

Crafting Your Own Lament

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- [0 : 0 0] Hello, everyone. My name is Meg Clark, and tonight we are going to continue our series on the book of Lamentations. We've been talking about this over the last couple weeks, and this book of poetry is really different than a lot of what we find in the Bible.
- It can feel like more of a sort of assault on our sensibilities, and it might make us grateful that this isn't the kind of poetry that we hear now frequently.
- But I think, you know, you might know more modern laments than you think. For instance, Childish Gambino's *This is America* was released in 2018 and speaks to what life is like for Black people in America.
- I am not going to rap *Do Not Worry*. I am not that person. But I will read it as a poem. This is America. Don't catch you slipping up. Look how I'm living now. Police be tripping now.
- Yes, this is America. Guns in my area. I got the strap. I gotta carry them. Talking about police violence, the prevalence of guns in this country, the fact that people feel like they need guns to feel safe.
- [1 : 1 7] Additionally, the song *Zombie* by the Cranberries is also is not a Halloween song nor a St. Patrick's Day song. It is actually sort of a lament of the troubles in Ireland in sort of the 70s through 90s.
- Is my mic weird? Okay, I'm just hearing it weird. Okay. And so this song sort of speaks about the challenges that people were facing in Ireland.
- It talks about, you know, the violence that are happening, the fact that, you know, there are tanks and bombs and guns and the sort of suffering that is going on.
- If you hear it at Halloween, you can sing along, but it is definitely not the intention of the piece. And even *Born in the USA* by Bruce Springsteen is not the political chant that many use it for in their campaigning, unless they are campaigning against war and for veterans rights.
- It talks about people who are serving in the Vietnam War and how, you know, children, essentially children, young men were sent over just for, you know, being born in the good old USA.
- [2 : 3 9] And our last example is, I'm sure a lot of us learned in elementary school, middle school, *This Land is Your Land* by Woody Guthrie. And there is a verse a little further in that song, which was written during the Great Depression that talks about sort of the need that people are having for support from the government and financial support.
- And it says, In the shadow of this steeple, I saw my people. By the relief office, I seen my people. As they stood there hungry, I stood there asking, Is this land made for you and me?
- So there's a little bit of a twist from what we normally hear in our sort of third grade music class, where we focus on the sea to shining sea side of it. So laments are still very present in our current moment. We encounter them more as songs than as poetry.

And tonight I'm going to invite all of us to individually write our own lament, peace, song, poem. You may have noticed there's some paper, some writing utensils. If you brought a journal, that's great.

If you would like to use your smartphone, also great. But we are going to sort of walk through the three main ideas of Lamentations 4, and we'll have some time to reflect and write sort of how it applies to us.

[4 : 05] To refresh us on the basics, the book of Lamentations is a set of five columns, each about the siege of Jerusalem by the Babylonians and the destruction of the people and the city.

The first three chapters we've talked about, they share various perspectives on tragedy, some talking about from the perspective of the city herself, Jerusalem or Zion personified.

Other times speaking as one of her warriors, her fighters. And in chapter four, which we'll focus on today, we hear from the people of the city, sharing what has befallen them and sharing some of their reactions.

In chapters four, verses one through ten, which is the bulk of the passage, I sort of think of it as like a survey of the damage done. And when reading it, you can almost sort of imagine a camera shot going through the streets, almost like a director's first take of us through a city.

Children are begging for bread. The priests who used to be, the princes who used to be the most glamorous are now malnourished. And it talks of the cruelty that desperate mothers enact on their children.

[5 : 17] Starting with verse four, it says, Because of the thirst, the infant's tongue sticks to the roof of its mouth. The children beg for bread, but no one gives it to them.

Those who once ate delicacies are destitute in the streets. Those brought up in royal purple now lie on ash heaps. The punishment of my people is greater than that of Sodom, which was overthrown in a moment, without a hand turned to help her.

Princes were brighter than snow and whiter than milk. Their bodies more ruddy than rubies, their appearance like lapis lazuli. But now they are blacker than soot.

They are not recognized in the streets. Their skin has become shriveled on their bones, and it has become dry as a stick. These verses share how desolate Jerusalem is by contrasting to what they would think of as before times.

We've talked in previous sermons over the course of this series about the need to name the things that have happened to us. How it matters that we are able to express to others what we have gone through and know that they have hurt us.

[6 : 32] And this is what is happening in this section of chapter four. We are going to take a few minutes to think ourselves about the things that we are carrying, the hardships that we've faced over the last few years, and spend some time writing about it.

I encourage you to think maybe one level deeper than what is on the surface. For me, I do have a loved one that I lost during COVID.

But the worst suffering for me is that I wasn't able to go to her funeral because of lockdowns. I have the benefit of working from home, which I know is a luxury that not everyone has.

But I am really negatively impacted by not having a network of in-person colleagues to connect with. So we're going to pause here for three minutes of reflection.

No one else will be reading what you write. So feel free to have this as vulnerable of a space as you'd like it to be. In the sort of lower section of the church, we've got paper and writing utensils.

[7 : 37] If anyone needs something, feel free to raise a hand and I can come around. And we have some instrumental music because silence terrifies me. So we are going to break for three minutes and then we will come back together to talk about the next section.

And we'll come back together to talk about sort of the next chunk. So the next thing that happens in the book of Lamentations after we have named what we've experienced, we need to answer a question that is really core to the book of Lamentations.

So three of the five chapters actually begin with the word how. And in Hebrew scriptures, they don't have sort of the pithy names that we give to Bible books.

So the name of the book in the Hebrew scriptures actually is the word how. And we need to answer how did this happen for all of the things that we have just noted.

And there's a second part that we need to answer of how can we prevent this from happening again? Whether something we did to cause it or not, there is a sense of needing that closure, needing that safety that often comes with sort of thinking about what has happened to bring us to the point where we are.

[8 : 58] And to the authors of Lamentations, God seems like the right person to blame. Now we'll pause for a minute. Do I think that God caused the description of Jerusalem?

Not really. I don't know God's mind, but I do know that it isn't in keeping with what Jesus has shown us about God to think that God would be vengeful against a whole city.

As Pastor Anthony preached last week, God is big enough to hold our blame. If there is something that we need to place somewhere, God is able to hold to that.

It can help us process and think that we can find a sense of control that we may be lacking when we can say, you know, we figured out what we did that made God angry, and now we won't do it again.

In Lamentations, that also brings us to blaming our leaders. Jerusalem was a city that was a government based in religion, and there were leaders that were supposed to help us stay on God's good side.

[10 : 01] They're supposed to keep us safe. In the United States, we don't have the same type of government, but we may think of some others in our communities who are supposed to keep us safe.

politicians, doctors, for some of us police, for some of us very much not the police. Blaming people often feels more comfortable than blaming God for us now.

And even when we're blaming God, we're usually blaming ourselves for not doing something that God told us to do. Here's what we find in Lamentations 4, starting with verse 11.

The Lord has given full vent to his wrath. He has poured out his fierce anger. He has kindled a fire in Zion that consumed her foundations.

But it happened because of the sins of her prophets and the iniquities of her priests, who shed within her the blood of the righteous. The Lord himself has scattered them.

[10 : 59] He no longer watches over them. The priests are shown no honor and the elders no favor. For this next prompt, we will take a couple minutes to reflect on who you might be blaming or who you might need to blame for some of the things that have happened over the last few years that you noted.

Politicians are still investing the COVID-19 virus because it's really hard to blame interaction between animals and humans as the reason, because we can't fully prevent that.

There's this need to find something we can control. For me, I blame politicians who lifted lockdowns and mask mandates too early.

And I blame them for a huge number of those who died during the pandemic. I blame the police for the murders of George Floyd and Breonna Taylor. I blame myself for not being more politically active and breaking down systems of oppression.

And I think somewhere in all of this, I do blame God a little bit for not preventing the tragedies that we've been drowning in for the last few years.

[12 : 11] It brings up a hard challenge for me of a supreme good God with all of these things that are hard in the world. So again, we're going to take a little bit of time to write out where you may be placing the blame.

Again, we'll have some prompts up on the screen. Feel free to, you know, whatever feels safe and comfortable. Sort of let that, we invite you to let that out onto your paper or phone or mental notes.

Great. And we'll come back and talk about our last section. There's a pivot at the end of Lamentations 4.

And unsurprisingly, as with the rest of the book, it is a little bit challenging. The most well-known hope passage in the book is Lamentations 3.

God's compassions never fail. They are new every morning. Great is your faithfulness. This is like capital H hope. This is doctrine. This is God. This is who God is.

[13 : 16] But there is hope in the end of chapter 4. In verse 22, the poet says, Your punishment will end, daughter Zion. God will not prolong your exile.

And while that might not feel as strong as God's mercies being new every morning, I find immense comfort in the idea that something challenging will be over soon.

As we talked about in some of the songs that we sung earlier today, and in the prayer that Antonio read, we just need to hold on a little bit longer. At the beginning of the pandemic, when my small group would ask for prayers, I would always ask for endurance.

I knew as someone who lives with depression, who lives by myself, the pandemic was going to be really hard. And the amount of isolation was going to be pretty challenging for me.

And so my word was always endurance. And there is something in this verse that says, you know, I've never run a marathon, though I'm sure you're all suppressed.

[14 : 21] The finish line is close. You know, we are coming towards it. But this verse is surrounded by something pretty hard to wrap our heads around.

In coping with their own pain, the poet condemns the Edomites, who are a neighboring people group, often in conflict with Israel. The poet warns that they will soon face the same wrath of God.

In verse 21, the poet says, Rejoice and be glad, daughter Edom, you who live in the land of Uz. But to you the cup will also be passed. You will be drunk and stripped naked.

Your punishment will end, daughter Zion. He will not prolong your exile. But he will punish your sin, daughter Edom, and expose your wickedness. There's something in this that also points to human nature.

When we suffer, there could be a part of us that wants to see our enemies suffer too. It happens. I have people that I don't particularly like in my heart.

[15 : 26] And, you know, sometimes it might feel like a twisted form of justice if something bad were to happen to them. But this is something, as Jesus teaches, that is a call to work on, to love our enemies as much as we love ourselves and our neighbors.

I need to see my suffering and remember the cliché, I wouldn't wish this upon my worst enemy. Because really, I wouldn't. I don't want other people to suffer the same thing that I personally have gone through.

And I know that if they did, it wouldn't necessarily make me feel any better. So rather than focusing on who we are hoping to see suffer for this last prompt, I'd like to invite us to reflect on where we are finding hope.

If you're not feeling particularly hopeful, I'd like to give you a quote from one of my favorite current poets and an amazing Twitter follow, Jessica Kantrowitz.

Jessica talks openly about her own depression and chronic migraines, and she frequently tweets out the same phrase. You are not alone, and this will not last forever.

[16 : 38] Every time I see it, no matter what I am going through, it provides a breath. Even if only for a moment, a moment of hope. So if you are not feeling particularly hopeful, perhaps for the next few minutes, you write and copy over, I am not alone, and this will not last forever.

Let's take a few minutes here. If you want to go ahead and finish up the current thought, I realize I did not share any examples before this one, like I had before.

So some of the things that are bringing me hope are spring and terry blossoms. I work on a quarterly work cycle, so we will be in Q2 as of April 1, and I am ready to be done with Q1.

My older sister is expecting, and so I will have my first nephew in June. And I did write a couple of times.

I am not alone, and this will not last forever. To close, there's one more recent lament that I want to share before we head out, and it is a bit of a shift from the ones that I've shared before.

[17 : 57] In the critically acclaimed masterpiece, Frozen 2, there is, and see, I told you there were not a lot of jokes, I saved it for the end.

There is a song that details depression in a way that I have never experienced in another piece. I really like that Disney has committed to, like, we're making movies for adults with trauma that their kids might like.

But, um, so in Frozen 2, we'll set the stage for you. Anna, she is the one with orange hair, if you have seen images. She is the younger sister.

She thinks that her older sister, Elsa, is gone, dead, unsure. And she is faced with this sort of, you know, real trauma of losing someone who was very close to her, someone who she relied on, losing her sense of self.

Their relationship is a little codependent. Um, and so there's this moment where she is literally in a dark case, and she sings this song about not being able to move forward.

[19 : 04] Um, this is on the top of my list for songs when I need, like, a cathartic cry. Um, so I highly recommend, and parents in the group, you're welcome. If your kid is like, why is this song so sad?

You will maybe have, maybe have some thoughts. Um, so Anna sings. Can there be a day beyond this night? I don't know anymore what is true.

I can't find my direction. I'm all alone. The only star that guided me was you. How to rise from the floor when it's not you that I'm rising for.

And then, a moment of hope. Just do the next right thing. Take a step. Step again.

It's all that I came to do. The next right thing. I'm a little misty now. Oh, and it was nice. In this children's song, there is a powerful message for those of us facing difficult times.

[20 : 06] When you don't know when the future holds, what your next move is, just take the next step. It reminds me of the famous quote from Dr. Martin Luther King Jr.

Faith is taking the first step, even when you don't see the whole staircase. I hope that no matter what you've written down today, about what you've gone through, who you are blaming and what you're hoping for, you are able to find the strength, the courage, and the faith to do the next right thing.

I know this was a little bit more emotional and participatory than we normally do. So if there is anyone who would like prayer, I will be in the lobby after service.

I would be happy to chat, pray with you, hold some of what might have come up for you.