

Jeremiah's Lament

Last week we looked at the prophetic experience of a young prophet named Jeremiah. He wasn't always young, but it seemed that, while he was young, he was often in protest mode about the things God asked him to do and to say. He was charged with the task of announcing destruction and tragedy to the people of Judah and Jerusalem. He was told to announce that defeat in battle against Babylon was inevitable and that exile to a far country would follow. He was told that God's people should make themselves at home in their new land, should settle down, marry, raise their families and pray for their captors, because they were going to be there for 70 years. All of these prophecies resulted in one thing for Jeremiah: people hated him, tried to kill him, wanted him thrown in prison and spoke against him. And yet, the thing that burned in his own heart was a great love for these same people. They were his own, the nation of Judah. This was his family, the ones he stood with against the world ... and he felt incredible grief at the things that they were about to suffer

I have cried until the tears no longer come. My heart is broken, my spirit poured out, as I see what has happened to my people. Little children and tiny babies are fainting and dying in the streets. "Mama, we want food," they cry, and then collapse in their mothers' arms. Their lives ebb away like the life of a warrior wounded in battle. In all the world has there ever been such sorrow? O daughter of Jerusalem, to what can I compare your anguish? O virgin daughter of Zion, how can I comfort you? For your wound is as deep as the sea. Who can heal you? (2:11-13):

This comes, not from the prophecy of Jeremiah, but from a much shorter book that follows it in our Bibles, a book we call "Lamentations", but which the Hebrews called simply, "How". "How" is the first word in chapter 1, chapter 2 and chapter 4.

*How deserted lies the city, once so full of people!
How the LORD has covered the Daughter of Zion with the cloud of His anger!
How the gold has lost its luster . . .*

You may not be a huge fan of poetic structures and the like, but this book's structure helps us understand its meaning, so let me give you a quick introduction. There are five "laments" and the first two and the final two are each 22 verses long -- 22 is the number of letters in the Hebrew alphabet. The middle lament, the most hopeful of the five, is 66 verses, or three times 22. But the 66 verses of this third lament each contain only one line of Hebrew text while the first two laments have three lines of Hebrew text for each verse, making the first three all the same length.

Lament 1: 66 lines

Lament 2: 66 lines

Lament 3: 66 lines

Lament 4: 44 lines

Lament 5: 22 lines

In addition, the first four laments are all alphabetic acrostics, which would mean, in English for example, that verse 1 begins with "a", verse 2 with "b", verse 3 with "c", etc.

The biggest mistake in looking at a writing like the book of "How" or "Lamentations" would be to think that this is the ramblings of someone who is blowing off steam at the sights and sounds of Judah's defeat at the hands of Babylon. This is a tightly constructed poetic work, and both Jewish and Christian tradition tell us that it was written by Jeremiah the prophet. Even though the book is anonymous -- nobody puts his name on it -- there are a number of indications in vocabulary, style and the timing that would point to Jeremiah as its author.

As we saw in the passage I read at the start today, Jeremiah was one who grieved deeply for his people. And his grief would resonate with all those who witnessed the collapse of Jerusalem at the hands of Nebuchadnezzar and his army and especially at the destruction that followed.

So, in the context of this intense grief and deep personal sorrow that this devastation had happened to his people, let's look today at Jeremiah's view of God. When people today witness scenes of tragedy, the common response is to blame God, to wonder why He allows such things, to question His existence, or at least His goodness. But what is the honest and humble way to understand God's workings during such challenging times?

*The roads to Jerusalem are in mourning
No longer filled with crowds on their way to celebrate the Temple festivals
The city gates are silent, her priests groan, her young women are crying
-- how bitterly Jerusalem weeps!
Her oppressors have become her masters
And her enemies prosper
For the LORD has punished Jerusalem for her many sins.
Her children have been captured
And taken away to distant lands (1:4,5)*

*The LORD has done what He planned;
He has fulfilled His word, which He decreed long ago
He has overthrown you without pity
He has let the enemy gloat over you
He has exalted the horn of your foes (2:17)*

The first thing we observe is that Jeremiah views this punishment of Judah as the LORD's doing. This is not bad luck, not a cruel twist of history, but God's dealing with the sin of His people. This is made clear in verses like these:

*Jerusalem has sinned greatly
And so has become unclean (1:9)*

And then Jerusalem itself makes a lament, starting in v. 11:

*My sins have been bound into a yoke;
By His hands they were woven together
They have come upon my neck
And the Lord has sapped my strength (v.14)*

One of the most direct statements of guilt is found in 4:12f

*The kings of the earth did not believe
Nor did any of the world's people
That enemies and foes could enter
The gates of Jerusalem
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*

But more than just stating the fact that Israel sinned and God punished them is the clear conclusion that God was in the right in doing so:

*Yahweh is righteous
Yet I rebelled against His commands (1:18)*

There are some who are given greater responsibility for the failures of Judah than others. In particular, the prophets are singled out as failing to give the warning:

*The visions of your prophets were false and worthless
They did not expose your sin to ward off your captivity
The oracles they gave you were false and misleading (2:14)*

In other words, the sins of the people should have been obvious to anyone who was truly speaking for God, but those who served as spokesmen for the LORD were more interested in serving themselves. They didn't risk getting in trouble to confront the sins of the people, like Jeremiah did, and so they were of no help to the people. They did nothing to prevent the disaster that came.

Maybe they didn't really believe in a God who could actually do anything. Maybe they didn't believe the stories they had grown up with about a God who delivered His people from slavery in Egypt, or who led them into the land He had promised to give their ancestor Abraham, or who had done miracles through prophets like Elijah and Elishah. And so they didn't believe that God would serve justice on His own rebellious people, even when their practices mocked Him as their true Lord and King. When your spokesmen, your worship leaders, the people who have the responsibility of guiding the nation in the true faith in God, have that kind of attitude? . . . well, God had to act severely or lose His people forever.

The second thing we find out about God from the Laments of Jeremiah is that He is the only source of hope. The gods of wood and stone were unable to do one thing to help. The king and the armies were defeated, they had no allies that could stand against Babylon, the city walls were broken down -- they were on their own . . . unless the LORD helped them:

*The hearts of the people cry out to the Lord
O wall of the Daughter of Zion
Let your tears flow like a river day and night
Give yourself no relief, your eyes no rest*

*Arise, cry out in the night, as the watches of the night begin
Pour out your heart like water in the presence of the Lord
Lift up your hands to Him for the lives of your children
Who faint from hunger at the head of every street. (2:18,19)*

In chapter 3, Jeremiah goes over some familiar ground, reminding God about the prophet's enemies who spoke against him and even tried to kill him. But then, this:

*I called on your name, O LORD, from the depths of the pit
You heard my plea:
"Do not close your ears to my cry for relief!"
You came near when I called you
And you said, "Do not fear" (vv.35-37)*

In chapter 4, we read again that God is managing this situation, that He is the One who will return His people from exile:

*O Daughter of Zion, your punishment will end;
He will not prolong your exile. (4:22)*

And chapter 5 is really a prayer, asking God to have pity on his suffering people. It starts:

*Remember, O LORD, what has happened to us
Look, and see our disgrace (v.1)*

And he goes on from there to paint a very bleak picture of what the people continue to endure. Chapter 5, and the book of Lamentations, ends with a cry to God to restore His people, to renew them to what they once were, with these final words:

*Unless you have utterly rejected us,
And are angry with us beyond measure (5:22)*

So, we've learned that the exile was God's doing, it was the result of the sins of His people ... AND, we've learned that He is the only One they can turn to in their desperate situation -- He is the source of hope. But there is a very important third thing that needs to be said about God. It is hard to grasp at first, but it's essential to the Laments: God acts this way because He loves these people with a deep and lasting passion that will not allow Him to simply walk away, to let them go to become self-destructive fools like so many in the nations that surround them. This series of five laments gives a picture of love in the midst of discipline, of wanting the best for a people who don't seem to want the best for themselves. As harsh as the circumstances in Jerusalem were at the time, God never stopped loving and caring for these children of Abraham.

If you're reading this book and hearing that comment, you ought to be asking, "How is this love? How can you say that all this death and destruction, starvation and misery can come from love?"

Let me take you to chapter 3:

*I remember my affliction and my wandering, the bitterness and the gall
I well remember them and my soul is downcast within me*

*Yet this I call to mind and therefore I have hope
Because of Yahweh's great love we are not consumed
For His compassions never fail - they are new every morning
Great is your faithfulness (3:19-23)*

Wait a minute. Isn't God the one who has brought all this pain and suffering to His people? How can Jeremiah say that God's compassions are new every morning and that His faithfulness is great?

I could say something like, "If God didn't love Judah, they would have disappeared from the face of the earth. He would have wiped them out long ago. Many other nations have disappeared over the centuries; why not the Jews?" But the real problem we have with answering the question is that we cannot see this from God's point of view at all. We're hopelessly on the side of human beings because we are them, so when they suffer we take their side. We don't see God's suffering. We can't understand it or really identify with the idea of His broken heart, even though He has tried to make it plain to us.

Genesis 6:5

*The LORD saw how great man's wickedness on earth had become, and that every inclination of the thoughts of his heart was only evil all the time.
The LORD was grieved that He had made man on the earth and His heart was filled with pain.*

Look at this universe, look at the beauty of the creation, look at the marvel of being made in the image of God, of bearing His likeness as we walk through His handiwork, and here we are in chapter 6, right near the beginning of the whole book, and it's already ruined and God's heart is broken.

But love isn't often something to be explained, and when it comes to God's love, it's better to let the artists paint us a picture. I'm going to play two songs, written by Steve Bell and Malcolm Guite and performed by Steve Bell. The first is from the point of view of Israel as she joyfully enters into the freedom that God gives her and then finds that freedom is hard and she abandons the love that brought her out from Egypt. The second song is God's reflection on Israel's waywardness, His unending love for her as He waits to see if she might return to Him again. The song ends with God's decision, His steadfastness, His heart out there on His sleeve, with the line, "All I am is turned towards her now." "A Big Mistake", followed by "Lenten Lands", you can read the words on the screen as we listen . . . (Play "A Big Mistake" and "Lenten Lands")

Yes, Jerusalem was destitute and forlorn, but nothing else had gotten her attention. Long ago, through Moses, God had warned of the possibility of exile and now it had to come. But God still loved His people:

*For men are not cast off by the Lord forever
Though He brings grief, He will show compassion
So great is His unfailing love
For He does not willingly bring affliction*

Or grief to the children of men. (3:31-33)

Maybe you've heard a parent say, "This is going to hurt me more than it hurts you", and wondered if that was true. But in this case it is. God watched His Son die on the cross for our choice to rebel against Him and go our own way. Always, He has the greatest pain ... including the heart-breaking pain of human rejection, denial, mocking, hatred and anger towards Him who loves so much.

The applications are simple: God allows us to go through hard things at certain seasons of life. In the hard things, don't forget that He still loves us and that He is still our primary source of hope. Don't give in, give up, give it over to the enemy. Keep trusting the God who cares enough about us to confront our old nature and to keep conforming us to be like Jesus. That's the goal and it's worth living for.