

## Dark Clouds, Deep Mercy

The Cause: A Broken World and a Holy God

Lamentations 1

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*<sup>1</sup> 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. <sup>2</sup> She weeps bitterly in the night, with tears on her cheeks; among all her lovers she has none to comfort her; all her friends have dealt treacherously with her; they have become her enemies. <sup>3</sup> Judah has gone into exile because of affliction and hard servitude; she dwells now among the nations, but finds no resting place; her pursuers have all overtaken her in the midst of her distress. <sup>4</sup> The roads to Zion mourn, for none come to the festival; all her gates are desolate; her priests groan; her virgins have been afflicted, and she herself suffers bitterly. <sup>5</sup> Her foes have become the head; her enemies prosper, because the LORD has afflicted her for the multitude of her transgressions; her children have gone away, captives before the foe. <sup>6</sup> From the daughter of Zion all her majesty has departed. Her princes have become like deer that find no pasture; they fled without strength before the pursuer. <sup>7</sup> Jerusalem remembers in the days of her affliction and wandering all the precious things that were hers from days of old. When her people fell into the hand of the foe, and there was none to help her, her foes gloated over her; they mocked at her downfall. <sup>8</sup> Jerusalem sinned grievously; therefore she became filthy; all who honored her despise her, for they have seen her nakedness; she herself groans and turns her face away. <sup>9</sup> Her uncleanness was in her skirts; she took no thought of her future; therefore her fall is terrible; she has no comforter. "O LORD, behold my affliction, for the enemy has triumphed!" <sup>10</sup> The enemy has stretched out his hands over all her precious things; for she has seen the nations enter her sanctuary, those whom you forbade to enter your congregation. <sup>11</sup> All her people groan as they search for bread; they trade their treasures for food to revive their strength. "Look, O LORD, and see, for I am despised." (Lamentations 1:1-11)*

Leonard Bernstein (1918-1990) is considered by many historians to be one of the most talented and famous musicians in American history. He was the music director for the New York Philharmonic, conducted the most notable symphonies around the world, and composed the score for *West Side Story*, *Peter Pan*, and a number of other musicals.<sup>1</sup> But do you know the name of his first symphony?

It was a three-movement symphony called *Jeremiah*, which included a solo in which the words of the book of Lamentations are sung in Hebrew. He composed it in 1942, and it made its debut in 1944, winning the New York Critics Circle Award in the same year.<sup>2</sup> Bernstein's first symphony became a huge success as he went on to perform it in Boston, New York, St. Louis, Detroit, Prague, and Jerusalem.

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<sup>1</sup> [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Leonard\\_Bernstein](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Leonard_Bernstein)

<sup>2</sup> [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Symphony\\_No.\\_1\\_\(Bernstein\)](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Symphony_No._1_(Bernstein))

In the program notes of the 1944 performance in New York, he described the third movement (Lamentation) as “. . . the cry of Jeremiah, as he mourns his beloved Jerusalem, ruined, pillaged, and dishonored after his desperate efforts to save it.” The symphony *Jeremiah* is one of a number of Bernstein works where, by his own admission, he struggles with the crisis of faith in the twentieth century. While his music is beautiful, his conclusion as to what is needed misses the mark. Underneath Bernstein’s *Jeremiah* symphony was a belief that “a renewal of faith in the modern times requires a return to innocence, a shedding of the trappings of dogma and orthodoxy, and a fundamental belief in our common humanity.”<sup>3</sup>

Do you hear what is underneath his symphony? Bernstein’s interpretation of the world is that we need to return to innocence, which is impossible. We need to shed our orthodoxy, which is the foundation of truth, and believe in our humanity, which is the essence of the problem. Bernstein may be quoting Lamentations, but I would suggest to you that he is not truly lamenting – at least not from a biblical framework.

### **Lament: Expressing, Interpreting and Tuning**

A lament is the heartfelt cry of sorrow. It is a prayer through which a believer pours his or her heart out to God because of the struggles and the tension of the pain of life. Lament wrestles with the gap between what the Bible says about God, what we know about Him, and what we experience in the real world. In lament a believer asks God, “Why? How? Who are you?” A lament is a God-given expression of our pain, wherein we look to Him for answers, relief, and hope.

Lament also interprets pain. In its expression, a lament acknowledges that there is more to life than pain or difficulty. A Christian lament, therefore, deals with more than just the “thing” that happened, but also with what lies underneath. It laments the specific issue but also the reality of brokenness which is a part our world, and it laments the delay in God’s final deliverance.

Last week we learned that lament also serves to tune the heart. Entering into lament can serve to awaken us to the needs around us, to the remaining brokenness in our world, or to circumstances that should break our hearts or serve as a warning. Lament gives voice to tragedy, and in so doing, it reminds us about who we really are and what life is all about. It is, in that respect, a wake-up call.

The book of Lamentations was written both to give voice to the pain of the destruction of Jerusalem and to remind future generations that Judah had reached the point of “no return.” Lamentations expresses sorrow, but is also serves as a warning.

Lamentations, especially chapter 1, shows us the brokenness of the world and the holiness of God. It tunes our hearts to the reality and the sorrow of divine judgment. It shows us that grace is only amazing because judgment is real.

Chapter one of Lamentations serves as an introduction to the central themes of the brokenness of the world and the holiness of God. Let’s walk through this poetic chapter and see what we learn.

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<sup>3</sup> Ibid

## The Scene of Lament

The very first word of the book actually serves as its title in the Hebrew. It's the word "How," and it is meant to be read both as a question and as a shocking statement. The author, who I believe is the prophet Jeremiah, even though he is not named, expresses his sorrow at what has happened. In English, we might express it this way: "How did that happen?" Or, if I hear my wife say while on the phone, "What!?! How!?" I know that something is terribly wrong. That is the intention of this word and title.

Now in case you were not here two weeks ago when we covered 2 Chronicles 36, the situation in the city of Jerusalem and the southern kingdom of Judah is devastating. After multiple kings were set up and removed, after multiple deportations, and after a brutal siege of the city, the walls of Jerusalem were penetrated, and the Babylonian army sacked the city. The temple was stripped of all its gold and vessels of worship, and it, along with the rest of the city, was burnt to the ground. The city, the nation, and the people of Israel were devastated. That is the context for the book of Lamentations.

This first chapter introduces us to the theme and tone of the book. Each chapter is an independent lament, and the book reaches its climax or turning point in chapter three. However, chapters four and five do not end with a rosy picture. Instead, they end with the pain still lingering. Lamentations does not resolve in a neat tidy manner. It expresses hope in God's mercy while the suffering is still happening.

One other thing that you need to know about this chapter: There are twenty-two verses, and there are twenty-two letters in the Hebrew alphabet. Each verse starts with a word whose first letter is the next letter in the Hebrew alphabet. It is as though Jeremiah wants us to see suffering from A to Z. The book is a work of poetry whose language and form are designed to emphasize the comprehensive nature of Jerusalem's destruction. This book is more than just a historical record of what happened to the city. It is designed to paint a picture and deliver a message.

In the first two verses the city is portrayed as a broken, lonely widow whose life has taken a tragic turn. Jerusalem used to be full of people, great among the nations, and a princess among the nations, but now she is alone and a slave. Her fall has been calamitous. And there is much sorrow. The city is said to be weeping with "tears on her cheeks," and she has been abandoned by her former lovers and opposed by her friends. Jerusalem is isolated, sorrowful, and abandoned.

What's more, the people of Judah have been brought into captivity and exile (v. 3). The once glorious nation of God's chosen people is now scattered "among the nations" with no resting place, and she has been overrun by her adversaries. Even the roads cry out! In verse four things once connected with celebration and festival are now feeling the pain of rejection. The roads mourn. The festivals are empty. The gates are desolate. The priests groan, and the young women no longer rejoice.

Central to the pain of this lament is the fact that the enemy has won. Verse five even goes so far as to say that the enemy has prospered. The blessing of the Lord has seemed to fall on the enemies of God's people. And lament presses this point even further by saying "because the Lord has afflicted her" (v. 5). Here is the great tension between the sorrows of life and the sovereignty of God. However,

Jeremiah has no problem in identifying that while Babylon was the means, God was ultimately behind the destruction of Jerusalem, and we see why in verse five: “for the multitude of her transgressions.”

This is one of the ways that Lamentations is different from Job. There are distinct categories of suffering and lament in these two books. In Job we see the category of innocent and personal suffering, while in Lamentations we see national suffering because of guilt. That makes Lamentations challenging in some ways because I’m sure that there were some people in Jerusalem who were trying to be faithful, who were listening to Jeremiah’s warnings, and who were praying for repentance. But they were affected directly and significantly by the city’s destruction. Lamentations shows us that sometimes innocent and righteous people are still affected by the consequences of national or cultural sins. The book reminds us that sin is more than just an individual issue. There is something broken about our world, our culture, and our nation. My sin is not the only problem.

Finally, this scene ends with part of the reason why the book of Lamentations was written: to remember. In verse seven the city is portrayed as one who thinks back on the glory days of Israel, the “precious things” that were hers prior to falling into the hands of the foe. We get a quick glimpse into the value of this book and into divine discipline. We are reminded about God’s former favor. The pain of the moment is meant to awaken us to who we are and who God is.

### **The Cause of Lament**

What lies underneath this lament? What is the reason for this calamity? How does Jeremiah interpret the disaster that he is witnessing? Verses 8-11 provide the background and the reason for the destruction of the city and the nation. This lament does more than mourn the state of the city. It also laments what lies underneath – the sinfulness of the nation.

Verse five introduced the cause as the “multitude of her transgressions,” and we see this repeated in verse 8: “*Jerusalem sinned grievously . . .*” What were the ways in which Jerusalem had sinned? To answer that question, we need to look into the book of Jeremiah and listen to a few of his warnings.

The second chapter of Jeremiah serves as a good summary of the message that the people of Judah rejected:

*<sup>5</sup> Thus says the LORD: “What wrong did your fathers find in me that they went far from me, and went after worthlessness, and became worthless? <sup>6</sup> They did not say, ‘Where is the LORD who brought us up from the land of Egypt, who led us in the wilderness, in a land of deserts and pits, in a land of drought and deep darkness, in a land that none passes through, where no man dwells?’ <sup>7</sup> And I brought you into a plentiful land to enjoy its fruits and its good things. But when you came in, you defiled my land and made my heritage an abomination. <sup>8</sup> The priests did not say, ‘Where is the LORD?’ Those who handle the law did not know me; the shepherds transgressed against me; the prophets prophesied by Baal and went after things that do not profit. (Jeremiah 2:5–8)*

*<sup>11</sup> Has a nation changed its gods, even though they are no gods? But my people have changed their glory for that which does not profit. <sup>12</sup> Be appalled, O heavens, at this; be shocked, be utterly desolate, declares the LORD . . . (Jeremiah 2:11–12)*

*<sup>17</sup> Have you not brought this upon yourself by forsaking the LORD your God, when he led you in the way? <sup>18</sup> And now what do you gain by going to Egypt to drink the waters of the Nile? Or what do you gain by going to Assyria to drink the waters of the Euphrates? <sup>19</sup> Your evil will chastise you, and your apostasy will reprove you. Know and see that it is evil and bitter for you to forsake the LORD your God; the fear of me is not in you, declares the Lord GOD of hosts. (Jeremiah 2:17–19)*

The people of God had abandoned their God in their worship, their actions, and even in their hearts. That is why the book of Jeremiah talks about the New Covenant and the ultimate hope that one day, God would give His people a new heart (Jer. 31:33) and put the fear of God in them so that they would no longer turn from Him (Jer. 32:40). But that day is certainly not present in 586 BC. That day would come through the cross of Jesus Christ, where a person could be born again and become a child of God from the inside out (see John 1:12-13). In fact, this lament serves to make the longing for a new heart even stronger.

What happened to Jerusalem is a small but important microcosm of what kind of devastation sin can create. Poetically it sounds like this in verse 8-9: “. . . *she became filthy; all who honored her despise her, for they have seen her nakedness; she herself groans and turns her face away. Her uncleanness was in her skirts; she took no thought of her future; therefore her fall is terrible*” (Lam. 1:8b-9a).

The language smacks of shame, pollution, isolation, exposure, misery, and hopelessness. Jerusalem is experiencing the abandonment of God and a taste of the consequences of sin – a bit of hell on earth.

But the tragedy is not just individual. The issue is compounded by the fact that sin has affected an entire nation. That is what makes this scene so horrific. The sanctuary was defiled by other nations (v. 10), and ALL the people groan as they search for bread (v. 11). It is not just the depth of the devastation; it is the breadth of it.

This reminds me of a time in the late '90s when I was able to visit Auschwitz while on a mission trip to Slovakia. If you've been there or seen pictures, it is a relatively small compound in the middle of the city. It has been converted into a devastating museum where you understand the overwhelming depravity of what happened to the Jews in World War II. You get a sense of methodical and organized genocide that was happening when you see rooms full of shoes, luggage, and human hair. Auschwitz is sickening. But outside the city is Birkenau. It was 425 acres, with over 300 buildings. I walked Birkenau for hours, and the scale of depravity was incomprehensible. As far as I could see were the remaining brick chimneys from the barracks spread all over the green fields. The depth of sin is not the only problem; the scope is as well.

The reason why Lamentations was written was because of the destruction of the city of Jerusalem, but there is more underneath. Jeremiah is lamenting the rebellion that caused the destruction of the nation. The people of Israel had been warned repeatedly. They knew better, and they were given opportunities to repent. They could see what had happened to the ten tribes to the north. And yet they refused to listen. They hardened their hearts to God's voice, and it led to their ruin.

Lamentations is written to mourn the reality of a broken world, of a people who have rebelled, and of divine justice that has finally been delivered. Lamentations helps us feel the weight of the problem of sin in the world.

### **The Plea for Mercy**

The final movement in Lamentations chapter one is where Jeremiah pours out his heart in prayer in a plea for mercy. It is generally directed towards God, but it includes statements that incorporate internal wrestling and things that the writer might say to others nearby.

In verse twelve, Jeremiah expresses how shocking the situation in Jerusalem really is. It is as if he wants people who are walking by the city to stop and take notice. His sorrow is enormous: “. . . is there any sorrow like my sorrow” (1:12). He wants people to notice what a tragedy has befallen Jerusalem.

The city is grieving because they are experiencing the judgment of God. The language indicates an overwhelming sense of divine justice:

- v. 12b - “the Lord inflicted on the day of his fierce anger”
- v. 13a – “he sent fire into my bones”
- v. 13b – “he spread a net for my feet . . . turned me back . . . left me stunned”

And once again, Jeremiah identifies that all of this is happening because of the waywardness of the people. In verse 14 the transgressions of the people are like a yoke on his neck, tied together by the Lord, set on his neck, and with no strength to support them.

In verses 15-17 it is clear that the people feel divine rejection. They’ve lost the battle (v. 15a), they are crushed (v. 15b), and they are weeping with no comfort (v. 16). God has temporarily turned against His own people such that “Jerusalem has become a filthy thing . . .” (v. 17).

Verse eighteen is a major turning point. After rehearsing the facts of what has happened to the people of God, now comes the acknowledgement and the confession that the Lord is in the right. It is a stunning statement, especially in light of what has been said previously.

<sup>18</sup> *“The LORD is in the right, for I have rebelled against his word; but hear, all you peoples, and see my suffering; my young women and my young men have gone into captivity.” Lamentations 1:18 (ESV)*

Jeremiah is drawing a straight line from their suffering to their rebellion, and he gives it more color in verse 19a: *“I called to my lovers but they deceived me . . .”* There is no doubt in his mind as to the connection of their suffering and its relationship to their spiritual adultery. God had warned them, and now He had their attention, but it came through discipline.

The circumstances in Jerusalem had taken their toll emotionally. Along with weeping and crying, there is “. . . distress . . . my stomach churns . . . my heart is wrung within me” (v. 20), and Jeremiah attributes it to their collective rebelliousness. He gives a voice to the city and the people of Judah.

And then finally, this lament acknowledges that the watching world feels vindicated by Jerusalem's destruction. *"They are glad that you have done it . . ." (v. 21)*. Part of what is painful in this lament is the fact that the enemies of God's people feel justified and triumphant in the destruction of God's people.

So this lament ends with a plea for justice to be done. God has shown through His dealing with Judah that He is a just God, and the lament concludes with a longing for God's final word to be spoken. In the lamenter's exhaustion, he desires that God adjust the scales of justice to be fully balanced.

<sup>22</sup> *"Let all their evildoing come before you, and deal with them as you have dealt with me because of all my transgressions; for my groans are many, and my heart is faint." Lamentations 1:22 (ESV)*

This is more than just a prayer of retribution. Jeremiah is wrestling with the waywardness of God's people, and he longs for every bit of waywardness in the world to be dealt with once and for all. Lamenting divine judgment has expressed his sorrow, interpreted the cause and tuned his heart to who God is. From A to Z, it is clear that we live in a broken world and that there is a holy God.

## **Lessons from Lamentations 1**

This is admittedly a heavy chapter. Frankly, it is a bit unusual for us to think or speak in the kind of tones and hues that we find in this first chapter. We are a more chipper and celebrative and optimistic people. And while there is nothing inherently wrong with that, Lamentations helps us to see a few really important concepts and applications.

### **1. Sin has real and devastating consequences**

One of the takeaways from this chapter should be the real and devastating effects of sin, not only on a personal level but on a community of people. Many of you know the verse "The wages of sin is death" (Rom 6:23), but I wonder when was the last time that you felt the effects of sin so deeply that it made you tremble. Because of the sin-saturated culture in which we live, and even because of our own latent sinfulness, it can become far too easy to forget that sin is devastating. This chapter serves as a potent reminder that God did not spare His own people from the consequences of their actions. We ought to be cautioned against thinking that because there are no *immediate* consequences, there are no consequences at all.

### **2. Divine justice and judgment are part of the redemptive story**

We love words like *redemption, grace, and forgiveness*. And we should. But we also need to be reminded that there is something underneath those words. Redemption is only necessary, grace is only amazing, and forgiveness is only needed because God is holy and because divine judgment is a part of the fabric of the universe. The cross of Jesus Christ was necessary because of our sin and because of God's righteous judgment.

Divine judgment means that Satan does not get to roam free on the earth forever. Divine judgment means that one day every sin will be dealt with and that hell will be populated with people who never turned to Christ. And although we talk about grace and redemption more, divine judgment is real

nonetheless. Underneath everything in life is simple but eternal truth: God is holy. And the lament regarding destruction of Jerusalem reminds of this reality.

### **3. Forgiveness through Jesus is miraculous**

As I was making my way through the sorrow and abandonment of Lamentations, I couldn't help but marvel at the beauty of what God has offered to us through Christ. You see, it is not just that God forgives the sins of those who put their faith in Jesus. It is that God poured out the punishment for those sins on Jesus personally. The Father offered His own son as an atonement or a sacrifice for our sins. And then to think that the promises of the New Covenant, which deal with matters of the heart, are being fulfilled through Christ. It makes me love God's grace even more. It makes me stop and say, "Why me? I don't deserve your grace!"

### **4. Confession tunes the heart**

My final application is to invite you to consider afresh the role of confession in your relationship with the Lord. I wonder how much time or thought or energy you put into confession this week? Confession means to say the same thing about our sin that God would say. It means to say, "I am in the wrong, Lord!" In many respects this first chapter helps us tune our hearts to not only what was happening in Jerusalem, but also to what is happening in our lives and around us all the time.

I wonder if the Lord is trying to get your attention today. Is He using the circumstances of your life to wake you up to a bad path that you are on? Is He using this message to prick your heart to be broken and contrite before Him? Is He calling you? Is He calling our church? Is He calling our city or our nation?

Confession is a lament that tunes your heart to the brokenness of sin in light of the holiness of God. It is the moment when individually or corporately we say, "The Lord is right . . . I have rebelled against His word." And because of Jesus we can know that *"if we confess our sins, he is faithful and just to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness"* (1 John 1:9).

Lament tunes the heart to hear the message of grace again.

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