

In the ancient world grief was quite public. Most important matters were expressed in poetry, as well. “The Sumerians, authors of the world’s oldest written literature, cultivated a genre of composition known today as ‘lament over the ruined city and temple’ ” (*The Oxford Companion to The Bible*, p. 420).

Because grief was public, the poetic form of *lament* was also public, a literary style into which many poured their grief—for an individual or a group. Of all the Psalms in the Hebrew Bible, one third are *laments*. Today more and more people are opting for a private memorial service when a death occurs. Most do not have a sense of community or perceive a need to gather with others when death comes; and many people grieve alone. We are losing whatever communal sense our nation once had as an expected form of communal grieving.

The Bible’s many lamentations are intended to teach worshipers it’s OK to be angry at God—to yell at God—because God, opposite of we humans, when receiving such treatment, will not abandon us. Lamentations grants permission to complain and rail at God. In that sense, Lamentations can become good news to anyone who is suffering grief.

The passage begins with an exclamation of pity for the city, which is the theme of the entire book. Jerusalem’s status is reduced from wife to widow, from princess to slave. The city is the first of other objects to be personified, that is, an inanimate object, a force of nature, or an abstract term is spoken of as if it were a person. Her “lovers” who do not comfort her are probably the national allies who failed to rescue her from Babylon’s armies. They seem to have joined the opposition. The nation of Judah (at least a representative number of the artisans, aristocracy, and royal family) have been taken into exile.

Consequently, with another personification, we hear that no one comes to Zion anymore for *her* festivals; *her* gateways are desolate. This ultimately occurs, no matter the human participation, because “*the Lord has brought her grief.*” The magnificence of the city and the splendor that clothed the leaders is all gone.

Eugene H. Peterson wrote a book, *Run with the Horses*, that is about Jeremiah’s prophecy. We have a few copies for sale in the Book Nook. All of his works are sound, helpful in understanding the Bible, and challenging to serious Bible students. Many of you are already familiar with his famous Bible translation *The Message*. I recommend his books because the faith he writes about is strained through his personal experience, prayer, and study. By example, in his meditation on Lamentations from the book, *Five Smooth Stones For Pastoral Work*, Peterson writes: “Among other things pastoral work is a decision to deal, on the most personal and intimate terms, with suffering. It does not try to find ways to minimize suffering or ways to avoid it. It is not particularly interested in finding explanations for it. It is not a search after the cure for suffering. Pastoral work engages suffering. It is a conscious, deliberate plunge into the experience of suffering. The decision has its origin and maintains its integrity in the Scriptures that shape pastoral ministry. The biblical revelation neither explains nor eliminates suffering. It shows, rather, God entering into the life of suffering humanity, accepting and sharing the suffering” (pp. 113-114). This pastor can second that thought.

Delbert R. Hillers comments what the author intends us to see in Lamentations chapter 1: “A man who has just lost a wife or child cannot keep his mind off it, and that is how this [writer] writes, ever returning to the source of his grief” (*Lamentations*, p. 16). The lament of this conquered community can be heard in

the cries of grieving parents who have lost a child, a town devastated by hurricane force winds, a child who is bullied daily, or an elderly person who has been left and forgotten in a nursing facility.

We should recognize that the voice of God is absent in this Scripture passage. These are the words of those who are suffering and those who are a witness to their suffering. This passage gives every reader a companion who has known a misery like theirs, but it does not give God's response to those feelings of abandonment and a perception of God's wrath. The pain is very real.

Catherine Cavazos Renken suggests that "the grace many may find in this first chapter is permission to weep and grieve and to wonder how or why God would allow or cause such anguish" ("Between Text And Sermon," *Interpretation*, April 2013, pp. 194-195). "*All the splendor has departed from Daughter Zion. Her princes are like deer that find no pasture; in weakness they have fled before the pursuer*" says verse 6. Jerusalem has been a princess, but has become a slave (v. 1). The city and the temple have been destroyed, and the people killed or taken into captivity. There is no majesty left in Jerusalem—only ruins. When the Babylonians breached the city walls, King Zedekiah and his soldiers fled by night. When the Babylonians pursued and overtook them, Zedekiah's soldiers deserted him.

Second Kings 25 starkly describes the hopeless scene: "*Then the city wall was broken through, and the whole army fled at night through the gate between the two walls near the king's garden, though the Babylonians were surrounding the city. They fled toward the Arabah, but the Babylonian army pursued the king and overtook him in the plains of Jericho. All his soldiers were separated from him and scattered, and he was captured. He was taken to the king of Babylon at Riblah, where sentence was pronounced on him. They killed the sons of Zedekiah before his eyes. Then they put out his eyes, bound him with bronze shackles and took him to Babylon.*" (2 Kings 25:4-7). Presumably, some of Zedekiah's lieutenants escaped, but where could they go—Babylon's army is in control everywhere? If these former princes of Jerusalem want to evade capture and punishment, they will have to hide in remote places where nobody lives—the kinds of places where it is difficult to survive.

When we move on to Lamentations 3, however, the prophet inspires hope in the midst of this decimation. No matter the circumstances, hope comes from the Lord. In chapter 3 the prophet's approach to the future is quiet hope (*loud* hope might get him in trouble). He suggests that when all you can do is wait, then wait—for the Lord. In the midst of chaos and disorientation, remember God's great love.

Let's not miss that the passage from chapter 1 in Lamentations is written in the third person, but this section from chapter 3 speaks to us in the first person. Even though the writer is suffering and despairing, he personally remembers his source of hope. Verse 19 says: "*I remember...the bitterness and the gall*" and verse 20 says: "*I will remember them.*" Both are constructions of the verb "to remember." He calls to mind the Lord's covenant loyalty and his *great love* (steadfast love in some English translations). That one trait of the Lord is so comprehensive, it could describe the Lord's character in full. A parallel idea in this passage to God's "*great love*" is his "*compassions.*" Even in suffering, the writer remembers the very nature of the Lord and trusts that daily—or at least someday—the Lord's compassions will again be granted to his devastated people. With all their land captured by a foreign power, no longer does anyone have the "portion" of the original tribal inheritance in Canaan from Joshua's conquest.

Verse 24 states: *“I say to myself, ‘The Lord is my portion.’”* This interesting expression comes from the traditions about the division of the Promised Land. All the Israelites received allotments, except the priests, for God said to Aaron (in Numbers 18): *“I am your portion.”* At a literal level this meant that the priests were to live from the temple offerings, but the expression came to be a way of asserting that when every other support in life fails, the Lord remains. Psalm 73:26 strongly and clearly restates this conviction: *“My flesh and my heart may fail, but God is the strength of my heart and my portion forever.”*

Brothers and sisters, God is with us. We are not alone. God will be faithful in every situation and every circumstance of life that we face. What we are called to do is turn to God and trust God to order and provide. This often requires a leap of faith, in a crisis or in the throes of grief. It’s not an easy thing to do. It’s hard to believe that God is there by your side when the rug is pulled out from under you.

Yet, think of it this way: Just as the sun comes up every morning, *“His compassions never fail. They are new every morning; great is your faithfulness”* (3:22-23). And even though there may be a thick layer of clouds blocking the sun from our view, such as, when we experience *grief beyond words*, and God seems far from us, the sun is still shining. And God is still watching over us with his great love. Amen.