

A VOICE OF LAMENTATION

HOLY WEEK DEVOTIONALS

GRACE CHURCH DOVER

The book of Lamentations gives voice to the depth of sorrow God's people felt over the destruction of their homeland. It is a raw expression of love, loss, anguish, and hope. The liturgy of Holy Week beckons us to this same range of emotional honesty. We will hear the voice of Jesus crying out for us and gain confidence that the God to whom we pray shares our tears. And as we awaken on Easter to the good news that Jesus is risen, we will remember that in our lament lies this unwavering hope:

*"The steadfast love of the Lord never ceases;
His mercies are new every morning"*
—Lamentations 3:22-23.

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*"I call on Your name, O Lord, From the depths of the pit."
—Lamentations 3:55*

PALM SUNDAY

Let us test and examine our ways, and return to the LORD!
Let us lift up our hearts and hands to God in heaven.

—*Lamentations 3:40-41*

INTRODUCTION

In the Gospels, time slows down during the final days before Jesus' death. The scenes in the street of Jerusalem and in the temple are described. Long and personal conversations between Jesus and His disciples are recorded. The authors hang onto the details of these events and words in order to cue us the readers into the unmatched significance of Jesus, His death, and His resurrection.

In our lives, time rarely slows down. Whether by necessity or habit, we often busy ourselves into a pace that is both unrealistic and unhealthy. As a result, we may feel stressed and tired. Worse, we may miss the significance of the events and words swirling around us.

For this reason, we as a church seek to slow our pace together each week on the Lord's Day, and each year during Holy Week. We do this not simply to quiet our lives, but to steady our hearts upon the Gospel of Jesus Christ crucified and raised for our salvation.

During these next six days, we are going to spend Holy Week meditating together on the ways in which Jesus Christ frees us to lift a voice of lamentation to God. Being like us, Jesus knows what it is to suffer, to long, and to cry out in complaint to our Heavenly Father. We can lift our voice of lamentation confident in His compassion. But we can also lift our voice of lamentation confident in His victory. Through Jesus' death and resurrection, our Heavenly Father has answered our lament by healing it, transforming our tearful mourning into joyful dancing.

It is our prayer that this devotional will be a helpful guide into lament and into worship for you this Holy Week. As you sojourn with this body of Christ, may it lead you anew to Jesus, our “mighty Rock within a weary land, our home within the wilderness, and our rest upon the way.”

—*Matt Fray*

Beneath the cross of Jesus, I fain would take my stand,
The shadow of a mighty Rock within a weary land;
A home within the wilderness, a rest upon the way,
From the burning of the noontide heat and the burden of the day.

“Beneath the Cross of Jesus” by Elizabeth Clephane (1872)

MONDAY

How lonely sits the city that was full of people! How like a widow has she become, she who was great among the nations! She who was a princess among the provinces has become a slave. She weeps bitterly in the night, with tears on her cheeks; among all her lovers she has none to comfort her; all her friends have dealt treacherously with her; they have become her enemies. Judah has gone into exile because of affliction and hard servitude; she dwells now among the nations, but finds no resting place; her pursuers have all overtaken her in the midst of her distress.

Lamentations 1:1-3, 16

SHE WEEPS BITTERLY IN THE NIGHT

I don't remember her name. Her face, though—leathered and weathered by countless days beneath an unforgiving Austin sun—her eyes, vacant and unwilling to take your gaze after how many nights of avoiding God knows who—her disheveled, defenseless face I do vividly recall.

She would not say how long she had been homeless. I'd seen her many times on West Campus, drifting from dumpster to dumpster. But that day we came face to face. I don't know who was more unprepared for such an encounter.

I suppose we exchanged pleasantries. Somehow in the course of our mutually-stilted banter, I brought up Jesus. As an awkward, mostly sheltered undergraduate, the only other encouragement I knew to give her were the few dollars from my pockets.

She'd heard His name before. She knew His story. But she summarized her unvarnished take on Him and what He stood for in three words: "not very cheerful." And for a few moments all she could do was repeat herself, as if finding some little consoling mantra.

I, the sophomore whose pilgrimage thus far had been comprised largely of wrestling with sophomore questions, had no answer for her underwhelmed view of the Christ. She knew enough of Him to feel some of His horror—horror she likely knew in part herself. But her addled, broken mind could not see beyond His pain, could not find any purpose to His passion. It was only a cheerless story.

And yet, despite a heart and mind cauterized by the hells of homelessness, I wonder if she grasped something better than I? Her unwittingly prophetic case to me was that before Jesus could bring cheer to the soul, He must first foster anything but. The coherence to this faith I'd been fixated to find, the joy I'd been told to embrace in my newly-born belief—there was no sense to be found in it, no felicity to be received from it unless it first elicited sorrow.

Lamentations records the struggle to find buoyancy amid the bleakness of Israel's moment. But in it we have more than a first-hand account of Jerusalem's devastation, and the jarring recognition that God was "complicit" in its fall. We have the contours of what it means both to come into a reconciled relationship with God and also to be rescued from the ongoing sin that so easily entangles. For there is no true cheer in an Easter morning apart from some inner lament that a fateful Friday was necessary.

I don't remember her name. But God does. Somehow by His mercies she is not forgotten. And it requires no more faith to believe in that cheerful thought than it does to trust that it's by the Father remembering the tears of His Son that my sins are forgotten.

—Patrick Lafferty

See, from His head, His hands, His feet,
Sorrow and love flow mingled down:
Did e'er such love and sorrow meet,
Or thorns compose so rich a crown?

"When I Survey the Wondrous Cross" by Isaac Watts (1707)

TUESDAY

The LORD determined to lay in ruins the wall of the daughter of Zion; He stretched out the measuring line; He did not restrain His hand from destroying; He caused rampart and wall to lament; they languished together. Her gates have sunk into the ground... her king and princes are among the nations; the law is no more, and her prophets find no vision from the Lae ground in silence; they have thrown dust on their heads and put on sackcloth; the young women of Jerusalem have bowed their heads to the ground. My eyes are spent with weeping; my stomach churns; my bile is poured out to the ground because of the destruction of the daughter of my people, because infants and babies faint in the streets of the city... What can I say for you, to what compare you, O daughter of Jerusalem? What can I liken to you, that I may comfort you, O virgin daughter of Zion? For your ruin is vast as the sea; who can heal you?

Lamentations 2:8-13

WHO CAN HEAL YOU?

Mary sat in her chemistry class, awaiting the results from her test the previous week. Mary had come from rural Missouri, so that one class had more people in it than the population in her entire town. She was out of her element. This was the first test of the semester.

The professor had created a chart that graphed the grades. Most were grouped in the middle, but one lonely poor soul had earned an 11, the lowest by far. The professor then handed the tests back face down, and when that was completed, he instructed the students to turn them over and take a look. On the top of Mary's test in a bright red circle was the number 11. You've been there, right?

Mary took the initiative to meet with him, and he encouraged her to join a study group and take steps that would help her. She did better on the next test and ended up passing the class with a high C. She says she learned that even though she struggled, she could succeed. In the end, she earned a biological engineering degree.

Lamentations is a book for Mary. It's a book for everyone who has lost, struggled, and failed. That means it's a book for you.

Jesus goes after the loser, the deceiver, the wanderer, the profligate, the slacker. Jesus was drawn to those who needed Him. They were drawn to Him. They knew life was filled with disappointment and failure. They'd experienced it. They were lepers, paralytics, and beggars living on the margins. They were prostitutes, the poor, and hungry. They had nothing to lose because they already had lost it all.

God goes after failures like you and me, too. He is close to those broken places in our lives and the broken people in our lives. He heals. God is a God of mercy. He sees, knows, cares, and helps. He sent His one and only Son Jesus Christ to live, suffer, die, and be raised again for you. Jesus failed so He could win. He loves to give you His success.

My friend Mary found that out, too. While she worked on her homework in that class, she sighed and said, "I can't do this." You've said the same thing, too. But Mary didn't expect what she heard next. She can't explain it, but she heard an audible voice that said, "No, you can't. But I can. We can."

Mary says that was worth the struggle. She earned a degree she never used. But she really ended up knowing and believing that no matter what, even if she failed, she wasn't a failure because she was in God's hands. He loved her.

—*Doug Serven*

Alas! And did my Savior bleed, and did my Sovereign die!
Would He devote that sacred head, for such a worm as I!
Was it for crimes that I had done He groaned upon the tree!
Amazing pity! Grace unknown! And love beyond degree!

"Alas! And Did My Savior Bleed," by Isaac Watts (1707)

WEDNESDAY

The LORD is good to those who wait for Him, to the soul who seeks Him. It is good that one should wait quietly for the salvation of the LORD. It is good for a man that he bear the yoke in his youth. Let him sit alone in silence when it is laid on him; let him put his mouth in the dust—there may yet be hope; let him give his cheek to the one who strikes, and let him be filled with insults. For the Lord will not cast off forever, but, though He cause grief, He will have compassion according to the abundance of His steadfast love; for He does not willingly afflict or grieve the children of men.

Lamentations 3:25-33

LET HIM GIVE HIS CHEEK TO THE ONE WHO STRIKES

Waiting is hard. Waiting alone is harder. Waiting alone while suffering is excruciating. But the author of Lamentations tells us this perfect storm is “good.” To us who live in a world of the instant, the social, and the comfortable, this prophet sounds false.

But as counter-intuitive as it may seem, the Bible repeatedly reminds us that it is in the places of our emptiness that God reveals the abundance of His steadfast love. As God told Paul, “My power is made perfect in weakness (2 Corinthians 2:9).” It is in our weakness, in our waiting, and yes, even in our suffering unto lament that we truly grasp our need and encounter God’s provision.

God’s provision for us comes not through wealth, but poverty; not through power, but through weakness itself. God’s steadfast love broke into our world in the

incarnation, and reached its climax in the crucifixion. Jesus Christ, God's Son, was struck, insulted, and cast off for us. More than that, He longed to be and planned to be from the beginning. Why? So that we would not forever remain waiting alone while suffering. So that we would forever remain with Him while celebrating.

In this Holy Week, give yourself time to wait alone before God. Remember and repent of your emptiness. And rejoice that in Jesus Christ an abundance of steadfast love is yours.

—*Rob Hamby*

Stricken, smitten, and afflicted, see Him dying on the tree!
'Tis the Christ by man rejected; yes, my soul, 'tis He, 'tis He!
'Tis the long-expected prophet, David's son, yet David's Lord;
By His Son God now has spoken: 'tis the true and faithful Word.

"Stricken, Smitten, and Afflicted," by Thomas Kelly (1804)

THURSDAY

The LORD gave full vent to His wrath; He poured out His hot anger, and He kindled a fire in Zion that consumed its foundations. The kings of the earth did not believe, nor any of the inhabitants of the world, that foe or enemy could enter the gates of Jerusalem. This was for the sins of her prophets and the iniquities of her priests, who shed in the midst of her the blood of the righteous... Rejoice and be glad, O daughter of Edom, you who dwell in the land of Uz; but to you also the cup shall pass; you shall become drunk and strip yourself bare. The punishment of your iniquity, O daughter of Zion, is accomplished; He will keep you in exile no longer; but your iniquity, O daughter of Edom, He will punish; He will uncover your sins.”

Lamentations 4:11-13, 21-22

THE CUP SHALL PASS

The book of Lamentations talked about “The Walking Dead” way before the hit TV series and the explosive zombie phenomenon we have today. In Lamentations, the “walking dead” are those experiencing shame and exile for their sin.

Shame is the painful feeling or experience of not being good enough, not measuring up; therefore, not worthy of love and acceptance. When sin came into the world in Genesis 3, we are told the first man and woman were “naked” and “ashamed.” “Naked” means to be exposed as unacceptable, deeply flawed, unworthy, not good enough, sinful, or as unrighteous. Every human being comes into this world naked and ashamed, it is the human condition.

Brene Brown says perfectionism has become a primary shield seeking to cover our shame: “Perfectionism is the belief that if we do things perfectly and look perfect, we can minimize or avoid the pain of shame. Perfectionism is a 20-ton shield that we lug around, thinking

it will protect us...” What is your 20-ton shield? Is it your performance and achievements in your career, being a good mother, avoiding sin, an addiction, the attention of men?

What is this passage inviting us to do with our nakedness and shame? The answer is found in Lamentations 4.22: “The punishment of your iniquity, O daughter of Zion, is accomplished; He will keep you in exile no longer...” On the eve of the ultimate Exile, Jesus says, “My Father, if it be possible, let this cup pass from Me; nevertheless, not as I will, but as You will.” God is so willing to heal our shame He was unwilling to spare His Son.

Go boldly to Jesus and His cross with your nakedness and shame, for He is both able and willing to heal you. Trying to be perfect is a 20-ton shield that cannot protect us from shame. Jesus’ death on the cross is the only shame killer on the planet, protecting us from shame.

—*Jeff Hatton*

Behold the Man upon the cross, my sin upon His shoulders,
Ashamed I hear my mocking voice call out among the scoffers,
It was my sin that held Him there, until it was accomplished,
His dying breath has brought me life, I know that it is finished.

“How Deep the Father’s Love for Us” by Stuart Townend (1995)

FRIDAY

The joy of our hearts has ceased; our dancing has been turned to mourning. The crown has fallen from our head; woe to us, for we have sinned! For this our heart has become sick, for these things our eyes have grown dim, for Mount Zion which lies desolate; jackals prowl over it. But you, O LORD, reign forever; Your throne endures to all generations. Why do You forget us forever, why do You forsake us for so many days? Restore us to Yourself, O LORD, that we may be restored! Renew our days as of old—unless You have utterly rejected us, and You remain exceedingly angry with us.

Lamentations 5:15-22

RESTORE US TO YOURSELF

The poet who authors the book of Lamentations reminds us that sorrow and suffering have a terminus. They are not endless realities. God gives space and permission for us to lament. The summative prayer in chapter five is simply this, “Restore us to Yourself.” The poet gives voice to grievance. He wants what we want: forgiveness, renewal, and God’s face to shine on him and on his community. He seeks a new future for himself and others.

True restoration though, seeks more than a new future. True restoration seeks a new past as well as a new future. We want more than our sins blotted out—we want peace with the past, a good record and not just a clean slate to start anew.

On this Good Friday, know that God has given us in Christ a new past as well as a new future. God has restored us to Himself in the cross of Christ. Yes, Jesus carried our sins, failures, crimes and has nailed them to the tree. We are united to Christ in His death and He is united to us in His life. His faith, His

righteousness, His life, His love, His past is our past. Jesus has restored us to Himself by giving us a new past as well as a new future. The love of the Father that sent Jesus into the world and the love of the Son that carried Him to the cross and the love of the Holy Spirit that is poured out upon all who look to Jesus is a gift of Good Friday. For God so loved the world that He has given us His Son, and in that gift He has restored us to Himself.

On Good Friday, Jesus died to give us a new past as well as a new future. Lord, restore us to Yourself. Amen.

—*Martin Ban*

Oh, to see my name written in the wounds,
For through Your suffering I am free.
Death is crushed to death, life is mine to live,
Won through Your selfless love.
This, the pow'r of the cross: Son of God—slain for us.
What a love! What a cost! We stand forgiven at the cross.
“The Power of the Cross” by Keith Getty and Stuart Townend (2005)

SATURDAY

Remember my affliction and my wanderings, the wormwood and the gall! My soul continually remembers it and is bowed down within me. But this I call to mind, and therefore I have hope: The steadfast love of the LORD never ceases; His mercies never come to an end; they are new every morning; great is Your faithfulness. “The LORD is my portion,” says my soul, “therefore I will hope in Him.”

Lamentations 3:19-24

THEREFORE, I HAVE HOPE

Good stories are enjoyable. Great stories are enjoyable even when repeated. But when you read, hear, or watch a great story unfold multiple times, your emotional engagement with the story changes. Your emotions do not diminish per se; they simply change.

For example, consider a time when you’ve introduced a great story to someone else and had the privilege of being with them when they first encountered it. Emotionally, you move through the narrative with delightful satisfaction because you are familiar with each climactic moment. The other person, however, waits for the story to unfold with curious expectation, unsure of what will happen that makes the story great.

The story of Holy Week is a great story. Yet for those who know the story well, we may not be sure what our emotions should be on the Saturday of Holy Week. For all the days previous, sorrow seemed appropriate. But climax of the resurrection hasn’t come yet, so

joy seems out of place. It's both impossible and illogical to try feeling the confusion and fear that Jesus' disciples first felt; they had not encountered this great story before, and we have. Knowing the climax of Holy Week as we do, is there an emotion or attitude suitable for us today?

There is a suitable emotion, and the author of Lamentations cites it twice in this passage: hope. As he uses it, the author does not treat hope as an emotion related to the unknown – what might be – but as an emotion related to the known – what will be. His hope is cultivated by calling to mind what he already knows to be true: the steadfast love of the LORD never ceases for He is our portion.

Today, we have hope because we know the blood of Jesus Christ was not shed in vain. Today, we have hope because we know the miraculous climax of the great story of Holy Week. Today, we have hope because we know that God's steadfast love for us will never cease for He is alive forevermore.

Consider spending additional time in prayer today, perhaps even fasting while praying for a portion of the day. But do so in hope, for God has answered our lament with the loud shout of His risen Son.

—*Matt Fray*

This is all my hope and peace: nothing but the blood of Jesus;
This is all my righteousness: nothing but the blood of Jesus.
O precious is the flow that makes me white as snow;
No other fount I know, nothing but the blood of Jesus.

"Nothing But the Blood" by Robert Lowry (1876)



"THE STEADFAST LOVE OF THE LORD
NEVER CEASES;
HIS MERCIES ARE NEW
EVERY MORNING."
—LAMENTATIONS 3:22-23