

# God's Message to Us in Lamentations

*Halifax, NS*

19 August 2018, 2:00 PM

## Introduction

Last week in our sermon series on every book of the Bible, we came to Jeremiah.

- You will remember that Jeremiah had the difficult task of proclaiming to the people of God the demise of Jerusalem, the temple, and the throne of David.
  - The people did not want to accept this message, but God made Jeremiah strong so that he could continue to preach what God told him to preach.
  - False prophets declared that Jeremiah was wrong—that God would never let Jerusalem or the temple or the house of David fall.
    - They even accused Jeremiah of conspiring with the Babylonians so as to get Jerusalem to surrender.
    - The house of David and the general populace all rejected Jeremiah's message and he suffered threats on his life and was imprisoned more than once.
  - However, as the years went on, it was the words of Jeremiah that kept being fulfilled.
    - Even so, the people and the house of David continued to reject his message and his counsel from the LORD.
    - Nevertheless, in the end, Jerusalem, the house of David, and the temple were all brought to ruin.
- Of course even though Jeremiah was vindicated as a true prophet when all his prophecies were fulfilled, he was by no means happy about the fall of Jerusalem.
  - And in the book we come to today, we have his lamentation about Jerusalem.

This is useful for us.

- Our particular culture does not understand how to mourn.
- So a book of inspired lamentations gives us guidance in how we ought to respond in a godly way to the hard things that befall us in this world.
- It especially teaches us how to respond to the troubles that bring the church down as has happened again and again in history.

Turn to this book called Lamentations and let us see what it teaches us.

- We will look at five things.

## I. First, Lamentations teaches us that we ought to mourn and lament.

A. It is not only allowable for us to mourn when the church falls, but it is wrong if we don't.

1. We have here a whole book of lamentations that is filled with statements like the one in chapter 2 verse 11: **“My eyes fail with tears, my heart is troubled; my bile is poured on the ground because of the destruction of the daughter of my people, because the children and the infants faint in the streets of the city.”**
    - 3:48 likewise says: **“My eyes overflow with rivers of water for the destruction of the daughter of my people.”**
    - 5:15 says: **“The joy of our heart has ceased; our dance has turned into mourning.”**
- Mourning and lamentation runs through the whole book.

2. Having a whole book of the Bible devoted to such lamentations shows us that it is something the LORD approves of.
    - There are many laments in the other books of the Bible as well—they are found in the Psalms, in the prophets, in the New Testament and the Old Testament.
    - We see Jesus Himself lamenting about the condition of Jerusalem in His day and calling for lamentation about her coming destruction, of which He prophesies, that came in 70 AD.
  3. Surely it would be wrong to see the church destroyed and shed no tear!
    - Failure to mourn about her ruined condition would show that you don't care about the church that Jesus purchased with His own blood.
      - It would show that you don't care about Jesus because the church is very important to Him.
- B. Our particular culture resists mourning—it is not fashionable to mourn about anything.
- We have two approaches we employ to avoid mourning when tragedy comes...
    1. We take a toke on a joint and shrug our shoulders—
      - You know what I mean—we avoid the matter—we don't look at the horror of what has happened...
      - We divert ourselves in some way—entertainment, busyness with work—whatever, but we don't face the crisis and the tragedy.
    - That is one way we avoid mourning.
    2. The other way is to celebrate when we ought to be weeping.
      - That has become a popular thing at funerals or memorial services—to celebrate the life of the person who has died...
      - There is nothing like that among the godly in the scriptures.
        - They lament and mourn because their loved one has departed.
        - Even Jesus wept at the graveside of Lazarus—even though He was about to raise Lazarus from the dead...
    3. Now of course it is true that Paul teaches us that as believers we should not sorrow as those who have no hope.
      - But that does not mean that we should not sorrow at all—it means that we should not sorrow as those who have no hope!
        - We know that those who die in the LORD have gone to be with Him.
          - And we know that their bodies will be raised incorruptible at the last day, and that brings great comfort to us.
      - But death itself is still a terrible thing, and we need to weep, we need to lament, we need to pour out our sorrow before the Lord.
- C. The reason we ought to mourn and lament is because something has gone terribly wrong!
1. Death was not part of God's original creation.
    - It is a disruption to the delightful, beautiful, excellent, lovely order that He established for us in the beginning.
    - It is a wretched intruder—it is not meant to be.

2. And the fall of the church—
  - That is the subject of Lamentations—that the church has fallen into ruins.
    - The city of God—Jerusalem—has been overrun by enemies.
    - The king on David’s throne has been taken into exile along with the leaders.
    - The glorious temple where God openly displayed that He was reconciled to His people by the blood of the covenant is in ruins.
  - That is not what ought to be!
    - That women in Jerusalem were reduced to the place where they were eating their children because of the famine... women that would never have dreamt of doing anything like that...
    - It is a terrible disruption of what the church ought to be like.
  - Here was the city that God promised to bless forever... in dust and ashes...
    - Here were the people through whom the Messiah was to come—ruined.
    - It was only right to pour out many tears. Dry eyes are not appropriate!
3. And so in our day...
  - We see churches in our land closing their doors.
  - We see ministers falling into sin and corruption.
  - We see women in the church aborting their babies.
  - We see couples getting divorces and young adults sleeping around.
    - It is not supposed to be that way!
      - It is a disruption of the beauty and the goodness that God appointed for His church and it calls for tears.

TRANS> My brothers and sisters in the LORD, shed tears about the state of the church.

- Shed tears for a loved one who dies.
- It is wrong for you to hold back your tears when tragedy strikes.

## II. **Second, Lamentations teaches us to acknowledge that it is the LORD who has afflicted us.**

- This may seem strange to you, but...
- A. This is repeated all the way through the book of Lamentations.
    - Here are some examples...
  1. Look at chapter 1, verse 5... **“Her adversaries have become the master, her enemies prosper; for the LORD has afflicted her...”**
    - There it is... He used other nations, but it was the LORD who did it.
    - He is the one who has afflicted them.
  2. There is no shying away from this.
    - Look at chapter 1, verse 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.***
      - It is fully acknowledged that God did it in His anger.
  3. Look at how chapter 2 opens: Lam 2:1-4: **How the Lord has covered the daughter of Zion with a cloud in His anger! He cast down from heaven to the earth the beauty of Israel, and did not remember His footstool In the day of His anger. 2 The Lord**

has swallowed up and has not pitied all the dwelling places of Jacob. He has thrown down in His wrath the strongholds of the daughter of Judah; He has brought *them* down to the ground; He has profaned the kingdom and its princes. <sup>3</sup> He has cut off in fierce anger every horn of Israel; He has drawn back His right hand from before the enemy. He has blazed against Jacob like a flaming fire devouring all around. <sup>4</sup> Standing like an enemy, He has bent His bow; with His right hand, like an adversary, He has slain all *who were* pleasing to His eye; on the tent of the daughter of Zion, He has poured out His fury like fire.”

- What strong language this is—God has bent His bow—He has profaned His kingdom—it was all His doing.

B. Sometimes people will try to find comfort by denying that all affliction comes from God—but it is a lie to deny it!

1. Many of you have seen the quote of the minister at the Halifax explosion who said, “God had absolutely nothing to do with this.”

- By the authority of God’s Word, I tell you that the minister told a lie about God.

- You hear that sort of thing all the time—

- The popular idea is that the devil sends the hard things and that God sends the good things.

- But that is completely wrong.

2. God is the one who afflicts us with whatever affliction we experience, and instead of denying that, Lamentations teaches us to affirm it.

- It honours God for us to affirm this.

- We are not to think of Him or talk of Him as one who has no control of what is going on—He is sovereign in all things.

- Ephesians 1:11 refers to Him as **God...works all things according to the counsel of His will...**

- Nothing happens unless He ordains it.

TRANS> So Lamentations teaches us to affirm that He is the One who has afflicted us.

- But it does not stop there.

### **III. Third, Lamentations teaches us to affirm that God was just in afflicting us.**

- There was no wrong in Him doing it.

A. We must never accuse God of wrongdoing.

1. He is a just and holy God.

- He is righteous in all His ways.

- He is kind and good beyond all measure to all.

- That is His natural disposition toward all His creatures.

2. The only reason we see affliction from God is because of our sin.

- If we had no sin, all we would see from Him would be kindness and goodness, an ever steady stream of kindness would flow from Him to us.

- That is what God is like toward any who are not ruined by sin.

- He has no other disposition but that toward those who do nothing else but be what they were made to be by Him—good and pure and just.

- It is only right for Him to be highly offended by our sin, just as it is only right for a father to be offended if his son is torturing his baby sister.

- B. Lamentations makes it clear throughout that God afflicts us because of our sin.
1. Look at Lamentations 1:5.
    - Here, Jeremiah is talking about Jerusalem... He calls Jerusalem “her” and he says: **“Her adversaries have become the master, her enemies prosper; for the LORD as afflicted her because of the multitude of her transgressions.**
    - Do you see the reason that God afflicted her?
      - It was moral outrage... **because** of the multitude of her transgressions.
  2. The truth is, it would be wrong for God to refrain from afflicting us for our sins.
    - Lamentations 1:18 puts it like this: **The LORD is righteous, for I rebelled against His commandment.**
      - He was righteous—it was the right thing for Him to do.
    - Do you know why it was right?
      - Because affliction is a necessary and appropriate response to evil.
      - I explained this to you recently...
        - It would be wrong for God to leave sin unpunished.
        - Just because we don’t think sin is a big deal does not make it anything less than a big deal...
          - It is the complete disruption of all that is right and good.
      - The foundation of all ethics is that God is to be loved and worshipped as God.
        - He is our creator and our lawgiver, and He is to be obeyed as our God.
        - To do anything else is to commit an offense that is so heinous and so unjust that there is no way for us to make it right.
      - But God will make it right—He will put everything right—it would be wrong for Him, as the judge of the earth, to leave wrong and sin without making it right.
        - He has to set the record straight.
        - If He does not, His honour would fall to the ground—and that simply could never be!
      - There must be affliction, severe affliction, to show how wrong we have been.
        - The ultimate display of how wrong sin is was in the cross of Jesus Christ.
          - He was afflicted for the sins of His people—and you see what it did to Him...
          - He was the Son of God—and when He was charged with our sin, He was cut off from the Father—forsaken—rejected—despised.
            - For that to happen to the Son of God means that our sin was far above our ability to comprehend.
        - Second to that ultimate display of how wrong we are to reject God, is the pit of hell.
          - It is a terrible place of eternal torment, without intermission—and it is for sin—sin against God.
          - The sufferings of that place show us how wrong we have been.

- And third to that, the wretchedness of sin is shown to us by the things we suffer in this world.
    - Death, pain, sickness, injury, poverty, abuse... all of our affliction, whatever it is, is God's testimony to us before the final judgment of how wrong sin is.
    - Without it, it is unlikely that anyone would ever truly repent of their sins.
3. Lamentations 3:39 asks an excellent question:
- Lam 3:39: **Why should a living man complain, A man for the punishment of his sins?**
  - We have no cause to complain when God punishes us.
    - It is not He but we who have done wrong.
    - We have no one to blame but ourselves.
  - There are so many people that have their anger turned on God when it ought to be turned on sin.
    - They even reject God because of the suffering in the world, concluding that God cannot be good when there is such suffering.
    - But I say again, it is not God, but we who have done wrong and ruined the world... by our sin.
      - It is a necessary moral response on His part.
      - God is setting the record straight by afflicting sinners—He is perfectly righteous and we have no cause to complain at Him.

TRANS> And this prepares the way for the fourth lesson...

#### **IV. Fourth, Lamentations teaches us to express contrition for sin when we mourn.**

- A. One of the worst aspects of our fallen condition is that we do not face the wrong in us—we do not sorrow over it.
1. We look very lightly upon our sin.
    - We minimise it and we make excuses for it.
    - We compare ourselves to others so that we come out not looking too bad.
    - We blame Satan or even God for it.
    - We simply do not face how unacceptable it is.
  2. There is a kind of conspiracy that goes on among the inhabitants of the world as well...
    - We help each other to excuse our sin and to minimise it.
    - Now I will admit that we can be severe on sin in others when they have sinned against us, or when we are comparing our sin to their sin...
      - But when it comes to our view of the state of all of us before God, we look very lightly upon the sin of the world.
      - We comfort each other by making excuses for our sin instead of sorrowing for our sins.
- B. And that is where punishment by affliction comes to help us.
1. God uses it, as we saw, to make us see how wrong we have been.
    - He uses affliction that we don't like to help us hate the sin that we like too much.

2. And when God's Holy Spirit is at work in us, this method proves to be very effective.
  - We become broken and contrite about our sin.
    - That is how parental discipline works with our children.
    - They learn the badness of sin by having consequences for sin.
    - If they were not fallen, the badness of sin would be enough by itself to turn them against it, but because they are fallen, as we all are, punishment helps to bring them to true contrition.
3. Now for course there is a concerted effort with our sinful hearts, the devil, and the world to disassociate affliction with sin.
  - That is what the prophets like Jeremiah struggled to correct in their preaching to God's people.
    - They constantly told them that God was sending this and that disaster because of their sin—they kept making the connection for them...
  - And in preaching the gospel, they continually tell people that the death of Christ (represented by the animal sacrifices in the Old Testament) is on account of the wrongness of sin.
    - False preachers deny that the cross is God punishing sin.
    - They want to say it is the suffering of a revolutionary—a man suffering for some good cause that He is trying to promote.

C. But in Lamentations, contrition for sin is expressed by the godly.

1. For example,
  - a. In Lam 1:8-9, it is confessed: **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. <sup>9</sup> Her uncleanness is in her skirts; she did not consider her destiny; therefore her collapse was awesome; she had no comforter.**
  - b. And in 1:20, it says: **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.**
  - c. In 3:40-42, there is a call to the church in her affliction: **Let us search out and examine our ways, and turn back to the LORD; <sup>41</sup> let us lift our hearts and hands to God in heaven. <sup>42</sup> We have transgressed and rebelled...**
  - d. And at the end of the book, in chapter 5, verse 15-17 sorrow for sin is expressed: **The joy of our heart has ceased; our dance has turned into mourning. <sup>16</sup> The crown has fallen from our head. Woe to us, for we have sinned! <sup>17</sup> Because of this our heart is faint; because of these things our eyes grow dim...**
2. Lamentation without contrition for sin is not whole—it is incomplete and sinful mourning.
  - The most vile devil will lament when he is afflicted because nobody likes affliction,
    - but only those who have the Holy Spirit of God at work in them will have a broken and contrite heart for their sin.

- See, then, that contrition is not missing from your lamentation.
  - As you pour out your sorrows, let it not only be sorrow for the affliction, but also sorrow for the sin of mankind, and also for your particular sins, especially those that are related to the affliction if you can identify them.
    - There are times when there is nothing specific as with Job, but sin is still at the root of all our sorrows and every affliction should humble us and make us sorrow for our sins.

TRANS> Lamentation is incomplete without contrition for sin.

- To review, so far,
  - We have seen that we should lament when we are afflicted...
  - That we should acknowledge God as the one who afflicted us...
  - That we should affirm that He has been just in afflicting us...
  - And that we should express contrition for our sin in our lamentation...

But there is a fifth element that we are taught about in Jeremiah's lamentations that must also be found if our lamentations are to be what they should be.

#### V. **Fifth, Lamentations teaches us to look to God for restoring grace and mercy when we mourn.**

A. He is such a gracious and merciful God.

- All through the scriptures, He continually testifies to us of His promise to forgive us and to restore us.
- His promises of forgiveness are so extraordinary that He has affirmed them with a promissory oath—He has sworn by His own name and made a covenant with us, even giving us signs like circumcision in the Old Testament and Baptism in the New Testament.
  - He calls upon all to look to Him to be saved.
  - He promises that all who call upon Him in Christ will find mercy and complete restoration.

B. This cry for mercy runs through the entire book of Lamentations.

1. All the way through there is a clear expectation expressed in the deepest sorrows that the Lord will show mercy—that He is that kind of God.
  - You can see this expectation at the very end of the book.
    - Look at chapter 5, verses 19-22: **You, O LORD, remain forever; your throne from generation to generation. <sup>20</sup> Why do You forget us forever, and forsake us for so long a time? <sup>21</sup> Turn us back to You, O LORD, and we will be restored; renew our days as of old, <sup>22</sup> unless You have utterly rejected us, and are very angry with us!**
  - The expectation is that God will turn us back and that we will be restored.
    - That the affliction will not continue forever.
    - When it says, “unless you have utterly rejected us” it does not at all mean that maybe He has utterly rejected us... oh no...
      - That is mentioned only as to say that of course He has not.
      - He is not like that.
      - It expressing what would be unheard of to give us assurance.



- So that comes at the end of Lamentations... but...
- 2. Right smack dab in the middle of the book, there is the beautiful confession of that God is a gracious God who forgives sin!
  - Surely the words speak for themselves.
    - Let's look at them starting in Lamentations 3:19.
  - Lamentations 3:19 says: **Remember my affliction and roaming, the wormwood and the gall.** <sup>20</sup> **My soul still remembers and sinks within me.** <sup>21</sup> **This I recall to my mind, therefore I have hope.**
  - What is it that gives Him hope? It is this v. 22: **Through the LORD'S mercies we are not consumed, because His compassions fail not.** <sup>23</sup> **They are new every morning; great is Your faithfulness.** <sup>24</sup> **"The LORD is my portion," says my soul. "Therefore I hope in Him!"** [It just keeps on going...] <sup>25</sup> **The LORD is good to those who wait for Him, to the soul who seeks Him.** <sup>26</sup> **It is good that one should hope and wait quietly for the salvation of the LORD.**
    - See in this that His promise of mercy is not to everyone, but to those who wait for Him—who trust His promise of mercy in Christ.
  - The passage goes on to affirm that affliction is good because it leads us to seek God's mercy... v. 27: **It is good for a man to bear the yoke in his youth.** <sup>28</sup> **Let him sit alone and keep silent, because God has laid it on him;** <sup>29</sup> **let him put his mouth in the dust—there may yet be hope.** <sup>30</sup> **Let him give his cheek to the one who strikes him, and be full of reproach.** <sup>31</sup> **For the Lord will not cast off forever.** <sup>32</sup> **Though He causes grief, yet He will show compassion according to the multitude of His mercies.** <sup>33</sup> **For He does not afflict willingly, nor grieve the children of men."**
  - That is our sure hope!
    - It is essential for us to do more than merely wail in our sorrows.
      - The Christian way to mourn is to express our sorrows indeed, but in the midst of it all to confess our sin and our assurance of God's mercy!
  - That is what makes lamentation fruitful for us and honouring to God.
    - We are brought to the end of ourselves—to a kind of mortification or deeper death—and then we lift up our eyes to God in the full assurance of hope, testifying of His wonderful grace!
    - Lam 3:22-24: **Through the LORD'S mercies we are not consumed, because His compassions fail not.** <sup>23</sup> **They are new every morning; great is Your faithfulness.** <sup>24</sup> **"The LORD is my portion," says my soul, "therefore I hope in Him!"**