
Sermon Manuscript

The Wounds of God: Studies in the Book of Lamentations

No. 5: "Help Us Remember" (Lam. 5)
23 Jan 1994 • Dr. Doug McIntosh, Senior Pastor
CORNERSTONE BIBLE CHURCH • 869 COLE DRIVE • LILBURN, GA 30047

INTRODUCTION: WHO'S IN CHARGE HERE?

For the past five weeks we have been looking at the song of a godly person who was in mourning—in mourning for a nation whose stubborn rebellion had finally met its logical end, for the embarrassment of being part of such a people, and for the personal pain of having so many people he loved endure such hardship. Lamentations was the prophet Jeremiah's sad song of how his nation's sins and disloyalty had led it to complete and utter ruin.

Of course, from the outside, it looked like a simple matter of politics. It looked as though a Babylonian king, upset because an Israelite king refused to pay tribute, made a simple military expedition to solve the problem and things got out of hand. The world frequently looks that way. It looks as though it is run by the impulses of kings, presidents, and prime ministers, and, to use Napoleon's phrase, is always in the control of whoever has the biggest battalions. The interesting thing about it is that Scripture acknowledges that the world does frequently look as though it is on its own and God is not involved. According to the book of Ecclesiastes, the world looks as though it engages in endless cycles of birth and death and has no point to it whatever. The characteristic expression of the book, to quote it from a modern version, says of the world, "All is useless, all useless. You spend your life working, laboring, and what do you have to show for It? Generations come and generations go, but the world stays just the same. The sun still rises, and it still goes down, going wearily back to where it must start all over again" (Eccl. 1:2-5).

One of the most convincing proofs of this is socks. I was in the shower yesterday and looked down and there was one of my socks. Since it wasn't there when I climbed in the shower. I concluded that it had to have come from one of two places. It either had backed out of the drain in some way that only socks can do, or it had fallen off of my towel. I am convinced that we could solve several serious problems if we could have a giant convocation somewhere in Kansas, on one of those great flat areas, and just reassemble all of the single socks that are left in the country. Then we could sell the newly matching pairs and donate the proceeds to pay off the national debt. Sock pairs have a way of deteriorating by themselves, a symptom of the apparent uselessness of life.

But this verdict of uselessness is, as Ecclesiastes says, the point of view under the sun. This is looking at life without an upward look to that place above the sun where decisions are rendered and motives are weighed. When Ecclesiastes gets to the end of things, he says, "The end of the matter is this: Fear God and keep His commandments, for this is the chief end of man."

Lamentations is a book written by a man who knew God well. He spent his whole life making God known to people who really didn't want to know Him at all. Lamentations is the song of a mourner, but it closes with a prayer. In the end, when everything has been said and done, when pain has increased and you are confused, the one thing you can do is pray. That is what the fifth chapter of Lamentations is—a prayer, asking God to remember exactly where we are, and to above all, help us remember Him.

SCRIPTURE: LAMENTATIONS 5:1-22

- 1 Remember, O Lord, what has come upon us; look, and behold our reproach!
- 2 Our inheritance has been turned over to aliens, and our houses to foreigners.
- 3 We have become orphans and waifs, our mothers are like widows.
- 4 We pay for the water we drink, and our wood comes at a price.
- 5 They pursue at our heels; we labor and have no rest
- 6 We have given our hand to the Egyptians and the Assyrians, to be satisfied with bread.
- 7 Our fathers sinned and are no more, but we bear their Iniquities.
- 8 Servants rule over us; there is none to deliver us from their hand.
- 9 We get our bread at the risk of our lives, because of the sword in the wilderness.
- 10 Our skin is hot as an oven, because of the fever of famine.
- 11 They ravished the women in Zion, the maidens in the cities of Judah.
- 12 Princes were hung up by their hands, and elders were not respected,
- 13 Young men ground at the millstones; boys staggered under loads of wood.
- 14 The elders have ceased gathering at the gate, and the young men from their music.
- 15 The joy of our heart has ceased, our dance has turned into mourning.
- 16 The crown has fallen from our head. Woe to us, for we have sinned!
- 17 Because of this our heart is faint; because of these things our eyes grow dim
- 18 because of Mount Zion which is desolate, with foxes walking about on it.
- 19 You, O Lord, remain forever; Your throne from generation to generation.
- 20 Why do You forget us forever, and forsake us for so long a time?
- 21 Turn us back to You, O Lord, and we will be restored, renew our days as of old,
- 22 unless You have utterly rejected us, and are very angry with us!

HELP US REMEMBER: OBSTACLES TO FOCUSING ON THE ANCHOR TRUTH

There is an “anchor truth” in Lamentations—a truth to hold onto in the darkest times. We find it in this fifth chapter, verse 19: “You, O Lord, remain forever; Your throne from generation to generation.” This verse is of such weight that it is given to keep us from slipping over the line into despair. John Calvin spoke of this verse as follows:

When we fix our eyes on present things, we inevitably vacillate, as there is nothing permanent in this world and when adversities bring a cloud over our eyes, then faith in a manner vanishes; at least we are troubled and stand amazed. Now the remedy is, to raise our eyes to God, for however confounded things may be in the world, yet He remains always the same. His truth may indeed be hidden from us, yet it remains in Him. In short, were the world to change and perish a hundred times, nothing could ever affect the unchangeableness of God.¹

But there are some barriers to lifting our eyes to God. Frankly, we forget to do so very often. Four of the things that keep us from focusing on this anchor truth are talked about in this chapter. Let’s look at the obstacles we sometimes face to focusing on this truth of God’s unchangeableness. First, we have the obstacle of...

Our Condition 5:1-10

We feel, to begin with...

Disinherited

This is a word that has a pointed focus in this context. The inheritance of every Israelite was his property. It was a divine inheritance, a gift from God to be held in trust. Judah had been invaded by the Babylonians, and now most of the people were carried off into slavery and the rest owned their property at the sufferance of the occupying army. That is why he says in verse two, “Our inheritance has been turned over to aliens, and our houses to foreigners.”

When you are in distress, you feel abandoned, and when you feel abandoned, you often forget to lift up your eyes.

In the National Gallery of Art hangs a unique painting of Calvary. The figure of Christ on the cross is almost hidden in the darkness. At first glance one sees nothing but the dim figure of the suffering Savior. But as one looks longer and with closer care, one sees another figure behind the Savior, with outstretched arms, tenderly supporting the suffering One. The face of the One holding is twisted by even more pain than the One crucified. In this way the artist seeks to show that God, the Father, is grieving and suffering with His Son, as He dies upon the cross.²

Elizabeth Barrett Browning sought to capture the story of the loneliness of the cross when she wrote:

*Deserted! God could separate from his own essence rather,
And Adam's sins have swept between the righteous Son and Father;
It went up single, echoless, "My God. I am forsaken!"
It went up from his holy lips, amid his lost creation
That no believer e'er should use those words of desolation!*

She's right, of course. But the truth is that we do use such words because we feel disinherited.

Not only do we feel disinherited, we feel...

Destitute

The people of Jerusalem knew what it meant to be destitute. They say in verse four. "We pay for the water we drink, and our wood comes at a price. They (that is, our enemies) pursue at our heels; we labor and have no rest. We have given our hand to [that is, we have formed alliances with] the Egyptians and the Assyrians, to be satisfied with bread."

When pressure comes, we have a tendency to feel that we are without resources. You end up doing what these people did—just trying to get through one day at a time. Survival becomes supreme.

Not only are we destitute, we are also...

Despised

That is why the text says in verse eight, "Servants rule over us; there is none to deliver us from their hand." This translation actually softens the real situation. The Hebrew text literally says, "Slaves rule over us." If you were a part of the Babylonian occupying force, you would have to have local help to administer the conquered territory. You would need people who knew the language and geography to do things for you. Now, whom do you recruit? You certainly wouldn't go to the important people who had been left behind. You could never trust them. So you would elevate people who had no love for the old administration. The Babylonians hired slaves to be the leaders over the dispossessed population of Judah. You can imagine the attitude that such a hireling would have toward those whom he had once served.

It is regrettable, but true, that when you are in suffering you will find a considerable number of people who will despise you and tell you—either to your face, or not—that you are getting just what you deserve.

Suffering holds all those terrors.

Now you should know that all three of these are illusions. When you experience pain, you are not disinherited. When you go through trial, you are not destitute. When you are in pain, you are not despised in heaven. But these things all seem to be true. And because they do, they seem to focus us in not on heaven, but on ourselves. So our condition poses an obstacle to remembering the central truth of God's unchangeableness. There is a second obstacle, too...

Our Individual Suffering 5:11-13

So our general condition poses one obstacle to remembering the central truth of God's unchangeableness. Our individual suffering poses another. When we suffer as individuals, our world becomes small and isolated. We feel that there is no one in the world who can possibly understand our pain.

In Judah, no one seemed to be exempt from the pain. Look at verse 11: "They ravished the women in Zion, the maidens in the cities of Judah. Princes were hung up by their hands, and elders were not respected. Young men ground at the millstones; boys staggered under loads of wood."

When you read a description of any military conquest, what doesn't always come through is the individual price that is paid in the lives of the people who are invaded. Invasions turn boys into pack mules and find young men playing the role of oxen, driving a millstone around and around in an endless circle.

Isolation keeps us from lifting our eyes up above the sun.

A third obstacle is frequently posed by...

Our Emotions 5:14-18

Look at verse 15: "The joy of our heart has ceased: our dance has turned into mourning. The crown has fallen from our head. Woe to us, for we have sinned! Because of this our heart is faint: because of these things our eyes grow dim: because of Mount Zion which is desolate, with foxes walking about on it?"

I want you to notice that expression in verse 16 in particular: "The crown has fallen from our head." The destruction of Jerusalem by the Babylonians ended the Davidic dynasty. To this day, there has never been a king ruling over Jerusalem from the line of David. Not only that, the records are destroyed which could prove any modern person's right to that throne.

The other day I watched a television special that did an evaluation of the claims of a woman who for many years claimed to be the last surviving princess of the Russian royal family, the Romanovs. She claimed to be the princess Anastasia, who alone survived the murder of the royal family by the Bolsheviks in 1918. There were pros and cons presented, and the end was indecisive.

But for someone to appear today in Jerusalem and to say, "I am the rightful descendant of King David and the heir to his throne," would provide nothing but a good laugh. There is only one living Person who could say that whose records are still around to prove it. Jesus Christ alone will pick up the crown dropped by the descendants of Israel. He alone can claim the throne.

There's something else here, too. He is the only one who can pick up your emotions and put a smile on your face again when you have gone through the biggest heartache of your life. That's because He's alive today. There was a big deal on some of the news telecasts this week about the traffic barrier that people are worshipping out in San Francisco. It's just a large hunk of concrete, but people are traveling from all over the world to come and worship a block of cement. They believe it is Shiva-Linga, a Hindu deity. They asked one fellow whether the traffic barrier was a god or not, and he said, "Of course! Would a traffic barrier accept worship if it wasn't a god?"

Fortunately, we serve a risen Savior.

So our feelings often amount to a serious obstacle to remembering the central truth of God's unchangeableness. We finally face the fourth one, which is...

Our Questions 5:19-22

Look at verse 20: "Why do You forget us forever, and forsake us for so long a time?" We do have questions when we hurt, and there is nothing wrong with asking the questions. Jeremiah does here. David does in the Psalms. There are lots of questions you have when your life turns upside down, and it is not out of line to ask them. The only time we get out

of line is when we demand and answer of God on our timetable,
Jeremiah isn't doing that here.

In fact, Jeremiah is very much aware that the future of His people depends not simply on them, but one whether God will act in mercy and touch—now get this—not their bodies; not their political situation; not their fortunes: but their hearts. Look at what he prays for In verse 21: “Turn us back to You. O Lord, and we will be restored; renew our days as of old, unless You have utterly rejected us, and are very angry with us!”

The way he expresses this makes clear two things: (1) man's deepest need is spiritual and he is lost without God's mercy toward him; and (2) God's acting in mercy is really up to Him: “unless You have utterly rejected us, and are very angry with us!” The final chapter of Lamentations begins with an appeal for God to remember us in our affliction. It ends with an acknowledgement that we aren't very likely to remember Him in our affliction, unless He helps us. Our obstacles are pretty severe. But in between there is the hopeful wonder that “You, O Lord, remain forever; Your throne from generation to generation.”

When God appeared to Moses on Mount Sinai, he told Moses that His Name was “I AM.”

When Jesus came to earth, He used that same expression to describe Himself.

I am going to ask you to turn to the eighteenth chapter of John's Gospel, to the opening paragraph. In the first six verses we have a remarkable event that ties together with the episode of the burning bush. Jesus is about to be arrested. Let us pick up the narrative at verse one: “When Jesus had spoken these words, He went out with His disciples over the Brook Kidron, where there was a garden, which He and His disciples entered. And Judas, who betrayed Him, also knew the place: for Jesus often met there with His disciples. Then Judas, having received a detachment of troops, and officers from the chief priests and Pharisees, came there with lanterns, torches, and weapons. Jesus therefore, knowing all things that would come upon Him, went forward and said to them, “Whom are you seeking?” They answered Him, “Jesus of Nazareth.” Jesus said to them, “I am He.” And Judas, who betrayed Him, also stood with them. Then-when He said to them, “I am He,”—they drew back and fell to the ground.”

Now people don't ordinarily draw back and fall to the ground when you say to them. “I'm the one you are looking for.” There is more here than meets the eye. You will note that in verse six, in the statement “I am He” that the “He” is italicized. It does not occur in the original Greek text. It is added by the editors in an attempt to make the sentence flow smoothly, and it does help do that. But it also obscures what was an intentional effort to tie this episode to Exodus 3:14. The “I AM” of the burning bush is the “I AM” of John 18:6. There was something so forcible and so dramatic in the “I AM” of verse six that it send a squad of soldiers falling backwards.

This was Jesus' last announcement to an unbelieving world that He was the one speaking from that ancient bush. He is the same Person in the garden of Gethsemane that He was on Mt. Sinai. He isn't going along bound by soldiers because He can't do anything about it. He has all the power that He had when He brought Israel out of Egypt. He has all the power in the garden that He had when He opened the Red Sea. He just is choosing not to use it at this instant.

In fact, note the amazing irony of verse 12: “Then the detachment of troops and the captain and the officers of the Jews arrested Jesus and bound Him.” This is amazing. They bound Him. Talk about doing things for appearance’s sake! The one who created the universe and set the stars in their courses is bound by men! That’s a laugh. He was not bound by men. He was bound by love. He was bound by love for you and for me. He could have snapped those bonds with a sigh, but those bonds were unbreakable, because they represented power under restraint because of love. Our pains are not lifted because He has no power. God acts in a way that shows that He restricts His power for the sake of His love of us. We may not know why, but that’s not important. The important thing is that He knows why, and He Is the same God when we hurt as when we prosper. Knowledge of His unchangeableness is what we need when it Is time for us to sing a song of mourning.

Copyright © 1994 P. Douglas McIntosh. This data file/manuscript is the sole property of the copyright holder and may be copied only in its entirety for circulation freely without charge. All copies of this data file/manuscript must contain the above copyright notice. This data file/manuscript may not be copied in part (except for small quotations used with citation of source), edited, revised, copied for resale, or incorporated in any commercial publications, recordings, broadcasts, performances, displays, or other products offered for sale without the written permission of the copyright holder. Requests for permission should be made in writing and addressed to Dr. Doug McIntosh, Senior Pastor, Cornerstone Bible Church, 869 Cole Drive, Lilburn, GA 30047.

Notes:

1. John Calvin, *Commentary on Lamentations*.
2. *Testimony of Triumph*.