

“A Prophet’s Repentance for the Nation”

Lamentations 3:1-6, 16-18, 21-26, 40 ¹

Lamentations 3:1-6

*I am the one who has seen the afflictions that come from the rod of the LORD’s anger.
He has led me into darkness, shutting out all light.
He has turned his hand against me again and again, all day long.
He has made my skin and flesh grow old. He has broken my bones.
He has besieged and surrounded me with anguish and distress.
He has buried me in a dark place, like those long dead.*

Lamentations 3:16-18

*He has made me chew on gravel. He has rolled me in the dust.
Peace has been stripped away, and I have forgotten what prosperity is.
I cry out, “My splendor is gone! Everything I had hoped for from the LORD is lost!”*

Lamentations 3:21-26

*Yet I still dare to hope when I remember this:
The faithful love of the LORD never ends! His mercies never cease.
Great is his faithfulness; his mercies begin afresh each morning.
I say to myself, “The LORD is my inheritance; therefore, I will hope in him!”
The LORD is good to those who depend on him, to those who search for him.
So it is good to wait quietly for salvation from the LORD.*

Lamentations 3:40

Let us test and examine our ways. Let us turn back to the LORD.

What comes to mind when you hear the word, “tears”? In our culture, little girls are typically given permission to allow their tears to flow, while little boys quite often are not.

There are perhaps some vestigial survival issues involved in such teaching, and anyone who has paid even a little attention to the matter knows that there are significant differences in how we humans, both male and female, are “wired.” But even so, at the deepest level we are all more alike than we are different, and tears have a significant place in the deep spiritual and emotional processes of our lives.

It seems to me that with very few exceptions, our tears are far more about ourselves than they are about others. The sadness we experience in a movie or a novel or at a funeral, for example, helps us get in touch with the deep places in our own spirits where healing is yet incomplete. Our tears have much to teach us.

I think I’ve told you that the first time I read *The Shack*,² I cried all the way through it. During the first third of the book, the pain in the story touched places of deep pain in my own heart; during the last two-thirds, the wonder of God’s love portrayed there touched places of deep longing. You’ve had similar experiences.

But there was one time when I experienced a qualitatively different kind of tears, and I’m sorry to say that I can only remember one such time. I had just finished watching the movie

¹ A sermon by Dr. David C. Stancil, delivered at the Columbia Baptist Fellowship in Columbia, MD on January 15, 2017.

² William Young, *The Shack: Where Tragedy Confronts Eternity* (Los Angeles: Windblown Media, 2007).

*Schindler's List*³—an award-winning but horribly graphic film about the Holocaust—and when the movie ended, I just sat and sobbed for nearly thirty minutes, grieving for the horror I had witnessed and for the evil that has been set loose in our world. That's the kind of thing the prophet Jeremiah experienced when he wrote, "*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*" (Lamentations 2:11).

We Interrupt this Message for BREAKING NEWS: "The Babylonian army has breached the walls of Judah's capital city of Jerusalem, having held the city under siege for more than two years.⁴ Judah's King Zedekiah tried to escape under cover of darkness, but Nebuchadnezzar's troops captured him on the plains of Jericho and brought him to Nebuchadnezzar at his camp at Riblah. There Nebuchadnezzar forced Zedekiah to watch as all his sons and the other leaders of Judah were killed. Then they gouged out Zedekiah's eyes, bound him in bronze chains, and led him away to Babylon.

"Nebuzaradan, Nebuchadnezzar's Captain of the Guard, has burned down the Jewish Temple, the royal palace, and destroyed all the houses and all the important buildings in the city. The army has completely destroyed the city walls and has pillaged everything of value.

"This afternoon, the last of the Jews began a forced march to an internment camp near Babylon. Stay tuned and we'll keep you up-to-date with the latest developments in this most recent conquest and acquisition by Nebuchadnezzar's growing empire" (from Jeremiah 52).

As terrible a scene as this is, try to imagine such a thing happening to the city that is most dear to your own heart. And then try to imagine what it would be like to know with absolute certainty that this is going to happen forty years ahead of time. Even worse, imagine warning your family, friends, neighbors, and government officials about this coming darkness, but being ridiculed instead of being taken seriously. That's what Jeremiah was experiencing when he wrote, "*My heart, my heart—I writhe in pain! My heart pounds within me! I cannot be still. For I have heard the blast of enemy trumpets and the roar of their battle cries*" (Jeremiah 4:19).

What if you really could see what the future holds? My friend, Bob Hughes, created a character in one of his science fiction novels who is able to see the future. Many people tell this character that they would like to have the same gift, but he tells them, "You do not want to know. Such knowledge is a terrible burden." The character's name is, appropriately, "Dark."⁵

It is for all these reasons that Jeremiah is often called "the weeping prophet," or "the prophet of the broken heart." The two books we have from Jeremiah in the Bible both focus on the destruction of Jerusalem. The book of Jeremiah predicts it, and the book of Lamentations looks back on it. Known as "the Book of Tears," Lamentations is a dirge, a funeral song written for the fallen city of Jerusalem.⁶

³ Steven Spielberg, Universal Studios, 1993.

⁴ Jerusalem was besieged from January 15, 588 to July 18, 586 B.C. The Temple was destroyed and the city burned on August 17.

⁵ I do not actually remember in which book Dark appears, but he appears in one of these two series: Robert Don Hughes, *Pelmen the Powershaper* (three volumes; New York: Ballantine, 1979); *Wizard and Dragon* (two volumes; New York: Ballantine, 1989).

⁶ In Hebrew, the first four chapters in Lamentations are acrostic poems. Each verse in each chapter begins with a successive letter of the Hebrew alphabet. Chapter 3 has 66 verses rather than 22 because it is a triple acrostic: the first three verses begin with the equivalent of A, the next three with B, and so on. This was a typical form of Hebrew poetry. Other examples of acrostics are Psalms 37, 119, and 145, and Proverbs 31:10-31.

The first part of our text this morning captures the general feeling of the dirge, and I want to share a few more verses with you that illumine more of the trajectory of Jeremiah's mournful poem. After that I'll try to bring the whole thing closer to home:

1. *"If people crush underfoot all the prisoners of the land, if they deprive others of their rights in defiance of the Most High, if they twist justice in the courts—doesn't the Lord see all these things?" (3:34-36).*
2. *"[Judah] defiled herself with immorality with no thought of the punishment that would follow" (1:9).*
3. *"I begged my allies for help, but they betrayed me. My priests and leaders starved to death in the city, even as they searched for food to save their lives" (1:19).*
4. *"How the gold has lost its luster! Even the finest gold has become dull. The sacred gemstones lie scattered in the streets" (4:1).*
5. *"See them lying in the streets—young and old, boys and girls, killed by the swords of the enemy" (2:21).*
6. *"Joy has left our hearts; our dancing has turned to mourning. The garlands have fallen from our heads. Weep for us because we have sinned" (5:15-16).*

Now let's try those six statements again, not as they were written long ago, but as they might be written in this inaugural week:

1. If a nation spends more time and money on locking people up than on developing strong families that don't produce criminals, if the rich get "justice" while those with public defenders do not, doesn't the Lord see these things?
2. If a nation disregards the guidance God has given for human life, whether at the personal, local, or national level, it's absurd to think that God's moral laws can be ignored without consequence.
3. When the consequences of such living begin to come due, appeals to other nations are futile, since they've all been doing the very same things, and every boat is sinking.
4. When people, families, and nations build their values and culture on greed, self-interest, and dishonesty, every goal they live for is certain to collapse, like castles built on sand.
5. While it may be that some of the false prophets of greed may themselves escape the consequences of their theft, it is certain that those consequences will fall on young families, on the retired, on those with fixed incomes, on their own children and on their children's children.
6. Darkness has fallen. Our houses, our businesses, our investments, our leveraged assets are all "underwater." The party's over. All is lost.

Do you begin to get the feel of Lamentations? And one of the key questions for us in this Inaugural Week is what sort of tears we are crying in the midst of it. Are we spending most of our time lamenting our own circumstances, or are we, like Jeremiah, broken-hearted as we survey the moral confusion and decay that surround us? Instead of complaining and pointing

fingers at each other, Democrat, Republican, Independent, or otherwise, we'd do better to ask whether and how we might actually be part of the problem ourselves.

Now there's certainly a place for prophets who call entire nations to repentance, as Martin Luther King, Jr. did fifty years ago; and God continues to call out leaders from time to time to "stand in the gap" for the nation (Ezekiel 22:30). You and I need to be serious about the business of praying for our leaders and for our nation, especially in such times as these, and we do well to be in frequent contact with those who represent us; but our most productive effort may lie in another direction.

It's awfully easy for us—especially those of us who are fairly often in church—to persuade ourselves that our own sins aren't really all that bad, and that the real problem in our world is with everybody else. Without intending to, we "climb up on our high horses" and look down our noses at "all those people" who are Real Sinners.

Joel Osteen told a story about a pastor who was walking down the street and encountered a group of middle school boys huddled around an old dog. Concerned that the boys were hurting the animal, the pastor went over and asked, "What are you doing with that dog?"

One of the boys replied, "This dog is just an old stray. We all want him, but only one of us can take him home. So we've decided whichever one of us can tell the biggest lie gets to keep the dog."

The minister was taken aback. "You boys shouldn't have a contest telling lies. Don't you know it's a sin to lie?" Then he launched into a sermon about lying, ending his speech with, "When I was your age, I never told a lie."

There was dead silence for about a minute; and just as the minister was beginning to think he'd gotten through to them, the smallest boy gave a deep sigh and said, "All right, give him the dog."⁷

Jesus warned us not to "*worry about a speck in your friend's eye when you have a log in your own. How can you think of saying, 'Let me help you get rid of that speck in your eye,' when you can't see past the log in your own eye? Hypocrite! First get rid of the log from your own eye; then perhaps you will see well enough to deal with the speck in your friend's eye*" (Matthew 7:3-5).

It seems to me that if we who follow Jesus were to really take Him seriously, we wouldn't be nearly so bothered by the shortcomings we perceive in others as we would be about the sins in our own hearts. We would cry out with the psalmist, "*Search me, O God, and know my heart; test me and know my thoughts. Point out anything in me that offends you, and lead me along the path of everlasting life*" (Psalm 139:23-24).

She had come to my office in another city with her common-law husband, wanting to be properly married. When I asked them about their spiritual journey, it was clear that neither knew what it meant to be born again, so I went through God's Plan of Salvation with them. When I looked up from the last passage in Romans 10, tears were streaming down her face. "I have wanted for so long to feel clean again," she said, "but I didn't know how." That young woman made the glad discovery of what it means to be Clean that night, and through her conversion several other people became believers. I suspect that more have come into the Kingdom since.

⁷ Joel Osteen, 20 February 2000.

My friends, as you and I make our way through these troubled and uncertain times, as we move through a week bracketed by the Martin Luther King, Jr. Holiday and by Donald Trump's inauguration as our President, may God grant us both wisdom and humility as we search for ways to move forward. May we take seriously God's word to Ezekiel: "*I looked for someone who might rebuild the wall of righteousness that guards the land. I searched for someone to stand in the gap in the wall so I would not have to destroy the land, but I found no one*" (Ezekiel 22:30).

In the film, *Amazing Grace*, William Wilberforce had asked his old pastor and friend, John Newton, to write an account of his years as a slave-ship captain to strengthen Wilberforce's argument against the transatlantic slave trade in Parliament, but Newton refused, saying that his "20,000 ghosts" haunted him too greatly to record on paper. Years later, after Newton had gone blind, Wilberforce discovered that Newton had written his account after all. "You must use it, William," Newton said. "Names, records, ships, ports, people—everything I remember is in here. Although my memory is fading, I remember two things very clearly: I am a great sinner, and Christ is a great Savior."⁸

Sisters and brothers, in this season of discontent, may our love for those who do not yet know the Savior cause us to feel God's own love for them; and whether or not that love finds expression in tears, may we be as committed as Jeremiah himself was to calling our nation back to the Lord.

Jeremiah lived in times much more difficult than ours currently are. As Jeremiah continued his lament over his nation, wondering what it all meant and where it was all headed, he reaffirmed his faith in God, even in the midst of absolute destruction and disaster: ²¹ *Yet I still dare to hope when I remember this:* ²² *The faithful love of the Lord never ends! His mercies never cease.* ²³ *Great is his faithfulness; his mercies begin afresh each morning.* ²⁴ *I say to myself, "The Lord is my inheritance; therefore, I will hope in him!"* (Jeremiah 3:21-24).

⁸ *Amazing Grace*, Samuel Goldwyn Pictures, 2006, directed by Michael Apted.