold numbers of people astray. Bad advice is easy to get and painful to follow. But not only had the people followed bad advice, they also had raised...

Foolish hopes 17-20

Their hopes were not in the Lord, they were in their political alliances. They had two primary hopes. First, that an ally would fight Babylon on their behalf. In this they were disappointed: Look at verse 17: “Still our eyes failed us, watching vainly for our help; in our watching we watched for a nation that could not save us. They tracked our steps so that we could not walk in our streets. Our end was near; our days were over, for our end had come. Our pursuers were swifter than the eagles of the heavens. They pursued us on the mountains and lay in wait for us in the wilderness.”

Even after the Babylonian invasion, a group of people who had survived the destruction decided that they would flee Judah and go to Egypt where they would be free to pursue idolatry in peace. When Jeremiah remonstrated over this policy, they responded in an interesting way to him. Jeremiah 44:16-18 records what the group said, “As for the word that you have spoken to us in the name of the Lord, we will not listen to you! But we will certainly do whatever has gone out of our own mouth, to burn incense to the queen of heaven and pour out drink offerings to her; as we have done, we and our fathers, our kings and our princes, in the cities of Judah and in the streets of Jerusalem. For then we had plenty of food, were well-off, and saw no trouble. But since we stopped burning incense to the queen of heaven and pouring out drink offerings to her, we have lacked, everything and have been consumed by the sword and by famine.” They are remembering the good old days of their idolatry. Their hope was misplaced.

But there was another false hope as well: The king of Judah. He is described in verse 20 this way: “The breath of our nostrils, the anointed of the Lord, was caught in their pits, of whom we said, under his shadow we shall live among the nations.” Zedekiah was their king, and when the famine was at its worst, the king tried to escape the city of Jerusalem. Second Kings 28:3-7 records what happened: “By the ninth day of the fourth month the famine had become so severe in the city that there was no food for the people of the land. Then the city wall was broken through, and all the men of war fled at night by way of the gate between two walls, which was by the king’s garden, even though the Chaldeans

were still encamped all around against the city. And the king went by way of the plain. But the army of the Chaldeans pursued the king, and they overtook him in the plains of Jericho. All his army was scattered from him. So they took the king and brought him up to the king of Babylon at Riblah, and they pronounced judgment on him. Then they killed the sons of Zedekiah before his eyes, put out the eyes of Zedekiah, bound him with bronze fetters, and took him to Babylon.”

Another false hope down the drain. It is always easier to trust in a political alliance than to trust in the Lord. It is always easier to trust in a king or president than to trust in the Lord. But they are always false hopes. Jeremiah had said it earlier: “Thus says the Lord: ‘Cursed is the man who trusts in man and makes flesh his strength, whose heart departs from the Lord.’”

In its Conclusion 4:21-22

Fortunately, there is a conclusion to the pain. The conclusion is given to the pain of God’s people, first, as to how it was ended...

Then

The lifelong enemies of Israel, the Edomites, had cheered as Jerusalem was burned. This chapter ends by saying that the Edomites have their own sins to account for. Look at these last two verses. Verse 21: “Rejoice and be glad, O daughter of Edom, you who dwell in the land of Uzi! The cup shall also pass over to you and you shall become drunk and make yourself naked. The punishment of your iniquity is accomplished, O daughter of Zion; He will no longer send you into captivity. He will punish your iniquity, O daughter of Edom; He will uncover your sins!”

So the Edomites would have to answer for their own behavior. Here we have a ray of light in the dark.

Now

The big problem in suffering is to lift your eyes away from the pain of the moment to the One who knows the end of all things. One of the recurring themes in Scripture is the pain caused when the righteous see the wicked prosper. So it was when Jerusalem was sacked. So it is now when people who despise God’s Word and reject His Son seem to get along famously. David recorded his own struggles with this in the 73rd Psalm. He wrote concerning the wicked,

*But as for me, my feet had almost stumbled; My steps had nearly slipped.
For I was envious of the boastful, When I saw the prosperity of the wicked.
For there are no pangs in their death, But their strength is firm.
They are not in trouble as other men, Nor are they plagued like other men.
Thth’efore pride serves as their necklace; Violence covers them like a garment.
Their eyes bulge with abundance; They have more than heart could wish.
They scoff and speak wickedly concerning oppression; They speak loftily.
They set their mouth against the heavens, And their tongue walks through the earth.
Therefore his people return here, And waters of a full cup are drained by them.
And they say, “How does God know? And is there knowledge in the Most High?”*

-Psalm 73:2-11

Then David did something that brought him back to reality. This is what he says, “When

I thought how to understand this, It was too painful for me—Until I went into the sanctuary of God; Then I understood their end” (Psa. 73:16-17). God has plans for them that I don’t know about. He sets their feet in slippery places, and their end comes in an instant. We need to lift our eyes in the time of hurt to realize that, though may pain may be terrible, the Lord has plans that we don’t know about.

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