

A Desperate longing

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[0 : 00] All right, change gears, let's jump into Lamentations 5. And it is a significant change of gears. I remember this week particularly well.

It was 2003. A few weeks earlier, from this particular day, a young couple at church had given birth to their first child, a girl.

And this child, they were told, had a heart problem. It was a significant heart problem that the doctors said they were not able to resolve and the child would die.

It was a very emotional time. Very emotional time. On the day that she died, I walked into a hospital waiting room at Westmead Hospital to support another young couple whose doctors were about to update them on the well-being of their first child.

It was a couple who I had married a few years earlier. They were not Christians. This little child was also born with a heart condition.

[1 : 17] And at six months of age, they decided to do surgery, to rectify it. They said it would be a pretty straightforward procedure.

It went wrong. It went horribly wrong. And I sat with this couple as this significant medical team told them that they were doing all that they could, but their little boy at this stage had a 50-50 chance of survival.

In that moment of an outpouring of grief, the mum turned to me and asked me two things.

Steve, why is God doing this to us? And secondly, can you pray for us right now?

The surgeon agreed that was a good idea. Any help would be appreciated in this moment. And if prayers are comfort for you, then let's do that.

[2 : 31] And they all bowed their heads. On the way home from the hospital, I cried out to God in that moment from deep anguish.

So much so I had to, in fact, pull the car over to the side of the road because the windscreen wipers weren't removing the water that was in front of me.

It was just my tears made everything blurry. I sat on the side of the road and I sobbed and I pleaded with God. I pleaded with him to save a life.

It was not just a simple matter of sorrow. It was just desperation. God intervened. God intervened. God intervened. Lamentations is a book that gets us ready for moments like that.

When the phone rings and you receive the worst possible news you could receive. That's what Lamentations does for us. As one person, I heard them say in a moment of terrible hardship as their loved one was dying slowly, someone with deep Christian faith, they said, you've got to have the roof up if you want shelter in the storm.

[4 : 04] No good trying to put it up in the storm. You've got to have it up if you want shelter in the storm. And Lamentations puts the roof on before the storm hits.

Gets us ready for those storms of life. In a world that is as broken as our world is, ravaged by sin as our world is, we are frankly naive if we do not make preparation for loss, for heartbreak, for tragedy. It's the case of when, not if. So if you've just tuned in to us at St. Paul's here for the first time, we've been journeying through this topic of lament.

Lament is how we bring our sorrow to God. And we've been discovering a whole heap about lament and in this book of Lamentations. It's a collection of five poems of lament by the prophet Jeremiah. And we're up to the fifth lament. The whole chapter, in fact, is a prayer. And there are three main elements to this prayer. This prayer is broken into three main elements.

[5 : 09] It's got three structures. And each of these elements is, if you like, a, let's just take the analogy of the roof thing. Each of these three main elements are three support beams that hold the roof up for when the storm hits.

The first one, if you go to your St. Paul's app, you'll see the three-point outline there. It's just three beams. The first support beam is a biblical understanding of sin and its consequences for everything in this world.

It touches everything. Sin ruins everything. Now, Lamentations is written in response to the devastating siege and destruction of Jerusalem by the Babylonian Empire in 587 BC.

And we know from earlier bits of Lamentations that this is a deserved suffering. God has judged his people for generation after generation of rebellion.

They spurned God's love. They rejected his word. They persecuted his prophets. And chapter five, as we launch into that, it's the aftermath of the destruction.

[6 : 26] It's like the tornado has gone through and we are now sitting in the rubble. This is the weeks and the months that followed, the siege, the destruction, the deportation of the elite to Babylon.

And so chapter five is a prayer from the top of the rubble of Jerusalem. Jeremiah sits there as the jackals surround and feed on the human corpses.

It's a moment where the atrocities continue. There's no UN peacekeeping force here. So this chapter is intensely human.

These chapters are so much more, sorry, they are as much about the experience of suffering as they are about the cause of the suffering.

And so what you see right through Lamentations is this struggle between the head and the heart or the theological acceptance of it and the moral outrage of it at the same time.

[7 : 34] It's this emotions and logic going together all the way through Lamentations. That's chapter five. In other words, if we go through Lamentations and don't feel anything, we've missed it.

Go back and read it again. Verse one is a simple plea for Yahweh, their covenant making God to, their promise keeping God to simply look and see.

Do not turn your face away. Look at our disgrace. Now this is simply more than asking God not to forget.

This is a plea for him to intervene based on his love and his promises. And the beginning of chapter two is a, if you like, not so subtle reminder to God of his promises.

And it's just there in the word inheritance. You see, an inheritance is, it's a gift.

[8 : 47] It's not earned. The land, the city, the temple, it was all a gift from God. All that Israel had, all that they were was God's gift to them.

That's how they came to be here in the first place, because of God's gift. It wasn't because they were lovely that God loved them and made him his special people.

There was nothing lovely about them, nothing special about them in the beginning. And there's nothing lovely about them now. God had made them his people.

He loved the unlovely. He loved the small, the weak, the insignificant. God made them something. He gave them this inheritance. And so Jeremiah calls, with the people left in the rubble, calls on God not to turn away, but to look and see your inheritance.

Look at the devastation that lingers on. And as you go through the first section, you just see the somber residing of Jerusalem's degradation, their occupation, abandonment, bereavement, thirst, their poverty, the inflation, the invasion, the famine, the despondency, the slavery, the exposure, the rape, the humiliation, the exhaustion.

[10 : 23] Why does this happen? Verse 7, Our ancestors sinned and are no more, and we bear their punishment. God had given them good gifts.

He had given them an inheritance. He had saved them. And yet generation after generation, they had spurned his goodness. They had ignored his word.

And so God's judgment came upon his people for their constant rejection. But the current generation are not innocent, though. It's not like they go, well, you know, we're suffering because of those guys.

Verse 16, The crown has fallen from our head. Woe to us, for we have sinned. Another way of stating that is, if only we had never sinned.

They'd taken responsibility. Sin was the reason Jerusalem had fallen. God's people had rejected their God again and again. But this current generation had done it too.

[11 : 32] You see, Jeremiah's prophecy of this destruction of Jerusalem could not have been any clearer. Jeremiah 19 lays out the details of the destruction of Jerusalem because of the sin and the

idolatry of the people.

And what happens to Jeremiah as he comes in, brings the word of God to the people of Judah in these days, for like four decades leading up to this moment, what happens?

They beat him. They put him into prison. Later, he's thrown into a sewer. With the expectation, he will die.

The people of Jerusalem had turned their backs on God's word and his prophets again and again. They arrogantly and tragically forgot. Everything that they had was a good gift from God.

Everything. Everything. Everything. Everything. Everything. Everything. Everything. So that's the first beam. First beam to remember when the storms of life hit, the Bible makes it absolutely clear that none of us are innocent.

[12:48] None of us. Romans 3 tells us that all have gone our own way. All of us have rejected God. We have all sinned. And everything wrong in this world is connected to that.

None of us are innocent. God created a good world. He designed humanity to live in obedience to him and discover joy and freedom forever. And when the first people rebelled against God, it broke everything.

Everything wrong in this world is a consequence of sin, either directly or indirectly. And so the first beam is crucial here.

A Christian therefore echoes the words of the tax collector in Luke 18, verse 13, who beats his chest and says, Lord, have mercy on me, the sinner, the model sinner.

The Christian echoes the Lord's prayer from the heart. Forgive me my sin as I forgive the sins of others.

[14:00] The Christian sees their sin, however much they have been sinned against. It's so important to have a healthy theology of sin. And what generations of rebellion against God has done to this world.

If we do not, we tend to put our head in a bucket of sand, declare that we are basically good, and that God owes me a trouble-free life.

That's naivety. God owes us nothing. It is secular humanism that says, my life should be upward and advancing, and everything works for my good.

If Lockie and Rosie go into next Saturday, make promises to one another, and just say, in the good and the bad, or leave out the bad, just the good, take everything negative out, they will not have the resources to endure in marriage.

Every sorrow, every tear, all pain, every loss, gives evidence of the brokenness in our world caused by sin. Something is terribly wrong with our world, every culture, and inside of every single one of us.

[15:40] And it's crucial that we understand that God does not owe us an inheritance. He does not owe us a trouble-free life.

Secondly, however, what's amazing here, after acknowledging sin and recounting 18 verses of consequences of sin, verse 18 starts with the word, not in the NIV, but it starts with the word, but, but, you've got to love the word, but, and this, verse 19 is in fact the center point of this whole chapter.

And it's the second support beam of the roof of our lives when the storms of life hit. It's verse 19, you, Lord, or, but you, Lord, reign forever.

your throne endures from generation to generation. God is in control. Sin and its consequences are not the end of the story.

That's the big but. Everything in this chapter, in this book, circles around verse 19. This is the spiritual reorientation for Judah.

[17:01] You see, God's stern discipline of Judah has awakened in them a sense of their sinfulness and their worthlessness and their helplessness.

It has broken her pride and humbled her. It is very, you know, it makes sense that they should be humbled. They're sitting on the rubble of Jerusalem.

And yet for sometimes, it's not so easy for us to go there. Our lives can be a rumble. And yet we still wave the fist to God.

Someone owes me. Sometimes suffering drives us further into pride. Self-assurance, self-confidence.

But here it's humbledom. And it's only from this humble position that Judah invokes God's compassion and his grace. Jeremiah confesses that everything works according to the decree and the purpose of the creator.

[18 : 04] Every event in life moves towards the fulfillment of his plans, the plans that he ordains, including the destruction of Jerusalem under his judgment.

The covenant God, in his sovereign rule, has destroyed his city, his temple, his people through the conquest of his Babylonians.

Babylon, the most powerful empire in the world, was simply doing his bidding. Now we get the same thinking if you fast forward to Acts chapter 4 where we are told the sin of Pilate, the sin of the Roman soldiers, the sin of the chief priests, and the sin of the people conspired together to crucify Jesus.

And then we are told in Acts 4 verse 28, they did what your power and will had decided beforehand should happen.

Now they're responsible for their sin. It's a terrible thing for which God will hold them accountable, but they cannot stop God being God.

[19 : 31] Just think about that for a moment. You must be very, very, very powerful to have your enemies fulfill your plans while working against you.

That's incomprehensible to me. I had to even think about that sentence several times. And yet this is how the Bible tells us to think about God and his sovereign rule over all things.

All else may change and will change, but God does not. God's rule over all things as opposed to what we might call chance or fate or luck in our society.

Everything may fluctuate, our times and our circumstances may grow harder and more difficult, but God is in control of the situation. The presence of pain, no matter how strong, does not negate the plan of God.

No matter how much it seems that the world is collecting around us, God is on his throne and he is always fulfilling his plans. Now it is essential that we do not stop there with just those two beams.

[21 : 05] If we do, what happens is we slip into a nothing more than a fatalism. In actual fact, what we do is we slip into the theology of Islam if we just stop there?

It's the will of Allah. Nothing you can do about it. We are just mere pawns in his plans. What's the difference between, amongst many other things, between Islam and Christianity?

Beam number three. Beam number three. relationship. God is good. He's beam number three.

God comes to us in our suffering. He's not Aristotle's unmoved mover at a distance. He comes to us in our suffering and that's why Lamentations doesn't end with verse 19.

If it did, the application would be very trite for us. It would be nothing more than, well, always look on the bright side of life. Nothing more than that.

[22 : 28] Or, there's always a silver lining, you just got to look for it, or, you will rise like a phoenix from the ashes. The Christian hope is not just that God is in control, but that he's good.

fundamental third being, he is good. And so in verse 20, we are back into the darkness and the death. Why do you always forget us?

Why do you forsake us so long? And here we have a plea to God's goodness, which echoes verse 1, and it ends in the same kind of way.

restore us to yourself, Lord, that we may return, renew our days as of old, unless you have utterly rejected us and are angry with us beyond measure.

One commentator says that lamentation ends like it does because Jeremiah and Jerusalem are in a position akin to the disciples on Easter Saturday.

[23 : 40] The hope of the resurrection Easter day is yet to dawn for them. There is waiting, longing for hope to dawn.

And while we wait, we need to hold both the sovereignty of God and the goodness of God in equal measure. The plea in verses 20 and 21 is simply, God, this hurts, help us.

But the main words there are restore, return, renew. Verse 21, restore us to yourself, O Lord.

This is not simply asking God to change the situation. It is, in fact, an appeal for forgiveness and a restored relationship.

This is crucial. my fear is that for so many of us, we repent because we want to get a weight off our shoulders.

[24 : 47] We want to feel better about ourselves. And so when we do that, we constantly live with an underlying feeling of shame and am I truly forgiven?

we don't sense the freedom of forgiveness. What's the purpose? In other words, when we do that, it's self-orientated.

Our repentance is self-orientated. Repentance and forgiveness matters because of the next step. it's because it restores relationship. That's why repentance matters. If I wronged my wife, Nat, it causes, sorry, when I wronged my wife, Nat, it causes a strain, it causes a separation, a break in the relationship.

There's this barrier, there's this problem and depending on how much I wronged her will depend on how great that barrier is, that roadblock in our relationship will be.

[26 : 06] Repentance and forgiveness matters, not so that I feel better about myself, it's because I get Nat back. That's why it matters. I want restored relationship.

And as they sit on the rubble of Jerusalem, their suffering has led them to want God back. Even if the rubble remains, we want God back.

This is more than just a prayer of lament, it is a prayer of repentance, it's a prayer for renewal, renewed relationship. It's prayer for restoration, renewal at the end of lamentations points us to something that only God can do.

And yet for lamentations, this is where it ends. This historic lament concludes without resolution. resolution. As some of us feel like life is a bit like that at the moment, particularly in the moment of suffering when the storms hit, it feels like it just lingers.

It ends by telling us where to look in pain, but not giving us the rest of the story. And it will be over 400 years before the resolution comes.

[27 : 35] Just think about that for Judah for this moment. There was a gap of 400 years before God spoke again. We want you back. And it was 400 years before he spoke again.

We don't have that long now. At the beginning of Matthew's account of Jesus' life, Joseph is told that Mary will give birth to a son.

You give him the name Jesus because he will save his people from their sins. First words.

Jesus is the one who restores us to God by taking God's punishment for us. Just before his execution and his arrest and his execution, Jesus is in the garden of Gethsemane and he says this, identifying with our sorrow, he says, my soul is overwhelmed with sorrow to the point of death.

Mark 14 tells us he was deeply distressed and he was troubled. We must not minimize what Jesus went through on our behalf. If you have a very high view of Jesus, we sort of tend to think, well, he could cope, he's God after all, he's divine, he can kind of cope with it, he knows what's going to happen, he knows the plan, but the fact is it says here Jesus is deeply distressed, which for him felt exactly what it feels like for you and for me, he is deeply distressed.

[29 : 18] in fact, more so, the anguish that he bore was greater than any anguish we would ever face, any sorrow that we would ever encounter. He saw the full terror of what lay ahead, his prostate body convulsing in the Garden of Gethsemane and his tears and the sweat falling to the ground like blood.

The terror he felt was not so much because of the pain of the cross that he was about to endure, but because of the human sin and all of its consequences, the cup of God's judgment being poured out, the destroyed Jerusalem is about to destroy him and wreck the Godhead apart in such a way that the Father turns his face away.

He saw the brutality of a thousand holocausts, all the prostituting and idolatry of human civilizations, the blasphemy, the profanity, and it was the cup that was full to the brim of jealousy and hatred and bitterness and gossip and greed and anger, and it was his job to drink all of God's judgment.

He doesn't want to do it. The storm had hit, but oh man, the shelter was up. He falls to the ground and he pleads, if possible, that this hour might pass, but not my will, but your will be done.

Your plan goes forward, not mine. He soaks up the punishment of the world. The greatest display of obedience to the plan of God, Jesus took the cup, the full cup of human sin and God's judgment.

[31 : 11] he looked at it shuddering deep into its depth and in a stilly act of trust and dependence upon his good father.

He drank it all for you and for me so that we do not end up where Jeremiah is at the end of Lamentations 5.

1 Peter 3 tells us Christ suffered once for all sin for the righteous, the righteous one for the unrighteous one to bring you back to God.

You get God back. And so Jesus, the cross, is the resolution to the plea in Lamentations 5.21 and 22.

He's the one who brings us back to God. None of our suffering makes any sense. In fact, no suffering in this world, whatever your religion and philosophical system is, makes no sense until we see Jesus suffering for us.

[32 : 29] God himself suffering for us. There isn't a religion or philosophical system in this world that has any answer to human suffering like the Christian faith.

And so we lament. Because all the promises of God are not yet fulfilled. They have their yes and their amen in Jesus.

So let me just take a slight diversion here. Particularly for those of us in this room and watching on screen who have walked with Jesus for a while.

The opposite of walking with Jesus in lament while we wait for the completeness of his promises is a cynical spirit.

That's the opposite of lament. And I see too much of it in my own heart and I see too much of it, I believe, amongst Christians.

[33 : 48] cynicism is increasingly the dominant spirit of this age and too many Christians are marinating in that age.

Many Christians stand on the edge of cynicism struggling with a defeated weariness but hiding it behind a theology of God's sovereignty.

As a pastor, in moments of grief, I often say to people, how are you doing? Trusting in God's plan. Trusting in God's plan.

He's sovereign, he's in control, he'll work it out. But how do you feel about that? And there's no response.

That's cynicism. That's weariness, not lament. That's not trust. That is, their spirits have begun to deaden but unlike their cynic, they haven't lost all of hope.

[35 : 11] There's still a hope there. But the fear of further sorrows tends to freeze them. Cynicism and defeated weariness both question the active goodness of God, which is why we can't stop at being number two.

Being number three is the difference between lament and cynicism. Cynicism creates a numbness towards God and life, a deafening silence of prayerlessness about your heart and what's going on in this world.

It may maintain a rigorous theology of God's sovereignty while not actually relating to him. prayers of lament engage with evil.

They don't take no for an answer. Jeremiah is in God's faith as he lays bare his heart hoping dreaming asking.

Lament is not wallowing. Lament is feisty. Cynicism just critiques and languishes and wallows.

[36 : 38] That's cynicism. Cynicism is passive. It is without hope in this life. Only hope for life forever. That is the sorrow of life leads us to the man of sorrows.

The man of sorrows. The God who knows your sorrow. Under the dark clouds of brokenness God offers mercy. I sat this week with a ministry peer going through a tough time.

I said to him what have you learned in this moment. What's God teaching you? He started to tear up and he said I just hear God saying to me all the time walk with me.

Walk with me. Walk with me. God the man of sorrows offers the embrace.

Lament is the language of a people who know the whole story. Not just part of it. The gospel story.

[38 : 02] The Christian's view of pain and suffering in this present life is transformed because of the good news of the man of sorrows. For I consider that the sufferings of this present time are not worth comparing with the glory that is to be revealed to us.

And so we along with all creation groan as we wait for the future day when Christ's victory will be complete. We lament.

We embrace this language of sorrow as a road map to God's grace and getting God back. You can hear God call out to you at the moment if that's your position in life.

walk with me. Walk with me. Let's pray. Gracious Father and Lord of all, sin has ravaged your good world.

Living in a sin riddled world means we accumulate pain and sorrow and hurt. Much of that is stored deep in our hearts.

[39 : 16] We have been touched by sin and pain so many times and in so many ways it's hard to remember it all but some of those times they are just seared into our memories. We battle with cynicism.

For some of us cynicism has crept in and made us passive with you. So we have this trust in a theological system rather than walking with you.

It is passive with you. And so we ask for your help Holy Spirit to look again at those sufferings and discern your love for us in that very pain.

Give us wisdom and discernment if not to fully understand your ways but to trust your plans your power your goodness the goodness that saw you intervene for us Jesus.

Father teach us to trust and to live as people who know that our final hope cannot be in any earthly Jerusalem or in any earthly circumstances just getting better but only in you.

[40 : 41] So grow our faith in you in the face of adversity and pain. Thank you for the gift of lament. Amen. Horatio Spafford was a prominent American lawyer and Presbyterian church elder back in the 1800s.

He knew suffering and loss in his life in all kinds of ways. Certainly not the least that scarlet fever killed his four year old son in the same year that his business was destroyed by fire in Chicago.

Two years later the family decided to take a holiday to Europe as part of a respite and rebuilding opportunity for them. Horatio was delayed because business at the last minute he was delayed and so his wife and his four daughters travelled on ahead of him across the Atlantic on a ship.

On the 22nd of November 1873 while crossing the Atlantic their ship was hit by an iron sailing vessel 226 people lost their lives including four of Spafford's daughters all of them all these kids gone now.

He got the news when his wife touched down in England. Spafford immediately sailed to England and as he sailed over the location of his daughter's death he penned a hymn.

[42 : 16] Let's stand and sing it.