

40 DAILY REFLECTIONS
FROM THE **BOOK OF LAMENTATIONS**

Finding
Mercy
on the
Way of
Sorrow

AN EASTER DEVOTIONAL

ROBIN HAM

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*For Mum & Dad – thank you for everything.
Lam. 5:19*

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Introduction to Lamentations

‘Life is pain, your highness. Anyone who says differently is selling something.’

Those honest words are spoken by the mysterious character Dread Pirate Roberts to Princess Buttercup in William Goldman’s hilarious cult film (and book!), *The Princess Bride*. (If you’ve not seen it, please borrow my copy!)

In the scene, Buttercup is taken aback by the bluntness of the words, but when you give them a few seconds of thought, they are refreshing words too. Suffering is *inescapable*. It’s as certain as, well, death and taxes (although I guess they’re hardly unrelated!). We’re all sinners in a suffering world and we’re all sufferers in a sinful world. Anyone – or, we might add, any philosophy, religion or *even* portrayal of Christianity – that says differently is probably ‘selling something’, or at least is guilty of misrepresenting the reality of life.

And that’s why we need Lamentations.

THREE FACTORS WHY LAMENTATIONS IS UNFAMILIAR GROUND

In my experience, Lamentations is not a section of the Bible that many Christians know especially well. A few years ago, there was a viral online quiz going round where you had to work out whether each quote was a verse from Lamentations or a Taylor Swift lyric. Admittedly, the Bible verses were from *The Message* paraphrase, but

I think the fact that so many people struggled shows it's hardly a book in which the Western church has been immersed. (It's either that or Taylor's less popular than she used to be!)

But, to be fair, there are probably a few factors explaining Lamentations' unfamiliarity to us.

1. Lamentations is poetry

Instinctively many of us are drawn to the logic or application of New Testament epistles, or to our beloved Old Testament narratives, or even to the familiarity of the Gospels. But poetry often feels like a 'gear change'. Ever tried to *analyse* a poem? As any good English teacher will say, such detailed study is not really the point. Perhaps we steer clear because, tragically, the church hasn't been great at demonstrating the value of the poetic books of the Bible.

2. Lamentations connects us to an unfamiliar moment in Bible history

We find ourselves in the sixth century BC, when the city of Jerusalem has been laid to waste by a neighbouring nation, the Babylonians. It's hardly an obvious place to preach from, especially if all we want is 'Seven Steps to a Successful Year with Jesus'. How do we relate to this? Maybe we think we or others will struggle to connect, and so we park Lamentations to one side – and stick to something that seems more obvious.

3. Lamentations is just grim

There's no two ways about it. Lamentations is heavy and sombre and unrelenting. Don't people need something a bit more upbeat? A bit easier on the ear? After all, no one likes to end up sitting next to the moaner at the party. Isn't it the same with Lamentations?

But what if this neglect of Lamentations was all to our detriment? What if we were missing out on something that was actually good for our spiritual health? And not just missing out individually, but missing out as the twenty-first-century Western church at large?

THREE REASONS WHY LAMENTATIONS IS A PRECIOUS PLACE TO DWELL THIS LENT

So let me give you three reasons to stick with Lamentations this Lent...

1. Lamentations is a vital spiritual resource to help us honestly process suffering

With Lamentations, the clue is in the name! But how often does the language of lament feature in our churches? My sense is not so much, which is probably a bit odd if suffering is unavoidable. More than that, if we perpetuate a form of Christianity that is uncomfortable with talking about suffering, we will end up with churches where people either feel they've got to hide their pain or where hurting people simply limp away.

Lamentations is a healthy corrective. It gives us words for confession, exasperation, doubt, shame, longing, pain and injustice. Even the style of the writing evokes sorrow. To use the technical words, its rhythmic metre is a dirge. Even if you heard the original Hebrew and knew nothing of what it meant, you'd still pick up the sadness in the style.

For this reason, and perhaps in contrast to contemporary Christianity, Lamentations has been a much-prized book throughout Jewish history. Every year on the ninth day of the Hebrew month, *Av*, it is read aloud, allowing people to remember Jerusalem's destruction in 587 BC, but also to acknowledge, process and respond to all suffering. One writer, Leslie C. Allen, called his book on Lamentations *Liturgy of Grief*.¹ Or, as Mark Vroegop puts it, Lamentations 'shows us how to pray when the dark clouds of suffering roll in.'²

2. Lamentations brings us up close and personal with the seriousness of human sin

As we get our bearings in Lamentations, we'll discover the book does not hold back about all that is wrong with the world. Lamentations gives us a wide-angle view on the impact of human rebellion and the reality of sin. This brings with it both razor-sharp, personal challenge, but also huge, explanatory power. Initially, Lamentations might seem to describe a foreign landscape, and yet as we look closer, we'll see a landscape we recognise. We may not be living in Jerusalem in 587 BC, but we're all living amidst the devastating effects of sin and with the shadows of God's coming judgment cast over us.

Yes, there will be *particular* aspects to the sin and suffering in Lamentations that we'll need to consider carefully. We'll need to think about how we apply this portion of God's word to ourselves as those living in between Jesus' first and second appearances. We'll also need to think about what difference it makes to read Lamentations as Christians who have been forgiven. But there's no getting round the way Lamentations will hold up a mirror to our hearts and show us sin is a big deal.

3. Lamentations teaches a suffering church how to find authentic hope

The most famous verses in Lamentations are right at the physical centre of the book:

*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.*

(3:22–23)

Maybe you recognise them, or can see the way those verses have inspired hymns and worship songs?

They are wonderful verses, but they're so much more than just cheery soundbites that look good on an Instagram picture. These come right in the middle of five profoundly moving poems of lament.

In fact, though it's not obvious in our English translations, chapters one to four all follow an ordered 'acrostic' pattern in the original Hebrew. This means the first line of each poem begins with the first letter of the Hebrew alphabet, the second line begins with the second letter, and so on – all the way from the Hebrew equivalent of 'A' to 'Z'.

Why does that matter? Because in the chaos of suffering, grief and loss, God does not shut us down with trite one-liners. Instead he walks with us along a tenderly-crafted path that helps us process the depths of our sorrow.

As we hike through Lamentations' dark valleys, rather than offering us merely 'feel-good Christianity' or a triumphalist faith that seems disconnected with real life, we instead discover something richer, sweeter and more substantial: the covenant mercy of God.

THE AUTHOR OF LAMENTATIONS

Historically, it's been common to assume the writer was the prophet Jeremiah. He certainly lived at the same time as the destruction of Jerusalem. For lots of other reasons, that analysis makes sense. But there are also some good reasons why it may not have been Jeremiah.

To be honest, nothing hangs on the author's identity. Whoever he was, he's bared his soul with five heart-wrenching laments, and yet they're also spectacularly crafted, as we'll hopefully see. For that reason, we'll just call him 'the poet'!

Approaching the Season of Lent

WHAT'S THE DEAL WITH LENT?

For some of you, even the idea of a season of 'Lent' might not be particularly familiar. You certainly won't find the word 'lent' in the Bible – so marking Lent can't be obligatory for Christians! Rather, I'd place Lent in the category of 'human traditions that God might choose to graciously use for our growth'! For example, we know that from as early as the fourth century, Christians had crafted a special annual calendar to journey through the key events in the life of Jesus. And just like Christmas and Easter, Lent was part of that calendar, setting aside forty days in the run up to Jesus' death and resurrection.

Historically, the emphasis at Lent has been on developing a rhythm of confessing our sin, confronting our mortality and hungering for God's salvation in Jesus Christ. Every Lent is a reminder that we need a Saviour. The actual word simply comes from 'lengthen', a reference to the hours of daylight getting longer again in springtime. As life prepares to burst out of the natural world around us, so we prepare our hearts for the good news of Jesus' death and resurrection. By the way, the forty days (excluding Sundays) of Lent picks up on the rich biblical associations with that number: forty days of waiting for the

flood to end in Genesis; forty years wandering in the wilderness for the nation of Israel; forty days that Jesus was tempted in the desert.

As for my choice of Lamentations in Lent, I was encouraged to discover there's a long tradition of Christians dwelling in Lamentations during Lent. Going back as far as the eighth century, it would be read and sung particularly during Holy Week. But actually that shouldn't be a surprise! With its focus on humility, contrition and dependence, Lamentations is the perfect soundtrack to Lent.

USING THIS DEVOTIONAL

If you journeyed through the book of Ruth in my Advent devotional, *Finding Hope Under Bethlehem Skies*, then you'll recognise the format here. There are forty daily, written reflections, one for every day in Lent – you can have a breather with your church family on Sundays!

For each day, you'll be encouraged to read a few verses from Lamentations and then a written reflection. Next are little suggestions or questions for further consideration and prayer. You might like to commit to reading the reflections with a friend or discipleship group and then discussing these closing questions together.

Each day's reflection then ends with a suggested song or version of a hymn by way of a response. These can easily be found online, but we've compiled a Spotify playlist that includes them all – just search for 'Finding Mercy' on the Spotify app.

Whether or not you've come across Lent before, I pray that by God's Spirit we all may come more fully alive to the depth of our need, but also to the overwhelming provision of God's grace in Jesus Christ.

*Loving Father,
In this season of lengthening days,
increase our awareness of your mercy.
How wide and deep and long it is!*

*You call us to turn from the long shadows
of our sin and lean upon Jesus Christ.*

*Guard me from denying my brokenness and mortality,
and astonish me afresh that I am beloved.*

*By your Spirit, fill me with a hunger for you, more than anything in
this world.*

*Rather than beating ourselves up, instead lift Christ up in our hearts.
Help us to 'survey the wondrous cross' from new angles, and to grasp
your grace in new ways this Lent.*

In Jesus' name, Amen.

Day 1: Ash Wednesday

A Day of Ash in the City of Ashes

Read Lamentations 1:1a

WELCOME TO THE CITY

Take a good look around you, but first, be warned: it's not a pretty sight. Here lies the remains of a city, and not just any old 'big smoke'. This one was special – we call it '*the city*' (1:1; my italics).

Once 'the city' was so full of people, but now it's deserted. Once a picture of life, now it's deathly quiet. Once a people and a place that told the world a story of grace, now these smouldering ruins tell another story – of anguish, guilt and despair.

Is Google Maps not working for you? Let me help you: this is *Jerusalem* – and it's 587 BC. *Welcome*, if that's the right word. And welcome to Lamentations. All around is rubble and ash. And that smell? That's hopelessness. In these parts, it lingers thick in the air.

Maybe you're starting to wonder why you've come? But let me tell you, there are few better places to be on Ash Wednesday.

BROUGHT BACK DOWN TO EARTH

For hundreds of years of Christian tradition, Ash Wednesday marked the beginning of the season of Lent. Think of it as a day to bring us back down to earth. After all, we are all on a collision course to be reunited with the earth from which we came: 'for dust you are and to dust you will return' (Genesis 3:19).

It is not simply that death is inevitable. Lent isn't about 'looking death in the eye', 'seizing the day' and making fresh 'bucket lists'.

Instead, Lent involves acknowledging that death is our inevitable sentence because a verdict has been justly passed. The apostle Paul puts it clearly enough: ‘the wages of sin is death’ (Romans 6:23).

For some of us, death will feel close right now. Too close, probably. Maybe it’s the debilitation of illness. Maybe it’s the persistent ache of grief. Maybe it’s that sense of life unravelling before our eyes; age and circumstance and loss...

And for those waking up in Jerusalem in 587 BC, death was also unavoidable. *Every day was Ash Wednesday.*

HOW...?!

Take a look again at the opening word of Lamentations in 1:1. The Hebrew word is êkâ, which perhaps best translates as ‘How?!’ In fact, the same word also begins chapters 2 and 4 of Lamentations. But this isn’t a polite question expressing puzzlement or ignorance. It’s an exclamation of grief and sorrow: *How ... can this be?! How ... on earth?! How ... long must this last?! How ... the mighty have fallen?!*

You’re probably getting a sense of Lamentations’ tone already. Well, we ain’t seen nothing yet. But stick with it. Yes, we begin Lent by confronting our mortality, but the surprisingly liberating truth wired into the rhythm of Ash Wednesday is that the way down is the way up. We die to find life. We walk towards the grave, but the tomb is empty.

So whether or not you’re familiar with Lent, and whether or not you’ve spent much time in Lamentations, I pray that this journey might take us to places of surprising hope.

Almighty and Everlasting God, who hates nothing that you have made and who forgives the sins of all who turn to you: over these coming weeks, create and shape in us humble hearts, that as we face up to our brokenness and sin, we may receive from you, the God of all mercy,

*the Spirit-filled gift of repentance, fresh assurance of forgiveness
and lavish helpings of hope – through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.
(Adapted from the Book of Common Prayer)*



Listen to ‘Ash Wednesday’s Early Morn’ by Liturgical Folk
and Lauren Plank Goans.

Day 2

The A to Z of Suffering

Read Lamentations 1:1–3

THE LONELY WOMAN

With Lamentations, the clue is in the name. And yet ‘lament’ isn’t particularly common today – at least not within a formal Christian setting. Can you recall hearing someone preach on a psalm of lament? Have you witnessed public prayers deeply acknowledging the pain that people in your church were facing? When did your discipleship group last cry out to God about the state of the world?

Lamentations will help us receive God’s gift of lament. But in order to do that, we’re going to meet a person.

Yesterday we were shown around a city, but now this city is portrayed as a woman – a widow in grief (1:1). And her story is one of a dramatic reversal: she was a queen, but has become a slave. We hear her sobs of anguish in the night, all alone, with no one to comfort her (1:2). Are you ready for this?

LONG TIME COMING

So what’s going on? God’s people had been on a downward spiral ever since splitting into two kingdoms. Verse 3 refers to the nation of Judah, which was the southern and remaining kingdom of God’s people. The northern kingdom, often known simply as Israel, had been invaded and decimated by the Assyrian army nearly two hundred years before. It had been a punishment for her idolatry, and Judah in the south was meant to heed the warning.

But now her time was up too. As we see hinted at, she had been unfaithful to God: ‘among all her lovers there is no one to comfort her’ (1:2). Lovers, plural? Jerusalem is not simply a widow facing bereavement, she is an unfaithful partner whose infidelity has left her alone. And now those ‘who pursue her have overtaken her’ (1:3) – this time, as the book of 2 Kings tells us, the conquerors were the Babylonian empire. It all culminated in a final siege of Judah’s capital, Jerusalem, before she too fell in 586 BC. Lamentations is born out of *that* experience.

EAVESDROPPING ON GRIEF

We all know how deeply personal grief is. When we see someone tearing up or sobbing uncontrollably, part of us might want to instinctively step back and give them some space. Or maybe we just turn away, feeling uncomfortable at their vulnerability.

And yet often we can’t help being drawn to watch and listen too. The emotion is real and visceral in a world that is often superficial.

Here, in Lamentations, God wants us to step closer. To lean in to these laments and feel their heart. And because they are written in this ordered ‘acrostic’ form, the unwieldy nature of suffering can now be expressed in a satisfactory way. This is the A to Z of suffering.

I wonder how you’re feeling about the next thirty-nine days? Lamentations is not an easy book to read, both in terms of the gut-wrenching subject matter and how we apply it to ourselves today. Spend some time praying that as Lamentations gives us this humbling vantage point on Jerusalem’s suffering, we’d listen well to this grief, and that it might give us a fresh perspective on God, his world, and ourselves.



Listen to ‘Dust We Are and Shall Return’ by The Brilliance.