

Lamentations 1:1-22 We Cope Like Christians Falls Ch. AM 10/15/2023

How do we as Christians cope with suffering and loss? By lamenting!

How does lamenting help with suffering? Lamenting leads us to God, and God gives us hope and reminders about His compassion, and His righteousness.

In our suffering and sorrows, we cope like Christians by turning to God with an ancient lament seeking His compassion and righteousness.

The Book of Lamentations is made up of expressions of sadness that remind us how to cope like the people of God. We could call it - The Book of Sad Poems. Or The Weeping Poems of the Weeping Prophet, since it was written by Jeremiah.

He lived through the loss of Jerusalem, and wrote about it. The ancient prophets knew how to lament. We need to know how to lament.

1. Lord, look and have compassion! (v.1-11)

Our test case is one of the worst scenes of tragedy in the world. Babylon destroyed Jerusalem, it was compared to a widow. The city was like a woman who lost her husband, lost her children, and lost her freedom when she became a slave. How would such a woman cope? That is, how would the people of the city cope?

Verse 1, *“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.”*

The first verse focuses on this woman who personifies the city while she face a triple whammy: widowhood, childlessness, and slavery.

Verse 2 – she started by weeping bitterly in the night. The immediate lesson is that God’s people can face our pain and begin by crying. The city of Jerusalem trusted in alliances with foreign nations, and they were let down. One of the most painful experiences of life is to be betrayed by those we thought were a good place to turn. This already points us to Jesus, who endured that experience for us. Jesus was let down by His disciples. Jesus helps us realize that we should have been trusting the LORD, and not human alliances, especially not the world. We ought not to rely on human support for the suffering of our souls, but rather we rely on God alone. When we get that part right, then God re-connects us with His community of His people.

Verse 3 – next the widow personifying the city realizes that her own sin and her own sufferings are not the only problems. She widens the lens and looks around to see that the problem is even bigger. What she had lost was not just her own city, but more - she lost her whole nation. Where was the nation of Judah? We read in verse 3, *“Judah has gone into exile.”*

In a poem, things themselves can be spoken of as persons with feelings of persons, such as the city that was personified by this widow. Here in verse 4 goes

farther, the roads THEMSELVES were personified. The roads were sad because they used to be full of worshippers traveling to the temple, but now the roads are empty. In verse 4, the roads mourn because, “*none come to the festival.*”

The roads in the poem were sadly recalling the good old days before the fall of Jerusalem. Travelers used to arrive from all the surrounding regions into the great city of Jerusalem in order to join in the worship of the great God of Israel. But this time, as the travelers came from afar and finally drew near to Jerusalem, whatever they initially saw, instantly alerted them that something was very wrong.

Verse 5 – the reason for Jerusalem’s attack, defeat, downfall, and sorrow was apparent in verse 5, “...*the LORD has afflicted her for the multitude of her transgressions...*” The word ‘transgressions’ shows that the people were guilty because they were willing to cross a line, willing to overstep. The results are many. Verse 5, some became “*captives before the foe.*” Verse 6, the majesty of the city have departed, and the people were forced to run like deer. Verse 7, during their suffering, the whole city sadly remembered the former days, before the enemies took control and mocked them during their downfall, with “*none to help her.*”

In verse 8, the sad poem returned to the reason for this downfall of this city. “*Jerusalem sinned grievously,*” and verse 9 compared to a debased and filthy harlot with “*no comforter.*”

In verse 10, as a result of her spiritual adultery, even their precious temple, the place where God forbade even non-priests to enter, has now had the unthinkable happen – the temple would be entered by pagans from the nations, and would be violated and destroyed by the enemy.

Verse 11, with the temple lost, any surviving people were groaning while searching for any bread anywhere. Even if they find bread, they must pay dearly for it, and the sad poem’s first section ends with them crying out to God to look and see their sad situation.

This first section of the poem has recalled what the city of Jerusalem used to be, compared to what the city had become, and it has repeatedly lamented that there was no one to comfort. The book of Lamentations has a rhythm all its own. We are already discovering that the poetic phrasing is distinctive. It wakes us up and tunes our ears to the pain of others, and the cause! The first word “how” and the first phrase “how lonely sits the city” or ‘how lonely sits the widow’ has already given us eyes to see how painful is sin. Yes, sin is that bad and the pain comes to us because God is that holy. How destructive is sin? How holy is God? Lament is already helping us, because it is bringing us back to understand the

cause and the source of our pain. Lament is already helping us, because it is bringing us back to God. Lament gives us hope because even now God this holy God who is that holy, still has compassion on us, and lament brings us back to readiness to pray to this holy God to see us in our pain caused by our sin, and yet to offer us His compassion. What would need to happen for us sinners to get compassion from a holy God? The suffering of another instead of the city of sinners. Watch for that, as we move on.

2. Friends, look and have compassion! (v.12-17)

At various points in verses 12-17, what is said about the suffering of Jerusalem, could also be said about the future suffering of another. The poem has given us a hint – while we keep one eye on Jerusalem on her day of destruction, we keep our other eye on the future Jerusalem. The God who is holy the God who sends destruction, is the God who sees our pain. He is also the God who says that a day is coming in Jerusalem when this sad song will point to the suffering of another in Jerusalem. And after His suffering, God will bring about a victory there. And if we keep watching that suffering and that victory, we are also trained to look ahead to another Jerusalem, to the New Jerusalem where God will gather us.

What would you think if you were passing by and saw the suffering of Jerusalem?

What would you think if you were passing by and saw the suffering of another?

Verse 12 – ancient Jerusalem is personified and speaking, and she is asking passersby to look and see the sorrow brought up on her, which the LORD had inflicted in His fierce anger. Jerusalem asks, “Look and see if there is any sorrow like my sorrow.” And we are asked to keep one eye on the suffering of another. Could you also imagine the scene of the LORD’s anger on another? What if he turned and asked the same as Jerusalem, “Look and see if there is any sorrow like my sorrow.” The poem has us now. What would we say then?

The poem has brought us from “nobody knows the troubles I’ve seen,” in a crushing self-pity and despair, to having a focus on another, sent by the LORD, upon whom the LORD inflicted His fierce anger, and we now say, “nobody knows the full sorrow of the LORD’s anointed one; there is no sorrow like His sorrow – He was asked to take our sin and the resulting sorrow, made necessary by God’s holiness.”

Verse 13 – description of the result of God’s wrath, and we could read this as the destruction of Jerusalem, and again as the destruction of another.

Verse 14 – the sins that destroyed Jerusalem were placed around her neck, and that reminds us that years later at that same city, sins were placed upon another.

Verse 15 – showed the action of the Lord to cause an army to attack Jerusalem, and again here, another later suffered the same fate – being destroyed.

Verse 16 – more weeping without a comforter. Another later came to Jerusalem without a comforter, One who was forsaken by the LORD God!

Verse 17 – No one comforts the city, and the city became “a filthy thing.” Later another in Jerusalem would have no one to comfort, and would become a filthy thing, but not filthy with His own sins, “...*He who knew no sin, became sin for us.*” (2 Corinthians 5:21) For us to have compassion for the suffering of Jesus is to acknowledge how filthy is our own sin. For us to have compassion for the suffering of Jesus is to be amazed at how holy is God for what He required of Jesus when our sin was placed on Jesus. Jesus was without a comforter, so that we will never be without a comforter. Jesus was forsaken, so that we will never be forsaken.

3. Look, O LORD, in Your righteousness! (v. 18-22)

Verse 18 – what if the sad poem of self-pity turns and becomes a sad poem of true repentance? What if I start realizing that God is right to send suffering on me for my sin, because “I have rebelled”? What if part of our coping with pain is when we stop blaming Judas for everything? For whose wrongs did Jerusalem suffer? For whose wrongs do I suffer? For whose wrongs did Jesus suffer? It was for mine! The hymn Ah O Holy Jesus puts this starkly, “Who was the guilty? who brought this upon thee? Alas, my treason, Jesus, hath undone thee. 'Twas I, Lord Jesus, I it was denied thee: I crucified thee.”

Verse 19 – what have we done? We have called out to our spiritual lovers, our spiritual adulterers! But the result is always being deceived, and the holy destruction spreads.

Verse 20 – the poem has definitely taken on a new character. No longer just a sad and weeping poem, but it really does ring like a repentingly sad poem now! The poet is teaching us to ask God to look at the contrition of stomach churning and heart wringing. Listen carefully to verse 20, “*Look, O LORD, for I am in distress, my stomach churns; my heart is wrung within me, because I have been very rebellious.*” And verse 20 ends with the sad shock that the consequences of rebellion have gone much farther than the now contrite poet had ever expected, because now, “*In the street, the sword bereaves; in the house it is like death.*”

Verse 21 – Again groaning with no comfort, but this time there is gladness in the enemies for God having brought the contrition! And verse 21 ends with the

poet asking God for the contrition of the enemies, “*now let them be as I am.*” When Agrippa said to Paul, “*In a short time would you persuade me to be a Christian?*” ...Paul said, “*... I would to God that not only you but also all who hear me this day might become such as I am...*” (Acts 26:28) True sadness of true contrition quickly leads to praying for others who are still stuck in their sins.

Verse 22 – asking God to deal with the evildoers, as God has dealt with us, with as much severity as it takes to get us to turn to God. God is not above giving many groans and faintness of heart, in order to bring us to repentance! In Romans 2:4, Paul explains how God’s severe actions are actually kindness, by which God intends “*...to lead you to repentance.*”

The Lord is righteous. The Lord has done all things well. God has done Jerusalem no wrongs, God has done Jesus no wrongs, and God has done you no wrongs. God has done His church no wrongs. God is holy and righteous, loving and merciful, and He is perfect in all of His dealings.

Conclusion: How do you cope with suffering and loss like a Christian? 3 ways.

1. To cope like a Christian is to remember that we have a comforter! Five times this passage said that there was no one to comfort. Verse 2, 9,16,17, and 21. Grief is always intensified when it seems that no one cares. God sent Jesus to take that place for us that our sins deserved, and as a result we always have a comforter.

2. Be willing to listen.

We start our sad prayers wanting God to listen, and by the time we are done, we ought to be willing to listen to God.

Notice how this works in chapter one. There are 22 verses in this chapter. It is because there are 22 letters in the Hebrew alphabet, and each verse begins with the next letter of the alphabet. The first verse matches the last verse. The second verse matches the second-to-last verse. The third verse matches the third-to-last verse. Why? To point us to the center of the poem. The center of the poem is verse 11, and the structure lets us know it has the most significance of the whole chapter.

Verse 11 is the poet praying Look O LORD and see.

That is your prayer, right? We want God to observe, to notice. God sees.

What is God’s reply in verse 12? God repeats the concept – look and see. But it is asking you to observe, to notice His suffering! Here the writer even wants passersby to look at what has happened. See Jerusalem. See Christ. That is supposed to change our grief, change our coping, change our listening.

Listen to verse 12 as if you hear the voice of Jesus our Savior, “*Is it nothing to you, all you who pass by? Look and see if there is any sorrow like my sorrow, which was brought upon me, which the LORD inflicted on the day of His fierce anger.*”

What is the lesson for us?

We find comfort in God. We stop looking elsewhere for comfort.

Who else died for you? The death of Jesus is proof that God cares about our suffering. Do we care about God's holiness?

We know that God has something to say to us when the pleasant merry-go-round of our lives stops. What does that mean? It means when we lose a person, or when we lose something or there is a threat for us to lose something. That is when the fun and busy moments of life all stop, and the carnival is not working for us anymore. The pleasantness has stopped, and we are frozen in shock and tears and silence. That is when God has something to say, and when He says it, we need to be listening with both ears and open mind and heart. God gets our attention by forcing us to take a long painful look at the absence of the person or thing we used to have and used to really enjoy having. God shows us through our pain in the silence and motionlessness of that moment that there is something wrong with the world. God wants to say something to us about that.

C.S. Lewis wrote what is becoming a common quote, "God whispers to us in our pleasures, speaks in our conscience, but shouts in our pains: it is His megaphone to rouse a deaf world." Suffering is an opportunity to learn. To cope like a Christian is to be willing to listen.

3. Express our groans to God until we reach a breakthrough of hope.

One of the first things God teaches us when we are listening is how essential it is to have hope. 1 Peter 1:3, God "...has caused us to be born again to a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead..."

We cope like Christians by continuing to express our griefs, and listening to God, and not stopping to work through our grief until we reach a point of hoping in God again. Sometimes we are in such pain that we get confused. When we get really, really confused, all we know is that bedrock truth that we are always called to affirm – that our only hope in this time of suffering is Christ our risen Lord.

How will you know when you have that breakthrough? When you begin expecting good to show up any minute to re-color all the dark sky.

A Christian named J.R.R. Tolkien wrote into The Lord of the Rings books the storyline of something called eucatastrophe. No one had ever heard this word before, because the author, Mr. Tolkien, invented the word. But he did not invent the reality of it. The word is a combination of something bad (a catastrophe) with something good (the greek prefix eu), to create the word eucatastrophe. It starts as an unexpected evil, a catastrophe, but with the added eu at the beginning, a catastrophe is reversed from bad to good. Eucatasrophe is the unexpected appearance of something very good. For Tolkien, eucatastrophe is a crucial part of the Christian mind, and the Christian interpretation of our story in this world. It is the sudden wonderful turn in a story which pierces you with a joy that brings you to tears...because it is a sudden glimpse of the truth of hoping in Christ alone.

Lament is like that. Lament takes us from the language of catastrophe, to the language of eucatastrophe. Lament helps us to believe that the catastrophe can suddenly become very good thing, in the hands of our God. We learn in lament to vocalize the pain of the moment, laced with the belief that help is on the way. Lament gives us hope because it gives us permission to use our imagination again for a good outcome. We stop imagining the bad outcomes, and we imagine good outcomes. We can imagine everything turning around and God doing something amazing in a mess.

Revelation 21:4, God, “...*will wipe away every tear from their eyes, and death shall be no more, neither shall there be mourning, nor crying, nor pain anymore, for the former things have passed away.*”

As Christians, we get both sorrow and victory, both lament and praise.

There is a sanctifying, redemptive value to lament. There is grace in lament.

The grace is when we see that the lament is a bridge that takes us from pain to hope.

Cross the bridge!

Express our groans to God until we reach a breakthrough of hope again.