

## A Gethsemane Life

*“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 the Lord’s great love we are not consumed, for his compassions never fail. They are new every morning; great is thy faithfulness.”* Lamentations 3:19-23

Jeremiah’s forty years of heart-breaking, life-threatening ministry is an inspiring, albeit sobering, reminder of costly obedience to today’s believers. Ever true to the word of the Lord, Jeremiah obeyed Yahweh. He got himself ready and stood for four decades, declaring whatever the Lord commanded him to say (1:17). He faced Judah’s evil kings, lying prophets, bad priests, plotting relatives and foreign kings, without giving in and yielding an inch. He delivered the Lord’s scathing message of judgment and experienced the full brunt of Judah’s rejection of God. His own family betrayed him, and the religious and political leaders tried to kill him. Yet his life testified to the Yahweh’s promise, “Today I have made you a fortified city, an iron pillar and a bronze wall to stand against the whole land” (1:18).

God’s protection, however, did not spare Jeremiah intense and agonizing grief. This stalwart prophet, pastor and poet, was a man of deep feelings and a broken heart. He preached judgment with tears: “Oh, that my head were a spring of water and my eyes a fountain of tears! I would weep day and night for the slain of my people” (9:1). He was bold in public, but he wept in private: “I will weep in secret because of your pride; my eyes will weep bitterly, overflowing with tears, because the Lord’s flock will be taken captive” (13:17). Because the Lord had withdrawn his blessing, his love and his pity from the people, Jeremiah was ordered to do so as well (16:5). He remained single, refused to attend funerals, rejected hospitality, and showed up at the temple to do battle. Even his loneliness sent a message. Jeremiah didn’t sermonize, he embodied the word of the Lord in his life and character. He was not the Incarnate One, but he lived an incarnational lifestyle.

Jeremiah was a parable of Jesus, 600 years before Jesus. His physical, emotional and spiritual suffering causes us to reflect on Jesus’ agony in Gethsemane and his suffering on the cross. Jeremiah experienced in his own mind, body and soul the judgment of God that Judah deserved. In a courageous act of willed passivity he walked alongside a rebellious and disobedient people through the valley of despair and helped them to grieve their loss and interpret their suffering. He gave true words and perspective to their lament and challenged them to grapple with the validity of God’s judgment. He taught them how to submit to God’s justice and judgment and work through their grief to an enduring hope in God’s great faithfulness.

## **In the Pit**

It may be difficult to determine the low point in Jeremiah's career because he had so many. Was it when he learned that his family was plotting against him (11:19) or when Pashhur, the chief officer of the temple, had him beaten and put in the stocks (20:1-2)? Was it when the Lord told him not to marry and to live as a social outcast (16:2-9) or was it when "the priests, the prophets and all the people seized him and said, 'You must die!'" (26:8-9)? Was it when Hananiah publicly accused and humiliated Jeremiah and broke the yoke he had around his neck (28:2-10) or was it when he hid from King Jehoiakim after the king cut up his scroll and threw the pieces into the fire (36:19-17)?

Of all the trials that Jeremiah experienced, the episode that may capture the depth of his suffering best was when he was lowered into a muddy cistern and left to die. He had been telling the people what he had told them all along, "This is what the Lord says: 'Whoever stays in this city will die by the sword, famine or plague, but whoever goes over to the Babylonians will live. He will escape with his life; he will live'" (38:2). Many of Jerusalem's leaders judged this now familiar message a treacherous betrayal and concluded, "This man should be put to death. He is discouraging the soldiers who are left in the city, as well as all the people, by the things he is saying to them. This man is not seeking the good of these people but their ruin" (38:4). King Zedekiah answered these false accusations against Jeremiah by abdicating his responsibility. "He is in your hands. The king can do nothing to oppose you" (38:5).

One cannot read this without thinking of the false accusations that were hurled at Jesus and recalling Pilate's abdication of responsibility (Mt 27:24). For Jesus it meant going to the cross; for Jeremiah it meant being lowered into a muddy cistern. We have no idea how long Jeremiah was left in the cistern but long enough for one of the officials in the royal palace by the name of Ebed-Melech, a Cushite (Ethiopian) to worry about his survival, and long enough for Zedekiah to regain some sense of responsibility. At some risk to his own career, Ebed-Melech approached the king saying, "My lord the king, these men have acted wickedly in all they have done to Jeremiah the prophet. They have thrown him into a cistern, where he will starve to death when there is no longer any bread in the city" (38:9). Thankfully Zedekiah listened to reason and ordered Ebed-Melech to take thirty men and "lift Jeremiah the prophet out of the cistern before he dies" (38:10). The fact that Ebed-Melech made an effort to pad the rope with old rags and clothing, indicated that Jeremiah had become emaciated and too weak to support himself as they hoisted him out of the well. It must have been a dramatic moment when Jeremiah was lifted out of the cistern barely alive, even as it was when Jesus' body was lifted down from the cross. Ebed-Melech must have handled the prophet with the utmost care and respect, even as we picture Joseph of Arimathea carefully handling his Savior's body (Mt 27:57-60).

In that miserable, muddy pit Jeremiah was forced to face the imminent reality of death, but nothing of his will and purpose changed. He remained faithful to his calling. His enemies considered him as good as dead, but his resolve remained undiminished and his courage undaunted. Even in the pit he was "as impregnable as a castle, immovable as a steel post, and as

solid as a concrete wall” (1:18, *The Message*). As near as we can tell, Jeremiah’s ministry didn’t skip a beat. He went right on proclaiming the word of the Lord. His faithfulness to the end proved his faith in Yahweh from the beginning. In fact if we take into account the book of Lamentations some of his most crucial work was yet to come. He discovered the truth, expressed by Corrie ten Boom, that no matter how deep the pit, God’s love is deeper still.

In the pit and throughout his life Jeremiah showed that death no longer had mastery over him. He testified *before* Christ to the reality that was made certain in Christ. “Now if we died with Christ,” wrote the apostle Paul, “we believe that we will also live with him” (Rom 6:8). Jeremiah lived in the same freedom that is offered to the followers of Jesus Christ. Jeremiah had crucified the old self. He had died “to the basic principles of this world” and was alive to God (Col 2:20; see Rom 6:6). Jeremiah lived the crucified life ahead time. How much more should we who follow Christ live this way? If we can say with the apostle, “I have been crucified with Christ and I no longer live, but Christ lives in me,” what can the world do to us (Gal 2:20)?

### **In Lament**

Those who accept the long standing tradition that *Lamentations* was written by Jeremiah have a keener sense of the importance of his continued ministry after the Babylonian army had occupied the land and deported the exiles to Babylon. The fall of Jerusalem in 587 B.C. was an event that needed to be grieved, interpreted, and reflected upon. Any impression that *Lamentations* is of marginal interest or is spiritually irrelevant is sadly mistaken. Jeremiah’s work on grief was not optional, but necessary in several ways. His poetry of sorrow gave voice to nearly inexpressible anguish. He put into words what people were feeling. That in itself is a feat that requires deep empathy, spiritual skill and psychological depth. His perspective on grief also articulated the reasons for this suffering. Unless we are prepared to conclude that life is meaningless, all suffering begs for explanation and interpretation. This required Jeremiah’s characteristic theological depth and insight. The prophet located the meaning of these tragic events in the larger scope of God’s salvation history. His vision of hope for the future was not pie-in-the-sky idealism, but absolutely essential to the grieving process and the meaning of the suffering. At the heart of *Lamentations* lies a solid message of hope that comes through intense grief and sorrow. Jeremiah not only helped the exiles face reality, but his testimony offers invaluable spiritual direction to those who follow Christ today.

The poetic form of *Lamentations* shows the value of attending to grief in a manner that is intentional, aesthetically careful and intellectually rigorous. Jeremiah never intended his five poems to be stylistic masterpieces, mere works of art written for literary critics, but he did choose to contain his lament within a defined structure. All five poems that make up Lamentations have the twenty-two consonants of the Hebrew alphabet in mind. The first four poems are acrostic with each three or four line stanza in the first two poems beginning with a consecutive letter of the Hebrew alphabet. The third and fourth poems are made up of single lines grouped in threes and twos respectively, with each line beginning with the same consonant of the Hebrew alphabet. The fifth poem, a prayer, has twenty-two lines but the lines do not begin with consecutive

consonants. There are a few exceptions to the stylistic structure which indicates a certain freedom within the form, but the orderly way in which this emotionally charged subject matter is treated is remarkable. For the poet, literary order paralleled theological truth. Gut-wrenching, soul-despairing grief was contained in a literary pattern that enhanced a theological perspective.

Jeremiah was an eyewitness to a national tragedy that resulted in the disastrous end to community life. We can picture Jeremiah walking the deserted streets of Jerusalem. “How deserted lies the city, once so full of people!” (Lam 1:1). Jerusalem is like a widow in mourning, a slave in chains, a humiliated outcast among the nations. Her once vibrant religious life had vanished. “The roads to Zion mourn, for no one comes to her appointed feasts. All her gateways are desolate, her priests groan, her maidens grieve, and she is in anguish” (Lam 1:4). Because of sin Jerusalem was in a state of utter humiliation and starvation. “Jerusalem has sinned greatly and so has become unclean” (Lam 1:8). Jeremiah voiced Jerusalem’s lament in the first person, female voice. The Daughter of Zion, the Virgin Daughter of Judah, weeps because of her sin and destitution. She cries out, “Look, O Lord, on my affliction, for the enemy has triumphed.... Look, O Lord, and consider, for I am despised... See, O Lord, how distressed I am! I am in torment within, and in my heart I am disturbed, for I have been most rebellious” (Lam 1:9, 11, 20).

In the second poem Jeremiah left no doubt that the suffering of Judah was an act of God’s wrath. “How the Lord has covered the Daughter of Zion with the cloud of his anger!...The Lord is like an enemy; he has swallowed up Israel...The Lord has done what he planned; he has fulfilled his word, which he decreed long ago” (Lam 2:1, 5, 17). The scope and intensity of Jerusalem’s suffering knew no limits. “Should women eat their offspring, the children they have cared for? Should priest and prophet be killed in the sanctuary of the Lord?” (Lam 2:20). Jeremiah’s well-worn phrase “terrors on every side,” was used to describe the extent of the Lord’s anger (2:22).

The third poem explores the national tragedy from a personal perspective. “I am the man who has seen affliction by the rod of his wrath. He has driven me away and made me walk in darkness rather than light; indeed, he has turned his hand against me again and again, all day long” (Lam 3:1-3). In many ways Jeremiah had vicariously experienced the judgment of Judah ahead of time, not because of the wrath of God against him personally, but because of the ways he had been persecuted, humiliated and mistreated by those who opposed the will of God. He had born the feelings of abandonment, bitterness and hardship long before the Babylonian army showed up at the gates of Jerusalem. So he knew first hand how to put the national calamity into words that expressed the intensity of suffering and agony of soul.

However, it is not only Jeremiah’s vicarious experience of suffering that comes to mind. We cannot read this third poem of lament without thinking of Jesus’ experience of suffering on the cross on our behalf. There are definite affinities with Isaiah 53 and Psalm 22 (Harrison, 223). The poem expresses the emotional and experiential side of Christ’s passion. This is what Jesus felt like when “God made him who had no sin to be sin for us, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God” (2 Cor 5:21). The connection between Jeremiah’s suffering and Judah’s experience underscores the prophet’s empathy for his people. Whereas the personal connection

between Jesus' suffering and the judgment we deserve because of our sin, underscores the vicarious sacrifice on our behalf to redeem us from our sin.

The personal and vicarious nature of the third lament gives Jeremiah's famous passage on hope special messianic significance. Jeremiah made sure to express the heart of the matter at the literal center of *Lamentations*, when he wrote,

“Because of the Lord's great love we are not consumed, for his compassions never fail. They are new every morning; great is your faithfulness. I say to myself, ‘The Lord is my portion; therefore I will wait for him.’ The Lord is good to those whose hope is in him, to the one who seeks him; it is good to wait quietly for the salvation of the Lord” (Lam 3:22-26).

Along with this message of hope in the Lord's salvation is the assurance that God “will show compassion” because of his “unfailing love” and the reminder that God “does not willingly bring affliction or grief to the children of men and women” (Lam 3:32-33; see 2 Pet 3:9). Furthermore, the only true response to God's great faithfulness and compassion is repentance. Jeremiah admonished, “Let us examine our ways and test them, and let us return to the Lord. Let us lift up our hearts and our hands to God in heaven, and say: ‘We have sinned and rebelled and you have not forgiven’” (Lam 3:40-42). Even in the throes of intense suffering and national calamity, Jeremiah prophesied the gospel of grace:

“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.’ O Lord, you took up my case; you redeemed my life.” (Lam 3:55-58).

In the fourth poem, we return once again to themes of utter desperation. Extreme suffering means that even gold and gems have lost their value. Begging children are heartlessly rejected and a violent death is better than a slow death by starvation. Compassionate mothers have been reduced to eating their own children and the prophets and priests are shunned as if they were lepers. The reality is this: “The Lord has given full vent to his wrath; he has poured out his fierce anger. He kindled a fire in Zion that consumed her foundations” (Lam 4:11). But even extreme suffering, brought on by sin and rebellion, will end and the agents of wrath will be punished. In this context of intense suffering, Jeremiah offers an important insight into the unexpected suffering of the Lord's Anointed, when he says, “The Lord's anointed, our very life breath, was caught in their traps. We thought that under his shadow we would live among the nations” (Lam 4:20). The fourth poem ends with this assurance, “O Daughter of Zion, your punishment will end; he will not prolong your exile. But, O Daughter of Edom, he will punish your sin and expose your wickedness” (Lam 4:22).

The fifth poem is a prayer from a grieving heart to the Sovereign Lord. “Remember, O Lord, what has happened to us; look, and see our disgrace” (Lam 5:1). The plight of Judah is reviewed

and the historic, as well as personal reason for judgment is confessed, “Our fathers sinned and are no more, and we bear their punishment....Woe to us, for we have sinned!” (Lam 5:7, 16). The symbolic center of community life has become a wasteland. Mount Zion “lies desolate, with jackals prowling over it” (Lam 5:18). The final word is a plea to the Sovereign Lord, who alone can remember, restore and renew the people of God. But the prayer is careful to assume nothing and it dreads the worst. “Restore us to yourself, O Lord, that we may return; renew our days as of old unless you have utterly rejected us and are angry with us beyond measure” (Lam 5:21-22).

*Lamentations* was not only meant to shape Judah’s grieving process but to provide spiritual direction for our experience of grief and suffering. By using vivid images and graphic word pictures, Jeremiah captured the experience of suffering. Instead of living in denial, he described pain with snapshots of grief and echoed the cries of anguish with tag-lines of despair. Jeremiah’s poetry of grief helped to define Judah’s suffering by offering an eyewitness account. Like a good doctor, he first observed his patient’s suffering with astute care and precision. Then his critical observation led to a diagnosis that was not only more accurate but more acceptable to the patient. The second lesson to be learned from Jeremiah is to understand grief and suffering in relationship to God. For Jeremiah this meant tracing the roots of the national tragedy to sin and describing God’s judgment against Judah’s rebellion. Jeremiah would not have been helpful to Judah in her grieving process if he had identified with her suffering but refused to talk about her sin. All suffering ought to be viewed from a God-centered perspective, because all suffering is a consequence of sin. We may have brought suffering upon ourselves because of our own sin or we may be suffering as victims of a fallen and broken world. In any case, the roots of suffering need to be seen in the light of God’s will and in the truth of God’s Word. Suffering ought to move us to God, causing us to become dependent upon his love and mercy, so that we can either repent of our evil ways or be empowered to resist evil. Either way, Jeremiah teaches us that suffering must always be defined in relationship to God.

A third way that Jeremiah helped Judah in the grieving process was to identify with the suffering personally. He was not a detached, outside observer but a fellow sufferer. His eyewitness account was not that of journalist or an expert, but of a faithful friend. All five laments underscore Jeremiah’s solidarity *with* his people. There is no sense in his laments of him feeling divorced from his people, even though he had spent a lifetime warning them of their rebellious ways and the pending consequences of their actions. In fact, his experience of unjust persecution and suffering proved invaluable in strengthening his identification with the people. Jeremiah’s empathy with the people allowed him to freely use the first person singular when describing the people’s suffering. He owned their grief as his own: “I remember my affliction and my wandering, the bitterness and the gall. I well remember them, and my soul is downcast within me” (Lam 3:19-20).

As valuable as this lesson of solidarity may be, its corollary truth supercedes Jeremiah’s example. Jeremiah identified with the people’s grief, but Jesus went way beyond that when he bore our sin and grief on the cross. This is the crucial and often overlooked truth in understanding the grieving process from God’s perspective. God’s solidarity with us in our suffering is like no

other. He who knew no sin became sin for us so that we might be saved from sin and death. Remarkably, the third poem in Lamentations can be read three ways: first as a personal description of the human condition; second, as a first person account of Jeremiah's solidarity with his people; and third, as a description of the suffering of Jesus Christ on our behalf. Any guidance on grieving or spiritual direction on suffering that ignores Christ and his Cross ignores hope and salvation.

## **In Hope**

Jeremiah is best known for his faithful perseverance and his passionate proclamation of the word of the Lord. He is well remembered for courageously enduring forty years of suffering and persecution in order to proclaim the truth. He is often called the weeping prophet and his name is synonymous with lamentations. It could be said that he lived a Gethsemane life. "Not my will but yours, O Lord," expressed the prayer of his life. But there is another dimension to his life that deserves to be recognized as well. Jeremiah lived into the future with passionate hope and confidence in the power of God to redeem and restore his people.

The Gospel according to Jeremiah gives us some of the best statements of hope and promise in all the Bible. Beyond his costly obedience and faithful endurance, Jeremiah expressed, at the center of his life and at the heart of his ministry, the gospel message of hope and healing. He was the prophet of God's gracious promise: "For I know the plans I have for you, plans to prosper you and not to harm you, plans to give you hope and a future" (Jer 29:11). He would be disappointed to be remembered only for his messages of judgment and lamentation, because he saw himself as the prophet of the Lord's new covenant: "This is the covenant I will make with the house of Israel after that time. I will put my law in their minds and write it on their hearts. I will be their God and they will be my people" (Jer 31:33). We may observe Jeremiah's life and feel sorry for him, but he didn't feel sorry for himself. Even from prison his message of hope prevailed. He was delighted to announce, "This is what the Lord says, he who made the earth, the Lord who formed it and established it—the Lord is his name: 'Call to me and I will answer you and tell you great and unsearchable things you do not know.'" The message of judgment he was called to give was always accompanied by God's redemptive purpose and promise. He delivered God's good news, "I will bring health and healing...I will heal my people and will let them enjoy abundant peace and security" (Jer 33:6).

Jeremiah's life was not just an endurance test and a life of suffering, but a parable of Jesus pointing forward to "The Lord Our Righteousness." Jeremiah delighted to say, "'The days are coming,' declares the Lord, 'when I will fulfill the gracious promise I made to the house of Israel and to the house of Judah. "In those days at that time I will make a righteous Branch sprout from David's line; he will do what is just and right in the land.'" (Jer 33:14-16). This is why Jeremiah bought the field at Anathoth from his relative, even as the Babylonian army was besieging Jerusalem. He bought it, because he believed in the future promises of God (32:1-25). In order to understand Jeremiah in his own words, it is best to see that at the center of his difficult life was an abiding sense of the Lord's great love. At the heart of his lamentations was a song of praise:

“Because of the Lord’s great love we are not consumed, for his compassions never fail. They are new every morning; great is your faithfulness” (Lam 3:22-23). What was true for Jeremiah can be true for all those who trust in Christ. **Jesus is the Lord Our Righteousness.**