

“God’s Deafening Silence”

Lamentations 2

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So, we began last week studying through the book of Lamentations
As I said, it consists of five poems.

I want to begin by putting the book of Lamentations in a little bit of context.

We are in the season of Lent.

It is a time of remembering and identifying with Jesus’ temptation and death.

It is a time of preparation for Easter.

Think about the Easter story for a moment.

Throughout his ministry he is living out this covenant blessing as the Messiah

At the cross, he experiences destruction of his earthly life

He is buried in the tomb and stays there 3 days

On Easter, he is resurrected to new life.

In many ways, it’s the story of Israel.

Israel lived in Canaan in obedience to the covenant and received God’s blessing.

When the Babylonians came in, they destroyed Jerusalem

In the aftermath of the destruction, the people lament (Lamentations)

Israel will be returned from exile and Jerusalem resurrected

It’s also the story of humanity.

Humanity in Eden experiencing the covenant blessing

Communion with God destroyed through sin

Scripture says all creation is groaning for redemption

We will experience new life and resurrection.

Therefore, as we study Lamentations, we are studying the faith of Holy Saturday.

We are so tempted to rush from the cross of Friday to the Empty Tomb.

But the disciples didn’t know that Easter was coming.

Instead, they sat and lamented in the shadow of the cross.

This is what we are doing here.

I hope that helps explain it a little better.

Have you ever been watching a big sporting event and paid attention to the reporters?

Michelle hates the announcers - much of the time, they just sound dumb.

The sideline reporters kill me.

A team experiences a really difficult loss and they come up and say

“So, the other team just handed you your butt - how do you feel about that?”

“You just got slaughtered - what are your thoughts?”

They are so unconcerned, unsympathetic, clinical almost.

Even worse than that is the live reporter at the scene of a tragedy.

“And if you look over my shoulder, you’ll see the house burning to the ground.

Wait! I see one of the residents that just got pulled from the burning rubble.

Sir, I see that you just lost your house and all you could save was a charred wedding photo. How do you feel?” or

“We’re standing in the rubble of what used to be your house before the tornado

You’ve got nothing.

What’s going through your mind right now?”

Sometimes, you just want to say,

“What is wrong with you?

Don’t you have a heart?

Come on!”

This is how our passage today starts.

Like last week, remember that we have two voices:

the narrator - our detached, clinical reporter

and Lady Zion/Jerusalem

the personification of the city and the people.

We begin with the narrator picking up where we left off.

- Narrator:**
- ¹ How the Lord in his anger
has humiliated daughter Zion!
He has thrown down from heaven to earth
the splendor of Israel;
he has not remembered his footstool
on the day of his anger.
 - ² The Lord has destroyed without mercy
all the dwellings of Jacob;
in his wrath he has broken down
the strongholds of daughter Judah;
he has brought down to the ground in dishonor
the kingdom and its rulers.
 - ³ He has cut down in fierce anger
all the might of Israel;
he has withdrawn his right hand from them
in the face of the enemy;
he has burned like a flaming fire in Jacob,
consuming all around.
 - ⁴ He has bent his bow like an enemy,
with his right hand set like a foe;
he has killed all in whom we took pride

in the tent of daughter Zion;
he has poured out his fury like fire.

⁵ The Lord has become like an enemy;
he has destroyed Israel.
He has destroyed all its palaces,
laid in ruins its strongholds,
and multiplied in daughter Judah
mourning and lamentation.

⁶ He has broken down his booth like a garden,
he has destroyed his tabernacle;
the Lord has abolished in Zion
festival and sabbath,
and in his fierce indignation has spurned
king and priest.

⁷ The Lord has scorned his altar,
disowned his sanctuary;
he has delivered into the hand of the enemy
the walls of her palaces;
a clamor was raised in the house of the Lord
as on a day of festival.

⁸ The Lord determined to lay in ruins
the wall of daughter Zion;
he stretched the line;
he did not withhold his hand from destroying;
he caused rampart and wall to lament;
they languish together.

⁹ Her gates have sunk into the ground;
he has ruined and broken her bars;
her king and princes are among the nations;
guidance is no more,
and her prophets obtain
no vision from the Lord.

¹⁰ The elders of daughter Zion
sit on the ground in silence;
they have thrown dust on their heads
and put on sackcloth;
the young girls of Jerusalem
have bowed their heads to the ground.

The description changes from the first poem

1st poem, there is an emphasis on Jerusalem's fault.

Here, the perspective shifts - God is the one behind this tragedy.

God is the one behind the destruction.

Verb after verb after of God's terrifying acts.

The Lord...

...humiliated Zion
...has thrown down Israel's splendor
...has not remembered
...destroyed without mercy
...broken down strongholds
...brought the kingdom to the ground
...cut down Israel
...withdrawn his protection
...burned
...bent the bow
...killed
...poured out fury
...destroyed
...laid in ruins
...multiplied mourning
...broken down
...destroyed
...abolished
...spurned
...scorned
...disowned
...ruined
...broken

It's like a thesaurus of tragedy and destruction

If you weren't uncomfortable already, you can't help but be now.

We like to think and talk of God in terms of God's
goodness, faithfulness, forgiveness, love, provision.

But not like this...

And yet, here it is . . . and we've got to deal with it.

The reporter has to stop just reporting.

he can no longer be objective.

He cannot stand by unaffected by the tragedy that is going on all around him.

He's overcome.

He has to put down the microphone and do something.

He is deeply affected by what he is seeing.

Narrator: ¹¹ My eyes are spent with weeping;
my stomach churns;
my bile is poured out on the ground
because of the destruction of my people,
because infants and babes faint
in the streets of the city.

¹² They cry to their mothers,

‘Where is bread and wine?’
as they faint like the wounded
in the streets of the city,
as their life is poured out
on their mothers’ bosom.

Leave it to children to cut through all the detached objective reporting.

He sees babies and children who are starving.

They come to their mothers and their mothers have nothing to give them.

He can’t stop the tears.

His stomach is in knots.

He is about to puke.

He is completely overcome.

Therefore, the narrator stops just reporting events and observations

He begins talking directly to Lady Zion.

Narrator: ¹³ What can I say for you, to what compare you,
 O daughter Jerusalem?
To what can I liken you, that I may comfort you,
 O virgin daughter Zion?
For vast as the sea is your ruin;
 who can heal you?

¹⁴ Your prophets have seen for you
false and deceptive visions;
they have not exposed your iniquity
to restore your fortunes,
but have seen oracles for you
that are false and misleading.

¹⁵ All who pass along the way
clap their hands at you;
they hiss and wag their heads
at daughter Jerusalem;
‘Is this the city that was called
the perfection of beauty,
the joy of all the earth?’

¹⁶ All your enemies
open their mouths against you;
they hiss, they gnash their teeth,
they cry: ‘We have devoured her!’
Ah, this is the day we longed for;
at last we have seen it!’

¹⁷ The Lord has done what he purposed,
he has carried out his threat;
as he ordained long ago,

he has demolished without pity;
he has made the enemy rejoice over you,
and exalted the might of your foes.

He is doing exactly what we talked about last week -

He sees her.

He says, "What can I even compare you to?"

"No one has had it as bad as you do right now."

"How can I comfort you?"

In Walker Percy's novel, *Love in the Ruins*, he tells the story of Tom Moore
a psychologist and lapsed Catholic who suffers from a mental illness himself
and ends up a patient in the hospital where he works.

Listen to this excerpt:

Here in the day room and in the ward we patients came to understand each other as only fellow prisoners and exiles can. Sane outside, I can't make head or tail of people. Mad inside, we signaled each other like auctioneers, a wink here, a wag of finger there. I listened and watched. Outside there is not time to listen. Sitting here in the day room the day after Christmas next to a mangy pine tree decorated with varicolored Kleenex (no glass!), the stereo-V showing the Blue-Gray game and rolling flip flip flip, my hands on my knees and wrists bandaged, I felt so bad that I groaned aloud an Old Testament lamentation AAAAIEOOOOW! to which responded a great silent black man sitting next to me on the blocky couch: "Ain't it the truth though."

After that I felt better.

The narrator has heard her cry and responds, in essence
"Ain't it the truth, though."

Then, the narrator does something amazing.

This narrator, who had no problem in the first poem
explaining why Jerusalem was getting what she deserved.

She had been unclean.

She had had many lovers.

Her filthiness was clinging to her skirts.

And yet, here he says: "To what can I liken you, that I may comfort you,
O *virgin* daughter Zion?"

Something has changed here.

The narrator is seeing Jerusalem through new eyes.

He is speaking a new, fresh word about her.

The blame is getting turned somewhere else. - God is to blame.

Where can she turn?

Her prophets are impotent

The passersby mock her

Her enemies are there to entrap her

And God is behind it all . . . according to narrator.

Then, he gives her instruction.

“This is what you need to do...”

Narrator: ¹⁸ Cry aloud to the Lord!
 O wall of daughter Zion!
Let tears stream down like a torrent
 day and night!
Give yourself no rest,
 your eyes no respite!

¹⁹ Arise, cry out in the night,
 at the beginning of the watches!
Pour out your heart like water
 before the presence of the Lord!
Lift your hands to him
 for the lives of your children,
who faint for hunger
 at the head of every street.

“Make a scene!” the narrator suggests.

“And do it up right.”

Have you ever been out in public and seen a fight break out between two lovers?
Or have you seen a child just lose it right in the middle of the store?

That’s what the narrator has in mind:

Scream!
Cry out!
Give yourself no rest!
Pour out your lament to the Lord,
 not just for yourself, but for your children -
 your children who are fainting and dying in the street.
So she does:

Lady Zion: ²⁰ Look, O Lord, and consider!
 To whom have you done this?
Should women eat their offspring,
 the children they have borne?
Should priest and prophet be killed
 in the sanctuary of the Lord?

²¹ The young and the old are lying
 on the ground in the streets;
my young women and my young men
 have fallen by the sword;
on the day of your anger you have killed them,
 slaughtering without mercy.

22 You invited my enemies from all around
as if for a day of festival;
and on the day of the anger of the Lord
no one escaped or survived;
those whom I bore and reared
my enemy has destroyed.

When was the last time you prayed like that?

“God, it’s so bad here that women are prepared to eat their children”

“The priests are killed on holy ground and you aren’t doing anything about it, God.”

God, why did you let her die?

Where were you when that drunk driver hit him?

Why didn’t you stop it God?

Why didn’t you heal my child?

Why didn’t you take away the cancer?

Where were you, O Great Physician!?

You didn’t show up!

According to Lamentations, though, it’s worse than that - it’s your fault, God.

You did this!

When was the last time you prayed like this?

Does this make anybody uncomfortable?

“How dare you talk to God that way.”

“You better watch out or you’re gonna get struck by lightning.”

As much as I am disturbed by the black on the page

(the words spoken by the narrator and woman),

I am more disturbed by the white spaces

(what’s not there).

What about the fact that God never answers?

In Job, we go 40 chapters or so before God finally speaks up and speaks up in anger.

Here, we get nothing.

God says absolutely nothing.

I have wondered as I studied this book, “How did this book make it into the Bible?”

What is God trying to teach us or reveal to us through this scripture?

I want to suggest that, too often, we sugarcoat our prayers.

We’re supposed to speak softly and reverently.

We’re talking to God after all.

Prayer is no place for anger.

It doesn’t show respect

It doesn’t show reverence

It doesn’t show love

I would disagree.

You see, we often have this false idea that anger/hate are the opposite of love.

They are not.
Apathy is.

We are angry, not because we don't love someone or something
not because we don't care about it
but because we DO care about it.
because we DO love it dearly.

To express anger like this is an act of honesty
it is an act of fidelity.

I would argue that Lady Jerusalem is doing to the most faithful thing she can do
Even though she is receiving nothing in return - no answer, no response,
she is keeping up her side of the communication

The anger of the narrator and the woman signify that they haven't let go of the relationship.
They still have hope that God will answer.

This lament is also a sign of trust.

When Michelle and I first married, we had to learn to fight.
We came from very different backgrounds and families that fought very differently.

Early on, we both experienced a crisis when a fight would come up.
We didn't talk about then, but we both had the great fear that the other one would
walk out and that it would be over.

We didn't express ourselves fully out of fear.
As time has gone by and trust has deepened,
we have become more able to express ourselves - our anger and frustration.
we have been more honest with one another

not because we love each other less,
but because we trust each other more.

The language of this lament - this prayer -
is the language of trust.
is the language of fidelity.
is the language of an ongoing relationship.

Healing begins when we dare to get honest.
Honest about our hurt.
Honest about our anger.
Honest about our disappointment.

Because, This God, who seems to be the one behind all the calamity and destruction
is also the God who can make it right
is also the God who can save us
is also the source of our hope

Therefore, when you pray and pray and pray
and hear nothing in return

When it feels like your prayers just don't get past the ceiling.

When you're sitting in the rubble of a life that had collapsed all around you.

Don't be afraid to make a scene before God.

Don't be afraid to shout and yell at the heavens

Don't be afraid to shake your fists and stomp your feet.

Don't be afraid to be completely honest with God.

It may be the most faithful thing you could possibly do.