

Lamentations 5 "When It's Time to Stop Grieving" **

Main Idea: According to Lamentations 5, when the tragedy is over and yet the pain remains, three responses are necessary.

I. When the tragedy is over and the pain remains, we need to look up (1).

- A. Our tendency is to become absorbed in our pain.
- B. Our need is to keep talking to the Lord.

II. When the tragedy is over and the pain remains, we need to face up (2-18).

- A. There were national losses (2).
- B. There were family losses (3).
- C. There were economic losses (4-6).
- D. There were spiritual losses (7).
- E. There were security losses (8-9).
- F. There were physical losses (10).
- G. There were societal losses (11-14).
- H. There were personal losses (15-18).

- 1. When the joy is gone, admit it.
- 2. When the joy is gone, admit why it's gone.
- 3. When the joy is gone, put your trust in the only one who can restore it.

III. When the tragedy is over and the pain remains, we need to move ahead on our knees (19-22).

- A. We do that by bringing the Lord our praise (19).
- B. We do that by bringing the Lord our questions (20).
- C. We do that by bringing the Lord our needs (21-22).
 - 1. Our biggest need isn't for things.
 - 2. Our biggest need is to be restored to the Lord.

Response: What have we learned from the book of Lamentations?

- 1. We have seen the wrath of God.
- 2. We have seen the mercy of God.
- 3. We have seen why we desperately need a Savior.

"There's a time for everything, and a season for every activity under heaven," says Ecclesiastes 3:1-4, "a time to be born and a time to die...a time to weep and a time to laugh, a time to mourn and a time to dance."

Some of us, in this happy-hungry age, need to learn how to mourn. There is a time to mourn and weep and grieve, and we've been learning how to do that, how to mourn in a God-honoring way, throughout our series in Lamentations. But there's also a time to *stop mourning*. And the question is, *how do you do that?* How do you move on with life after you've experienced a significant loss?

Quite frankly, some people don't. They shut down and throw in the towel. Others adopt a victim mindset and begin living as though "the world owes me." Still others turn to a bottle or a pill or a screen to create their own little fantasy world that's free of pain, sort of.

In reality, if it's hard to grieve in a God-pleasing way, it's often harder to stop grieving. For many, while the loss itself was hard, life after the loss becomes even harder.

Thankfully, our gracious God has something very practical to say to us about this vital subject as well, and this too in the book of Lamentations. A godly prophet (I think it was Jeremiah) wrote this oft-neglected book nearly six centuries before Christ. His beloved nation of Judah was in shambles, the temple burned to the ground, with his fellow citizens either dead or in chains and heading into captivity in Babylon.

People who've lost everything they've ever loved don't need pat answers. But they desperately need a hope-giving word from God, and in Judah's case Jeremiah was the instrument through which God delivered that word.

It came in the form of five lamentations, one per chapter for five chapters. We've mentioned before that in the Hebrew text, Jeremiah used a tool called an acrostic to deliver his message of hope. An acrostic is when you use the letters of the alphabet to organize a message. For example, **A**ll have sinned. **B**elieve on the Lord Jesus Christ. **C**onfess His worthy name and you will be **D**elivered from your sins. **A...B...C...D...** That's an acrostic.

In Lamentations we find four acrostic poems and one that mimics an acrostic. Chapters 1 & 2 have twenty-two verses (with each verse beginning with the twenty-two successive letters of the Hebrew alphabet) with three lines of poetry per letter. Chapter 3 is a triple acrostic with sixty-six verses. Chapter 4 has twenty-two verses, but only has two lines per letter. In chapter 5 there is no acrostic, yet it too has twenty-two verses, but each verse is comprised of only one line, "a signal that things are winding down in a *decrescendo*," says Kaiser.^[1]

By the way, if the acrostic is gone in Lamentations 5, how do we know that it's poetry? As Kaiser explains, the unfailing mark of Hebrew poetry is Hebrew parallelism. That certainly continues. Also, the fifth lament is full of rhymes and assonance (words sounding alike), for out of 134 Hebrew words in this chapter, 65 (that's almost half) end in either the *-u* or *-m* sound.^[2]

There's a life-changing message in Lamentations 5, and that's not an exaggeration. According to Lamentations 5, when the tragedy is over and yet the pain remains, three responses are necessary. We need to *look up*, *face up*, and then *move ahead on our knees*.

I. When the tragedy is over and the pain remains, we need to look up (1).

Verse 1 begins, "Remember, O LORD, what has happened to us; look, and see our disgrace." What stands out immediately is that the fifth chapter of Lamentations is not only poetry but a *prayer*, a conversation with God.^[3] Jeremiah is writing down and leading his people in this prayer (note the first person plural pronouns "we" and "our" and "us" throughout).

When you compare the final chapter to the previous four, you'll notice a progression.^[4] In chapter one, Jeremiah focused on the city of Jerusalem, in chapter two on the temple, in chapter three he focused on his own sufferings as a representative sufferer. In chapter four he lamented the afflictions that fell on the whole population. And now in chapter five he leads his people in a closing prayer. He tells them, "Now that the tragedy is over and the pain remains, we need to *look up*."

Don't miss the profound significance of this simple call to prayer. In reality, when tragedy strikes...

A. Our tendency is to become absorbed in our pain. We tend to go *inward*, not upward, and certainly not outward. But Jeremiah makes it clear that...

B. Our need is to keep talking to the Lord. And not generically either. Notice how this prayer begins. He asks the Lord to do three things: *remember*, O LORD, *look*, and *see*. As H. L. Ellison explains, "Remembrance in the Bible is never a mere recalling. It always involves resultant action; so this is a call to God to act."^[5]

The fact is, we are dependent creatures. Our Creator made us, and He made us to need Him. That's always the case, but we feel it most once we've lost something—a loved one, a job, our health, whatever. Some people respond to their losses by turning *away* from the Lord. We mustn't do that, says Jeremiah. Now that the tragedy is over, we must do what I've been urging you to do throughout. We need to *look up*.

You say, "Okay, look up and do what?" What Jeremiah did next...

II. When the tragedy is over and the pain remains, we need to face up (2-18).

Specifically, we need to face up to the reality of our losses, again not by becoming introspective, but by turning them over to the Lord one by one. That's what Jeremiah does for his people in verses 2-18. He lists their losses so as to give them handles with which to turn them over to the Lord. I count at least twenty-five painful, post-trauma realities in the text. I've grouped them into eight categories.

A. There were national losses (2). "Our inheritance has been turned over to aliens, our homes to foreigners."

It's almost unthinkable to read this section and ponder just how broken and harsh living conditions were for Jeremiah and his Jewish countrymen. But Jeremiah puts it into words, at times with ugly, graphic detail. He states first the *facts*, and then the *feelings* that those facts produced inside of him and his people.

"It's gone!" he prays. "Our inheritance is gone! But not just gone. It's now in the hands of godless foreigners. The days of our national pride under kings David, Solomon, Hezekiah, and others is long gone." That's not pessimism. That's reality. The tragedy is over, but the national losses remain.

B. There were family losses (3). "We have become orphans and fatherless, our mothers like widows."

Again, in his fifth lament Jeremiah is describing, not the Babylonian siege, but what happened after the siege was over. The family losses were incredible. Teenagers like Daniel and his three friends were shipped away to far off Babylon without their parents. Mothers had to relearn how to cook for they weren't feeding families anymore, just themselves.

C. There were economic losses (4-6). "We must buy the water we drink; our wood can be had only at a price. Those who pursue us are at our heels; we are weary and find no rest. We submitted to Egypt and Assyria to get enough bread."

If you had told me thirty years ago that we'd be paying money for bottles of water, I wouldn't have believed you. Our family had a well when I was growing up. Water was free. That's no longer the case.

But it was for different reasons that the Jews were buying their water, and wood, and bread. They were basically slaves at the mercy of powerful foreigners. The good life was gone. The economic losses were great and it took everything they had just to eek out a living.

D. There were spiritual losses (7). "Our fathers sinned and are no more, and we bear their punishment." We're reaping the consequences of others' sinful choices, says Jeremiah. That's why this disaster happened. But it's not just the fathers that sinned. As Jeremiah will point out in verse 16, "We have sinned." They sinned. We sinned. The problem is *sin*. Oh, what a terrible thing sin is. And wherever there is unrepentant sin, there are spiritual consequences that spread like gangrene.

E. There were security losses (8-9). "Slaves rule over us, and there is none to free us from their hands. We get our bread at the risk of our lives because of the sword in the desert."

Some of you remember the old days, when we didn't need to lock out doors at night. Those days are long gone for us. They surely were for Jeremiah and his people, for while the Babylonian army was gone, the fear for one's life remained with bandits roaming the land.

F. There were physical losses (10). "Our skin is hot as an oven, feverish from hunger." Prolonged stress takes a toll on your health, so say the professionals. It is with us, says Jeremiah.

G. There were societal losses (11-14). "Women have been ravished in Zion, and virgins in the towns of Judah. Princes have been hung up by their hands; elders are shown no respect. Young men toil at the millstones; boys stagger under loads of wood. The elders are gone from the city gate; the young men have stopped their music."

We're not talking about small-scale suffering. We're talking about a complete upheaval of all aspects of Jewish life. The government had collapsed. Families had been torn apart by death and deportation. National security was a joke. The economy wasn't depressed, it was non-existent.

And those were just the obvious results. Respect was gone, too, respect for women and respect for the elders. Also gone was the joy of childhood, with kids doing the work of adults and music out of the question. Not surprisingly...

H. There were personal losses (15-18). "Joy is gone from our hearts; our dancing has turned to mourning. The crown has fallen from our head. Woe to us, for we have sinned! Because of this our hearts are faint, because of these things our eyes grow dim for Mount Zion, which lies desolate, with jackals prowling over it."

You say, "This is so depressing to read!" Yes, but necessary. Jeremiah has a loving agenda. He's doing what he's doing because he loves the Lord and loves his people. He's helping them to *face up*, and we can learn from him. If we're ever in a situation where our joy is gone, we need to follow his counsel and do three things.

1. *When the joy is gone, admit it.* Admit it to ourselves, but more importantly, to the Lord.
2. *When the joy is gone, admit why it's gone.* Why is our joy gone?

By the way, there's no simplistic answer to that question. Unfortunately, like Job's friends, we're prone to think that if suffering exists, then it's evidence that there's sin in the person's life. We would do well to pay attention to Lamentations. Yes, suffering can be connected to sin, as in Judah's case, but not always. Remember, Jeremiah suffered greatly too, but his suffering wasn't due to his sin.

Old Testament scholar Walter Kaiser points out that there are at least *eight* basic kinds of suffering in the Old Testament. I'll mention them and if you'd like to go deeper I recommend his commentary on

Lamentations, *A Biblical Approach to Suffering.*

First, there is *retributive suffering*. If a person lives in disobedience to his Creator, sooner or later he will experience the painful consequences of his sinful choices. He will bring suffering upon himself.

Related to retributive suffering is *educational or disciplinary suffering*. As Proverbs 3:11-12 indicate, the Lord disciplines those He loves. That is, He brings pain and hardship into our lives to teach us and mature us.

Third, there is *vicarious suffering*. We read about the Suffering Servant in Isaiah 42-53. He will suffer greatly, said Isaiah, but not for his own sins. He will suffer in the place of others to pay for their sins.

Then there's *empathetic suffering*. That's because when a person suffers, so do many of the people that the sufferer knows and loves. In this sense, God Himself suffers. His compassion and even remorse is aroused because of the plight of His creatures (Isa. 63:7).

Fifthly, there's *doxological suffering*. This occurs when God chooses to take one of His own children through a painful experience in order to fulfill His bigger redemptive plan for His glory. A prime example is Joseph. Remember his testimony? "You meant it for evil, but God meant it for good...the saving of many lives (Gen. 50:20)."

A sixth type is *evidential or testimonial suffering*. Think of Job. God allowed Job to suffer in order to demonstrate His worth and sufficiency.

Then there's *revelational suffering*. That's suffering that God brings into our lives to help us go deeper in our knowledge of Him and His attributes. Hosea is a great example. Watching his own wife betray him and turn to prostitution enabled him to know firsthand the pain that God feels when His beloved people forsake Him in pursuit of worldly lusts.

And then, eighth, there's *eschatological or apocalyptic suffering*. Isaiah, Ezekiel, Daniel, and many of the other prophets talk about how God will take His people through the furnace of suffering at the end of the age, just prior to the coming of His kingdom. As Kaiser explains, "The intense days of Israel's suffering will climax in a new exodus under a new Moses with a new David in a new Jerusalem with a new heaven and a new earth."^[7]

Now back to Jeremiah's counsel. If your joy is gone, admit it. Then admit why it's gone. And why did Jeremiah say it was gone? "Woe to us, for we have sinned!" Again, that's not the only reason we suffer, but it was for Judah.

3. *When the joy is gone, put your trust in the only one who can restore it.* The truth is, once we've sinned we can't rewind the clock and undo the deed. But we can confess it to the Lord, and we must. You say, "Why would we do that?" Because the Lord has made a way for sinners to be restored to Himself. Six centuries after Jerusalem fell, God sent His own beloved Son to a cross, and on that cross His Son took the penalty of sin for every person who will repent and believe in Him. It's that simple. If we confess our sins, He is faithful and just to forgive us our sins (1 John 1:9). O friend, have you done that? Have you confessed your sins to God and trusted in the finished work of His Son? If not, I invite you to do so right now.

You say, "If I do will God put my life back together again?" It depends what you mean by "put your life back together." Will He snap His fingers and undo the consequences of your sinful choices? Not necessarily, at least not in this life. Yes, He will give you new life, that's for sure, but let's define what that life will look like. That brings us to our third necessary response...

III. When the tragedy is over and the pain remains, we need to move ahead on our knees (19-22).

What does it mean to *move ahead on our knees*? How do we do it? We do it by bringing three things

to the Lord on a daily basis.

A. We do that by bringing the Lord our praise (19). “You, O LORD, reign forever; your throne endures from generation to generation.”

Our world may be changing all around us, but God remains the same. It may seem to us as if everything is spinning out of control, yet we can be sure (and we must affirm) that the Lord God Almighty remains in control.

John Calvin said it well, “When we fix our eyes on present things, we must necessarily vacillate, as there is nothing permanent in the world; and when adversities bring a cloud over our eyes, then faith in a manner vanishes, at least we are troubled and stand amazed. Now the remedy is, to raise our eyes to God, for however confounded things may be in the world, yet He remains always the same. His truth may indeed be hidden from us, yet it remains in Him. In short, were the world to change and perish a hundred times, nothing could ever affect the immutability (unchangeableness) of God.”^[8]

Do you believe that? Do you *really* believe that God is sovereign? A lot of people say yes, but with a little qualifier. “Oh yes, God is sovereign...over most things, but what about my blunders? You know, I sinned and that’s the reason I’m in this mess right now. I’m doomed and there’s no way out. God’s sovereignty is limited by my sins.” We may not say it quite so bluntly, but we think it.

For instance, “I made a foolish choice when I... (fill in the blank) and now I’m doomed for misery. There’s no sense turning to God. He can’t (or won’t) do anything...”

Answer this. Why were Jeremiah’s people suffering? It was because of THEIR SINS, right? Yet even then there was hope, for God still reigns even when His people sin. And when His people repent and return to Him, He can bring beauty out of their ashes.

So bring Him your praise this morning, and start by praising Him for His sovereign control. There’s something else involved in moving ahead on our knees...

B. We do that by bringing the Lord our questions (20). “Why do you always forget us? Why do you forsake us so long?”

There are some things you just can’t learn from a book. That’s why we call it the *school of hard knocks*. And there are some hard questions that we find ourselves asking in that school. So what about those questions? What should we do with them? Do what Jeremiah did. Bring them to the Lord.

Asking God *why* is not always bad, and sometimes it’s necessary. Just make sure it’s the why of a submissive child. Moving ahead on our knees means we bring the Lord our praise, yes, but also our questions. And then...

C. We do that by bringing the Lord our needs (21-22). “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.”

What a bold conclusion to this book! “Restore us to yourself, O Lord.” That prayer request reminds us that...

1. *Our biggest need isn’t for things.* Sure, it would be nice to get our house back, our security back, even our family back. But no, that’s not what we need *most*.

2. *Our biggest need is to be restored to the Lord.* And even that is something that He must give from start to finish.

Please notice that, according to Jeremiah, true repentance is something that God Himself must grant. Sinful man cannot initiate repentance towards God, nor is it even his desire. *Restore us to yourself*, says

Jeremiah, *that we may return*. In other words, if you don't restore us, Lord, then we won't return to You.^[9]

For those non-Christians with us this morning, we're so glad you've come. We'd love for you to come to know the Christ we know and love. And may I suggest that this is a good prayer for you to pray. Not, "I want You in my life, but I've got to clean up some things first." But rather, "Restore us to yourself, O LORD, that we may return."

It's an amazing thought to ponder. The Living God specializes in doing just that, in restoring broken things. That's good to know since we entered the world broken in sin and even as redeemed people continue to experience the pain of brokenness at times. Yet by His grace and through His Son, the Almighty God will restore us to Himself if we will humble ourselves and come to Him.

Again, I ask, "Will you?" Hear the message of the final chapter of the book of Lamentations. The Lord doesn't ask you to patch up your life first. He invites you and me to bring our brokenness to Him and place ourselves totally in His trust. So if you're hurting today, if you're *broken*, be encouraged, for there is One who restores broken things!

You say, "But that's not the end of the prayer." No, it's not. The book actually ends on a negative note, "Renew our days as of old unless you have utterly rejected us and are angry with us beyond measure."

Did you realize that for centuries the Jews have read Lamentations on Tisha b'Av? That's an annual fast set aside on the seventh day of the seventh month (2 Kings 25:8-9) to remember the destruction of the temple. And did you realize that in the synagogue readings the Jews will often repeat verse 21 again after reading verse 22 so the reading doesn't end on such a dismal note.^[10]

But wait. If the book ends on a negative note, then it does so for good reason—after all, this is God-breathed Scripture. What's the reason? I'm not sure, but it seems to me that Jeremiah is showing us in realistic terms how to end our grieving. When the tragedy is over and the pain remains, we move ahead, not demanding that God give us what we want out of life, but what He deems best, whatever that is. We look up. We face up. And we move ahead *on our knees*.

As you may recall, I began our Lamentations series with the spotlight on Haiti. I'd like to conclude our final message by once again turning our thoughts to this suffering country. Listen to a true story posted by Al Mohler just last week:

Arno was inseparable from Mr. Penguin. The little Haitian boy was almost three years old, and the plush penguin with the word "love" inscribed upon it was his most treasured object. The orphan and his penguin were always seen together.

The boy had been given the penguin just after his birth. A Dutch couple was in the process of adopting him almost from the start of his life -- they had been matched to him when he was only two months old. The penguin represented a promise.

The process of adoption took two years -- the length of time considered adequate to determine that no living relatives might claim him. According to official estimates, there were over 50,000 parentless orphans in Haiti before the earthquake came and orphaned many thousands more.

Richard and Rowena Pet were the young Dutch couple who wanted so badly to be Arno's mother and father. They had struggled with infertility for years before deciding to adopt. As they awaited the adoption of Arno, Rowena became pregnant. Last August she gave birth to Jim, who was left in the care of relatives as Richard and Rowena flew to Haiti in January to claim Arno and complete the adoption process.

The story of Arno's adoption is movingly told by reporter David Charter of *The Times* [London].^[11] As he reported, "Arno was shy at first but within 30 minutes of meeting his adoptive parents he reached for Rowena's hand and took the Dutch couple on a tour of the orphanage in Port-au-Prince where he had

spent most of his short life. He began to call them Mummy and Daddy."

Richard had shared their joy with a friend in an e-mail: "We got to the orphanage feeling a bit strange. We went around a corner and immediately saw Arno walking towards us. He was OK until he was about half a meter away, but then he panicked. The woman from the orphanage helped out and half an hour later he took Rowena's hand for the first time. I'm sorry but I can't help crying at the moment as I type this. Arno has been showing us everything in the orphanage. He showed us an old car they have for the children to play on. He was holding a birthday card we sent for his second birthday."

According to Charter, adoptive parents often stay at the Hotel Villa Therese in the Pétionville district of Port-au-Prince. That is where Richard and Rowena took Arno. That is where they were when the earthquake came. And that is where they died together.

When I first read that story, I couldn't believe the ending. That's not the way stories like that are supposed to end. A couple wants a child to love, an orphan needs a home, that's a perfect beginning for a wonderful story, right? But having the couple and child meet and then, just hours later, perish in an earthquake? That's not a story-book ending. Or is it?

For starters, that's the way more than a few stories end in the real world. They did for a lot of people in Judah in the sixth century B.C. Maybe that's how you feel about your own story, for in the real world, people suffer and there's not always a "happily ever after" ending.

But then it struck me, God's own story has a tragic ending, too, or so it seemed. *For God so loved the world that He gave His only Son...*and the world killed His Son. But of course, that wasn't the final chapter of God's story. Listen again to Al Mohler, as he reflects on the outcome of God's story:

Adoption is perhaps the most powerful depiction of the Gospel found in the Bible. We are all orphans, born under the curse of sin. By the sheer grace and mercy of God, those who come to faith in the Lord Jesus Christ are adopted as sons. Redeemed sinners are adopted as sons "through Jesus Christ to Himself, according to the kind intention of His will, to the praise and glory of His grace, which He freely bestowed on us in the Beloved." [Ephesians 1:5-6]

Arno Pet began life as an orphan, but he ended life as a son. He was abandoned at his birth, but he died in the arms of his parents. He did not die as Arno, he died as Arno Pet.

In the rubble of the Hotel Villa Therese the film crew found the bodies of Richard and Rowena and Arno Pet. In that same rubble, we find a picture of the Gospel of Christ. He who has eyes to see, let him see. [\[12\]](#)

It's amazing what we can learn about God even in tragedy, if we have eyes to see. So as we finish our series in Lamentations, just what have we learned?

Response: What have we learned from the book of Lamentations?

The Lord has used this book to bring three realities into clarity for us.

1. *We have seen the wrath of God.* God hates sin, my friend, all of it. And He will deal with it, in His time and in His just way. He is a God of wrath.

2. *We have seen the mercy of God.* Even while judging His wayward people, He guided Jeremiah to write this book for their care. Oh what mercy! Because of the Lord's great *chesed* we are not consumed!

3. *We have seen why we desperately need a Savior.* Beloved, we are sinners, just like the people in Jeremiah's day. Like them, we too have gone our own way and deserve the just punishment of God's wrath. We need a Savior! And praise be to God, we have one!

****Note:** This is an unedited manuscript of a message preached at Wheelersburg Baptist Church. It is provided to prompt your continued reflection on the practical truths of the Word of God.

[1] Kaiser, p. 109.

[2] Kaiser, p. 110.

[3] Kaiser says it belongs to a prayer genre akin to such Psalms as 44, 60, 74, 79, 80, 83, and 89 (p. 110).

[4] Observation by Walter Kaiser, p. 99.

[5] H. L. Ellison, p. 730.

[6] See his final chapter, pp. 121ff.

[7] Kaiser, p. 129.

[8] Calvin, in Kaiser, p. 112.

[9] H. L. Ellison observes, "This is a foreshadowing of the NT doctrine of regeneration. Unfortunately, it was grasped by few at the time. Normative Judaism lays very great stress on the importance of repentance but has always regarded it as something essentially within man's control." H. L. Ellison, pp. 732-3.

[10] See R. K. Harrison, *Jeremiah and Lamentations*, p. 240, and H. L. Ellison, p. 733.

[11] http://women.timesonline.co.uk/tol/life_and_style/women/families/article7012471.ece

[12] <http://www.albertmohler.com/2010/02/03/adopted-for-life-and-death/>