The Five Laments: Lessons from Lamentations

Introduction to the Study:
In Psalm 30:11, the psalmist says that the Lord has turned his “mourning into dancing.” In Lamentations 5:15, Jeremiah (the likely writer of these laments) surprisingly turns that phrase around and says that “our dancing has been turned to mourning.” There is something deep being said there. When we think about what it means to lament—to mourn—we understand that there is always something deep involved. Deep emotions, deep questions, deep searching.

We will find that in the five laments (each chapter is a separate lament) of Lamentations, there are very specific issues related to the aftermath of the Israelites’ sins, the destruction of Jerusalem, and the horrible effects of being carried away to Babylonian captivity in 586 B.C. There are also, however, many universal themes in these laments that impact the way we think about God and the way we share our struggles with Him.

It is my hope that these five lessons/discussions will help us learn how to cope with tragedy in ways that actually reinforce our faith. It will also help us learn how to comfort those in pain in a way that accepts the complexities of life while never surrendering our belief in a God who is faithful, loving, and whose “compassions never fail” (Lam. 3:22).

Lesson One: Shock and Sorrow at Rock Bottom
January 6, 2010

Imagine if everything you loved in life was taken away—your family, your home, your job, your freedom, your social structures, even your access to God. If we lose any one of these things, it’s likely that we go through a range of emotions and ask God a lot of questions. But imagine losing everything. When the Babylonians finally overran Jerusalem in 586 B.C., they tore down the city walls, defiled and destroyed the Temple, and forced most of the remaining population to walk away from everything they ever knew as they marched to foreign exile. In the aftermath, Lamentations was written as a godly man tried to understand what had happened and searched for a way to understand God in light of unspeakable, ungodly destruction. Let’s begin by reading Lamentations 1, the first of five chapter-long laments contained in this book.

Q1. What are your initial reactions to this lament?

Q2. Complaints are a common element in laments. What complaints are found in chapter 1?
Q3. How would you describe the emotion of this lament and its author?

Q4. According to what we read in Lam. 1, who is impacted by this catastrophe?

Q5. Why is no one immune from the results of Jerusalem’s fall? What about the innocent ones?

Q6. Why has this horrible devastation happened? [consider 1:5, 8-9]

Q7. What actions have the people taken to try and survive? [consider 1:11]

Q8. Why won’t these actions work?

Q9. Have you ever felt like God had turned against you in His anger? If so, what was that like, and what did you learn from that experience?

Q10. It’s easy to want to give up when things get this bad. What enables people to keep on living in the face of incredible loss and sorrow?

Q11. Notice that in Lam. 1, there is no expression of hope at all. The author is completely distraught. His only comfort is in his request that God will make his enemies experience the same level of destruction and brokenness that he feels (see 1:21-22). Do we ever pray for things like this? Should we? Why or why not?

It is important to understand that God still hears us, even when we are at rock bottom. Jeremiah has not given up, and he doesn’t want to give in. That’s why he has to get these words out. Even though he feels lost and is in incredible pain, he is still in conversation with God.

When people around us are overcome with grief, we should not try to silence them or counsel them to keep things to themselves. We should stay out of their way and allow them to grieve. Allow them to question. Allow them to wrestle with their anguish, even if they question God’s justice in the process. That’s what Jeremiah does in Lamentations 2. We’ll work through it together next week.