

LAMENTATIONS FOR TODAY: PART ONE¹

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Abstract: The article explores the relevance of the biblical book of Lamentations in modern Christian life. It highlights the book's raw portrayal of grief, despair, and suffering following Jerusalem's destruction, emphasizing its universal resonance with human pain and loss. Despite its brutal imagery and accusations against God, Lamentations offers a pathway to spiritual healing by encouraging honest expressions of sorrow and lament. The text challenges the tendency in Western culture and Christian worship to suppress grief in favor of positivity, arguing that lamenting is essential for emotional and spiritual authenticity. By rejecting Lamentations, believers risk losing the ability to confront injustice, express vulnerability, and engage deeply with God during times of suffering. The article underscores the importance of lament as a way to reconnect with God, address personal and communal wounds, and navigate life's tragedies. It advocates for embracing Lamentations as a tool for healing, reflection, and prayer, asserting that its timeless themes of anguish and hope remain profoundly relevant in a world marked by disasters and loss. Ultimately, Lamentations invites believers to honor their pain, confront reality, and seek God's mercy amidst life's darkest moments.

INTRODUCTION

Within the last one-hundred and fifty years, the world has witnessed "The war to end all wars," World War Two, the Holocaust, the firebombing of Dresden, Stalin's purges, the Chinese cultural revolution, the killings fields of the Khmer Rouge, Rwanda, 9/11. The point? Life can be hell. Sometimes, it crushes our hearts. So why study Lamentations—an ancient book that mourns one more disaster? Why increase our sadness by throwing ourselves into poetry filled with mourning and misery? When offered the opportunity, most Christians take a pass. Alternatively, if they do read Lamentations, it is probably because they are systematically reading the Bible—cover to cover. They have to read Lamentations to get to the next book, Ezekiel.

"How lonely sits the city once full of people" (Lam 1:1a). "Renew our days as of old—unless you have completely rejected us, and you remain exceedingly angry with us" (Lam 5:21–22). The book of Lamentations begins and ends with sorrow and deep sadness.

Most of the baptized hear snippets from Lamentations, especially 3:22–23. After that, a quick read of the book might prompt the question, "Why is *this* in the Bible?" Todd Linafelt aptly writes, "A more relentlessly brutal piece of writing is scarcely imaginable."² Some react vehemently. For instance, in 1995, Naomi Seidman composed a short story titled "Burning the Book of Lamentations."³

¹ This article is adapted from the *Concordia Commentary - Lamentations* by R. Reed Lessing (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 2024).

² Todd Linafelt, *Surviving Lamentations Catastrophe, Lament, and Protest in the Afterlife of a Biblical Book* (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 2000), 2. He continues, "This short biblical book affronts the reader with a barrage of harsh and violent images: from its opening portrayal of the city of Jerusalem as an abandoned widow exposed to endless dangers, to the broken man of chapter three, to the bleak description in chapter four of the inhabitants of a devastated city, to the final unanswered appeal of chapter five."

³ Seidman's story is about a young Jewish woman in Poland during the late 1980s who throws Lamentations into a fire after the *tiš'ā bē' āb* liturgy—a worship rite that mourns the Babylonian atrocities of 587 BC, the Roman destruction of the second temple, as well as other events experienced by the Jews in their long and tortured history. Naomi Seidman, "Burning the

The Hebrew Bible titles Lamentations תְּהִיָּה, "How could it be?" after the first word in the book. The Babylonian Talmud (b. B. Bat. 14b–15a) calls it *qînôt*, "laments." Ancient Jews also termed it *mēgillat qînôt*, "a scroll of laments" (y. Shab. 16:15c), as well as *sēper qînôt*, "a book of laments" (b. Hag. 8b). The LXX calls it *ΘΡΗΝΟΙ*, "Dirges," while the Vulgate offers this title, *threni id est lamentationes Jeremias prophetiae*, "Dirges, that is, laments of Jeremiah the prophet." Martin Luther simply labeled it *Klagelieder*, "Dirges/Laments."

Israel's long history—from Genesis to 2 Kings—culminated in total disaster. Called *tiš 'ā bē' āb* by Jews for centuries (Mishnah Ta'an. 4:6), it all appeared to be a complete and irrevocable end.

The latter appears mild when we compare the book of Lamentations with Jeremiah's protests (Jer 11:18–12:6; 15:10–21; 17:14–18; 18:18–23; 20:7–13). While Jeremiah complains that Yahweh has led him "like a lamb to the slaughter" (Jer 11:19) or is a "deceitful brook" (Jer 15:18), he does not blame God for directly attacking him. However, in Lamentations, Daughter Zion (e.g., Lam 1:11c–16; 2:4a–b, 5a) and Jeremiah (e.g., Lam 3:1–18) accuse Yahweh of becoming their adversary. Only the book of Job matches this bitterness and rancor.

Lamentations expresses misery, sadness, anguish, heartache, darkness, agony, hurt, affliction, tribulation, calamity, torment, isolation, wretchedness, misfortune, and unmitigated pain. "The multitude of dead bodies, fractured bones, and broken spirits that fill the lines of this poetry attest to the horrific outcome of God's attack."⁴

Babylon ripped apart Jerusalem's walls, gates, citadels—and most importantly, the city's temple (Lam 2:1–9). Enemy soldiers decimated the nation's army (Lam 1:15a), who ran for their lives (Lam 1:6b–c). Political and religious leaders were either dead (Lam 1:15b–c), exiled (Lam 1:3a), starving to death (Lam 1:11a), or drowning in sorrow (Lam 2:10). Survivors huddled together—broken and hopeless. Not so fortunate others were executed (Lam 5:12). Normal life, including judicial and economic processes, ceased, ushering in suffering and starvation (Lam 2:12, 20; 4:2–10; 5:2, 4–6). Access to life's basic needs evaporated (Lam 5:2, 4). The upshot? Jerusalem became like a slave (Lam 1:1c); her citizens felt like filth and garbage (Lam 3:45). The empire's military force reduced everything to dust.

A thick veil of darkness covered the landscape. Babylon negated, voided, and destroyed everything. Death hovered around every corner. The future was blank. There was no future. W.F. Dobbs-Allsopp maintains,

These poems constitute some of the Bible's most violent and brutal pieces of writing as well, as they emerge, both literally and figuratively, out of the ashes and ruins of Jerusalem and are filled with horrifyingly dark and grizzly images of raw human pain and suffering.⁵

And yet! In 1923, Thomas Chisholm wrote the hymn "Great Is Thy Faithfulness." Little did he know that, after William Runyan set the words to music, it would find its way into worship services and—in time—be a staple in Christian hymnals. The title comes directly from Lamentations 3:23, a verse that bursts forth with hope.

Despite everything, the book of Lamentations hangs on—sometimes by a thread—to God's faithfulness. The small trickle of prayers (e.g., Lam 1:9c; 1:11a; 2:20–22) becomes a steady stream (Lam 3:40–47). It then turns into a rushing river in chapter five, where the community's cries and protests, laments and longings, are brought to Yahweh, whose steadfast love endures forever. This prayer places the book's tears and heavy sighs into God's hands. It is within the context of unspeakable despair that Lam 3:23 dares to assert, "Great is thy faithfulness."

God also invites us to sing and raise our voices defiantly when it is the most difficult.⁶ To join the choir with these lyrics, "Great is Thy faithfulness. Morning by morning, new mercies I see."

Book of Lamentations," in *Out of the Garden: Women Writers on the Bible*, ed. Christian Büchmann and Celina Spiegel (New York: Fawcett Columbine, 1995), 278–88.

⁴ F. W. Dobbs-Allsopp, *Lamentations* (Louisville: John Knox Press, 2002), 30.

⁵ Dobbs-Allsopp, *Lamentations*, 2.

⁶ Dobbs-Allsopp maintains that "Lamentations may well be the most remarkable and compelling testament to the human spirit's will to live in all the Old Testament." Dobbs-Allsopp, *Lamentations*, 2.

REJECTING LAMENTATIONS

Is there a place for the book of Lamentations in the Christian life? Most believers say no. Christ fulfills Old Testament promises. It is time to rejoice, be glad, and weep no more. Consider Paul. The apostle exhorts us with upbeat expressions. "Rejoice in the Lord!" (Phil 4:4) "We are more than conquerors through him who loved us" (Rom 8:37). "Give thanks in all circumstances" (1 Thess 5:18). "We boast in our suffering" (Rom 5:3). Why become lost in defeat when we can live in victory? Why shed a tear? If we trust God enough and believe in his promises wholeheartedly, everything will turn out to be sunshine and roses. Is it not our duty to thank, praise, serve, and obey God? Who needs Lamentations?

Besides, it is best to hurry past loss and grief, to get over yesterday's sorrows, and to get on with today's possibilities. "Everything will be all right." "Time heals all wounds." "The sun will come up tomorrow." The goal is a church where "seldom is heard a discouraging word" because we all know that laments do not market well in a society where life's chief purpose is to be happy, joyful, and carefree. Who wants to become downcast and depressed anyway?

Lamentations? Some insist that the book may be dangerous to our spiritual lives. Grieving over life's dark turns could signify unbelief and sin. Why, in our post-Pentecost era, Christ promises to always be present through his Gospel and Sacraments (Matt 28:20; Heb 13:5). How could we even think about lamenting when we have Jesus?

Our marching orders are clear from Romans 9:20, "Who are you to answer back to God?" Whatever you do or say, do not argue with God. Be tough. Submit in silence. Put your hand over your mouth. Go along with whatever happens. God is the Potter, and we are the clay. And even if life gets messy, it is better to pretend everything is "just fine."

There is a long history of people in the church who reject Lamentations. Augustine believed that those who lament have an inordinate affection for this world, while John Calvin taught that Christians already know why they suffer—God teaches and blesses through it. Consequently, Augustine confined laments to confessions of sin, while Calvin demanded sporadic use.⁷ Oswald Bayer writes,

Since the earliest days of Christianity, expressions of lament in worship have largely withered. Because of the influence of Stoic thought, lament was pushed out of the everyday lives of Christians.⁸

Why are we so reticent to embrace the book of Lamentations? W.F. Dobbs-Allsopp observes: "Western culture, in particular, oftentimes appears impatient with or embarrassed by acute grief and deep sorrow and thus rushes to medicate it away."⁹ The result? Lamentations is a *liber non grata*.

WHAT DO WE LOSE?

If we spurn the book of Lamentations, what are we losing? Much, very much. Overlooking Lamentations means we can only utter weak and anemic prayers in the face of injustice and pain. Thinking that God only cares about our praises, we hesitate to tell him about our angst and sorrow. When engulfed in sadness, our prayers seldom diverge from these four words, "Thy will be done."

If God's throne is only a place where we show him esteem and acclaim, we ignore our brokenness and the brokenness of others. We coldly dismiss people who are struggling and depressed, who are slogging through difficulties like sickness, disease, loneliness, divorce, bankruptcy, and the like. Matthew Boulton writes,

To the extent that Christian churches implicitly or explicitly exclude modes of indignation and anguish from their liturgies, they effectively abandon indignant and anguished people, leaving them to

⁷ Kathleen D. Billman and Daniel L. Migliore, *Rachel's Cry: A Prayer of Lament and Rebirth of Hope*. (Cleveland: United Church Press, 1999) 73-74.

⁸ Oswald Bayer, "Toward a Theology of Lament," in *Caritas et Reformatio: Essays on Church and Society in Honor of Carter Lindberg*, ed. David M. Whitford (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 2004), 211.

⁹ Dobbs-Allsopp, *Lamentations*, 37.

suffer these agonies in isolation from the worshiping assembly and thus also, it may well seem to them, in isolation from God.¹⁰

Walter Brueggemann further maintains that when we forfeit laments, "Both psychological *inauthenticity* and social *immobility* may be derived from the loss of these texts."¹¹ We not only relinquish Lamentations' spiritual/emotional healing, but we also lose our engagement with the significant social and political issues of our day—whose challenging issues "soon appear to be improper questions in public places, in schools, in hospitals, with the government, and eventually even in the courts."¹²

We also see this at funerals. Instead of solemnity, reverence, and grief, there is a growing propensity to turn burials into "celebrations of life" instead of facing the cruel reality—a loved one is dead. Federico Villanueva provides this scathing rebuke: "There used to be much weeping at funerals; these days, there is karaoke singing."¹³

When engulfed in darkness, when its bitterness almost feels tangible, God does not invite us simply to pray, "Yes, Lord. Whatever you say." No. He wants us to speak our minds. Pour out our hearts. Even challenge and question him. Faithfulness does not always imply the passive acceptance of trial and torment. William Soll writes: "Lament is not merely an articulation of unhappiness; it seeks in the midst of unhappiness, to recover communion with God."¹⁴ The deep longing to reconnect with Yahweh lies at the heart of Lamentations. The book's protests explore the fissures of God's absence and covenantal brokenness.

OLD TESTAMENT LAMENTS

The book of Lamentations is just one voice in a much larger choir of lamenters in the Old Testament. Rebekah cries, "If it is this way, why should I live?" (Gen 25:22). Moses objects to Yahweh's plan to wipe Israel off the map (Exod 32:11–12). Gideon complains, "If Yahweh is with us, why has all of this happened to us?" (Judg 6:13). When Saul and Jonathan die on Mt. Gilboa, David grieves over his unbearable loss (2 Sam 1:23–27). Then, when his son Absalom is struck down, David again laments (2 Sam 18:33). And even after Joab reprimands him, the king keeps on weeping (2 Sam 19:4). Rachel mourns over her lost children (Jer 31:15). Put these prayers together, and what do we learn? To lament is to stay involved with life, face reality, feel sorrow for the world's wounds, and become vulnerable before the divine throne of grace. Kathleen O'Connor writes:

Laments announce aloud and publicly what is wrong right now. Laments create room within the individual and community not only for grief and loss but also for seeing and naming injustice. Laments name the weeping and fracturing of relationships—personal, political, domestic, ecclesial, national, and global. The point of lamenting is ... to name injustice, hurt, and anger.¹⁵

Psalmists, for their part, often acknowledge the raw experiences of life. They cry out to Yahweh, "How long?" (e.g., Ps 13:2–4 [EN 13:1–3]), "Where is God?" (e.g., Ps 79:10), "Why?" (e.g., Ps 74:1), "Are you asleep?" (e.g., Ps 44:24 [EN 44:23]), "Wake up!" (e.g., Ps 35:23), "Listen!" (e.g., Ps 17:1). These prayers reject a fake and pretentious faith. They affirm that distress and setbacks are real. Federico Villanueva observes, "We are most open with the people we are closest with. The more intimate the relationship, the greater the vulnerability and openness. Intimacy explains why people in the Bible know how to lament."¹⁶

¹⁰ Matthew Boulton, "Forsaking God: A Theological Argument for Christian Lamentations," *Scottish Journal of Theology* 55 (2002): 58–78, 59.

¹¹ Walter Brueggemann, "The Costly Loss of Lament," *Journal for the Study of the Old Testament* 36 (1986): 57–71, 67.

¹² Brueggemann, "The Costly Loss of Lament," 64.

¹³ Federico Villanueva, *Lamentations: A Pastoral and Contextual Commentary* (Carlisle, UK: Langham Global Library, 2016), 31.

¹⁴ William M. Soll, "The Israelite Lament: Faith Seeking Understanding," *Quarterly Review* 8 (1988): 77–88, 79.

¹⁵ Kathleen O'Connor, *Lamentations and the Tears of the World*, (Maryknoll: Orbis, 2002), 128.

¹⁶ Villanueva, *Lamentations*, 14.

APPROPRIATING LAMENTATIONS

Add Zion in Lamentations to the ensemble of protesters in the book of Psalms. Zion's "I" in Lamentations helps readers/hearers find the voice of their despair.¹⁷ Why? Lamentations mostly deletes the specifics of Jerusalem's defeat—striking a more universal note.¹⁸ It omits the names of key leaders on both sides—for instance, it does not mention Nebuchadnezzar, Zedekiah, or Babylon. Yahweh's past mighty acts of salvation also do not appear; neither do any of the great heroes of faith—Abraham, Moses, or David. "The style of the book is deliberately universalizing, using conventional and traditional descriptions of the fall of a city that, by their very nature and intent, resist efforts to treat them as documentary films of what happened."¹⁹

Jeremiah, the book's author, gives us historical bits and pieces, snippets and scraps. If he had provided too much detail, it would be difficult for us to make the book's prayers our own. Thus, every reader can relate to Lamentations' chaos and disorder. "The mourning is for the common loss, and it seems fitting that here there are no names of the slain, nor private griefs."²⁰ By giving voice to universal hurt, the book of Lamentations offers a way forward for sufferers—out of the darkness and into Yahweh's healing light.

When we ignore grief, it often metastasizes into deadly pathologies that distort reality, leading us into more pain. Lamentations is Yahweh's "yes" to express our grief, sorrow, crying, and mourning. The book invites us to place our shattered hearts into God's loving hands and to face life's setbacks and their emotional fallout honestly.²¹ Lamentations offers spiritual and theological categories to help us make sense of what happened, as well as how to survive it. Its poems give us words and images that help us speak the unspeakable. "Every life, and every land and people, has reasons for lament and complaint."²²

CONCLUSIONS

No doubt. Because Jerusalem's demise and the ensuing catastrophe are far from the lived experience for most of us, we do not relate to everything in Lamentations. We are separated by time, local, language—and most obviously, event. Put bluntly, Babylon overran Zion, not us.

Nevertheless, we still face disasters. Our world has tsunamis, genocides, pandemics, fires, earthquakes, mass shootings, mass devastation, and mass starvation. Moreover, we all face death. When we pray the book of Lamentations, we pray with the faithful who have been victims of violence, rape, murder, and every sort of mayhem. We plead with God to turn from judgment to mercy and to heal his broken world. Brevard Childs writes that Lamentations "serves every successive generation of the suffering faithful for whom history has become unbearable."²³ The book corrects euphoric and celebratory notions of faith that romantically portray the Christian life as consisting of only sweetness and light. The cries of anguish in Lamentations help us avoid a one-sided, happiness-only mindset that fails to

¹⁷ What Athanasius of Alexandria (ca. 296–373 AD) wrote about the Psalter holds for Lamentations: "He recognizes [the Psalms] as being his own words. And the one who hears is deeply moved, as though he himself were speaking, and is affected by the words of the songs, as if they were his own songs." Athanasius, *The Life of Antony and the Letter to Marcellinus*, trans. Robert C. Gregg (New York: Paulist Press, 1980), 109.

¹⁸ Delbert Hillers observes, "Such 'history' as we have it in Lamentations is not told with an eye to the unique, particular, unrepeatable, contingent circumstances; it is experienced and narrated in conformity to certain pre-existing literary and religious patterns." Delbert Hillers, "History and Poetry in Lamentations," *Currents in Theology and Mission* 10 (1983): 155–61, 160. These patterns make the book accessible to future generations.

¹⁹ Hillers, *Lamentations Introduction, Translation, and Notes*, Anchor Bible 7A (Garden City: Doubleday, 1992), 10.

²⁰ Hillers, *Lamentations*, 5.

²¹ "Grief creates a canon within the biblical canon, headed by the books of Job and Lamentations and the lament psalms in the book of Psalms" (Leslie C. Allen, *A Liturgy of Grief: A Pastoral Commentary on Lamentations*. Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2011, 25).

²² Miriam J. Bier and Tim Bulkeley, eds., *Spiritual Complaint: The Theology and Practice of Lament*. (Eugene: Pickwick Press, 2013), xv.

²³ Brevard Childs, *Introduction to the Old Testament as Scripture*. London: SCM Press, 1979, 596.

deal forthrightly with life's tragedies.²⁴ After all, expressing our pain is the first step towards healing our pain.

Lamentations honors Judah's suffering so we may honor our own—and the suffering around us. "In this conversation between worlds, it can help us see our pain, and, by reflecting it to us, however indirectly, it has the potential to affirm our human dignity in a first step towards healing."²⁵ The book calls us inward to address our wounds. Outward to address the wounds of the world. And upward to bring these wounds before the throne of our loving Savior. "Lamentations is a book whose time has come."²⁶ Do you see? *Lamentations is our lament.*

²⁴ Robin Parry writes, "If the only prayer language into which believers are inducted through communal worship is that of thanksgiving, praise, and adoration then we are depriving believers of a language for dealing with the dark periods of life. We are also communicating the message that to speak to God with words of complaint and lament is somehow inappropriate, irreverent, and unfaithful (in spite of the fact that Jesus himself took the words of a complaint Psalm upon his lips while on the cross). In this way, we are in danger of failing to train disciples to walk with God through the valley of the shadow of death" ("Wrestling with Lamentations in Christian Worship," Pages 175–97 in *Great is Thy Faithfulness? Toward Reading Lamentations as Sacred Scripture*. Edited by Robin Parry and Heath A. Thomas. Milton Keynes: Paternoster, 2011, 194).

²⁵ O'Connor, *Lamentations and the Tears of the World*, 4.

²⁶ Paul M. Joyce and Diana Lipton, *Lamentations Through the Centuries*, Diana Lipton. *Lamentations Through the Centuries*. West Sussex: Wiley-Blackwell, 2013, 7. Christopher Wright maintains: "Never to read Lamentations is to miss the challenge and reward of wrestling with the massive theological issues that permeate its poetry. How can the ultimate extremes of suffering be endured alongside faith in the living God whom we have learned from the scriptures and in experience to be all-loving and good?" (*The Message of Lamentations*, Downers Grove: IVP, 2015, 22).