

Praying Through Your Grief
Based on Lamentations
Sunday, February 17, 2008
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It's tough to lose, isn't it? We live in a culture that adores winners and achievers. But we don't accept losses well. Take, for instance, the most recent Super Bowl. The New England Patriots had a perfect record – an unheard of 18-0 – until losing to our (yes, I did say our) New York Giants. In all of the post-game wrap-ups I heard the same theme: the Patriots are now losers. They have wasted the entire season. Their record is tarnished and tattered because they couldn't win the last game and become a perfect 19-0.

As a culture, we don't accept our losses and we don't grieve well. Author Norman Wright says, "Loss. It's a simple four-letter word that is one of our constant companions throughout life. But we don't talk about it very often. Like a silent conspiracy, we seem to have an unspoken agreement with others not to talk about our losses ... Nobody likes to lose. Life is supposed to be filled with winners ... Losing hurts. A small loss or a large one – it doesn't matter. It hurts. And it hurts even more because we have not been taught to expect or how to handle the losses of life."

But life is filled with losses and, therefore, life is filled with the need to do "grief work." Think of what we lost throughout our lifetime. First, there are the losses of childhood ... We lose our youthfulness. We lose our dreams. We lose our routines in transitions. We lose our friends. We lose our health. We lose our image of ourselves as good people. We lose our concepts of others. We lose our jobs. We lose our children. We lose our parents or siblings.

How do we handle these losses? It's easy to numb our hearts by ignoring our losses or slapping clichés and religious jargon on them. But God invites us to a better way, the way of dealing with our grief, the way of facing our losses and even growing through our losses. This is so important to God that God even devotes an entire book to the process of grieving our losses – it's called the Book of Lamentations. This little book tucked into the middle of your Bible seems so small, quiet and hidden that you may miss it. And if you happen to read it, you may find it so dark and depressing that you'll never return to it. I've come to admire and love this little book. People have called it an "artistic gem" or a "potent work of art" or "a prayer journal." It is all of those things and more.

It's not a nice book. It comes at us the way real life hits us – honest, messy, and jagged. In one sense this is the private journal of a man who has encountered profound grief and shock. He's trying to speak about unspeakable events. He's trying to make sense of the nonsensical. He's in deep pain and shock and grief. He weeps often. There isn't a neat and tidy resolution in this book. It trails off with an inconclusive prayer: "Why do you always forget us? Why do you forsake us so long? 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” (5:20-22).

This book doesn't have easy answers; the author has seen too many troubling things. The story behind the poem goes like this: in the year 587 B.C. the Babylonian army had finally broken through the gates of Jerusalem, invading the city, destroying the temple, capturing and executing the leaders and then rounding up most of the people and sending them into exile. The loss was devastating. They lost homes, loved ones, jobs and an entire way of life. As he wrote this book, the author was still in shock. He was trying to make sense of it all. He's trying to connect it to his relationship with God. But the waves of grief keep hitting him in the face, knocking him to the ground, washing over his soul, until you wonder if our author-poet will ever get up again.

It's an eyewitness account – and his first job will be to “see” reality, to look at it without the distortion of religious jargon or socially accepted clichés. And what he sees is just awful. It is horrendous and shocking and painful and disturbing – but he keeps looking, trying to make sense of it all. The first function of prayer is not to help us escape from the pain of the world; the first function of prayer is to help us see the world as it is – without piling a layer of jargon or clichés on it. This is the first task of prayer: to see reality, to observe what is really there – with unflinching honesty, with searing honesty.

He will see and then slowly walk us through four aspects of grief and loss:

1. The devastation of grief and loss
2. The process of grief and loss
3. The healing of grief and loss
4. The calling within grief and loss

It begins with the devastation of grief and loss. The poem begins with one word: the Hebrew word 'ekah. The second and fourth poems begin with the same word (see 2:1 and 4:1). English versions translate it as “How,” but it's almost impossible to convey the sense of the word in English. 'Ekah is a cry of lament that lodges in our throat, stuffed down with horror and sorrow. The grief is nearly unspeakable. A rasp. A guttural 'ekah! Alas and woe are too weak to convey the meaning in this word. I am going to propose a translation for you: What the hell! I'm not advocating cursing, but I want us to understand the sheer horror, the un-prettiness and un-niceness of this word. The poet here has just watched his city get plundered, his house of worship get razed and his friends and loved ones captured and deported. What do you want him to say? “To God be the glory?” He's not ready for that yet. In the Hebrew versions of the Bible this one word is indented and then placed on a line by itself with a large space after it. Now that catches the power of the word. 'Ekah! How! And then there is silence and white space. There's nothing else to say.

Verses 1 – The grief of the nation is compared to a woman who has lost her husband and family. Her “splendor has departed” (see verse 6). The widow in ancient society was a symbol of aloneness and bereavement. The emphasis is on the sense of loss. Something precious and valuable has been stripped and snatched away.

There are physical manifestations of grief and loss. See verse 2 – “Bitterly she weeps at night, tear are upon her cheeks.” There is a social dimension to grief – “All her friends have betrayed her; they have become her enemies.” Usually this isn’t intentional; people just become wrapped up in their own world so they can’t enter your world of grief. A spouse dies and you can’t get together with the same couple friends anymore. You fall into depression and the happy people around you just can’t slow down and walk at your pace. Again, most of it isn’t mean-spirited or a conspiracy to hurt you; it just happens. Perhaps they don’t have a clue how to grieve or how to help you grieve. Grief scares us. We’re not equipped to deal with grief. So people stay away.

Grief seems too quiet. Notice 1:4 – “The roads to Zion mourn, for no one comes to her appointed feasts. All her gateways are desolate...” The gateways were the place where the merchants and elders gathered to trade and talk and debate and decide. But now there’s just an eerie silence and emptiness. And see 5:14b-15 – “the young men have stopped their music. Joy is gone from their hearts; our dancing has turned to mourning.” The person you walked beside is now gone – a child, a spouse, a friend – and their voice is no longer heard. The house is too quiet. The room is too still.

When Nicholas Wolterstorff lost his twenty-five year old son in a tragic climbing accident, he pictured grief as a sudden rupture of his world: “There’s a hole in the world now. In the place where he was, there’s just nothing. A center, like no other, of memory and hope and knowledge and affection which once inhabited this earth is gone. Only a gap remains ... The world is emptier. My son is gone. Only a hole remains, a void, a gap, never to be filled.¹”

Verse 7 – Grief has a backwards look. It doesn’t have enough energy to look forward. “Jerusalem remembers all her treasures that were hers in days of old.” The writer wants God or someone to see – verse 9 – “Look (ra ‘ah), O Lord, on my affliction” and verse 11 – “Look, O Lord, and consider, for I am despised.”

Second, there is the process of grief and loss. Our friend Norman Wright writes eloquently about the long journey of grief: “In grief the bottom falls out of your world; the solid footing you had yesterday is gone. It feels more like a floorboard tilting or soft pliable mud with each step you take. The stability of yesterday’s emotions has given way to feelings that are so raw and fragile you think you are losing your mind. Your grief will take the shape of a spiral figure rather than a linear one. Grief is not a straight line moving gradually up and toward a set point.

¹ Nicholas Wolterstorff, *Lament for a Son* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1987), page 33.

You will move forward only to return to where you were ... Many feel as though they are losing their mind, that they're going crazy. But the "crazy" feelings of grief are actually a sane response to grief. It disrupts your entire life schedule ... Your body changes. Food doesn't taste the same, nor will the fragrance of your favorite flower be as intense. The frequency of tears will cloud your vision ... Eating and sleeping patterns won't be the same."

There are three stages in trauma recovery: the *cognitive* stage, the *emotional* stage, and the *mastery* stage. The cognitive or thinking stage involves fully facing your trauma, remembering it, and even reconstructing it, allowing the story to come out and be heard. The emotional stage involves dealing with the feelings of grief and loss – anger, sadness, anxiety, fear. We don't have to act on the feelings or get stuck in the feelings but we have to feel them at a gut level. The final stage is the mastery stage. This is when you find new meaning through what you have experienced.

In this book, the author is working through and praying through the first two stages, but he hasn't mastered the grief and loss yet. It's an emotional book, filled with intense scenes of pain (see, for example, 4:3-5). Notice the beautiful way he works through the first stage of grief – the cognitive stage. This entire stage is prayed through in an organized, meticulous fashion. The first four chapters are written as an acrostic. In other words, the twenty-two consonants of the Hebrew alphabet are used in succession. As one Bible commentator said, "The alphabet gives both order and shape to suffering that is otherwise inherently chaotic, formless and out of control." Now he measures and observes the grief and trauma from "A to Z" to which nothing more can be added.

By identifying and sharing the story of our grief and loss, we are no longer alone in our suffering. The pain and loss and grief are called forth, structured, given voice, named. The first condition for healing of grief is to bring it into light. One of the survivors from the high school shootings at Columbine offered wise advice to the Virginia Tech survivors: "For those of us who openly shared our thoughts, who cried, and who dealt with the pain immediately after it happened, we're not doing too bad. It still hurts, I still find occasion to cry. But those who never dealt with it find themselves unable to handle the simplest things. A fire alarm goes off, a balloon pops, or a police car drives by, and they find themselves doubled over in anguish, unable to move ... We all deal with these things in different ways ... It doesn't matter how we deal with it – as long as we do."²

Third, there's the healing of grief and loss. Theme – Comfort. "There is no one to comfort her among all her lovers" (1:2b, 9b). Then, Daughter Zion cries out, "For these things I weep . . . because my comforter is far from me, one who would turn my spirit" (1:16). The narrator reiterates it, "Zion spread out her hands; there is no one to comfort her" (1:17), and Zion takes it up again when she calls upon God, "There is no one to comfort me" (1:21a). She seeks someone who would "turn (*sub*) her spirit" (1:16). The

² All Things Considered, April 18, 2007, "Columbine Survivor with Words for Virginia Students," Brooks Brown.

Hebrew verb connotes “conversion,” “turning around,” “changing direction.” Daughter Zion is looking for someone to help her reorient herself, to turn her life away from the trauma that has overtaken her being. She declares unequivocally what she needs from a comforter: someone to see the truth of her destroyed world and to grasp the encroaching despair and anger in which she dwells.

Healing – healing begins to come when we can place our pain in a larger context, a larger story. We see glimpses of a larger story starting to emerge. It begins with compassion for others. Notice that the personal wound starts to give way to an other-centered grief. In other words, the grief is not just about me and my pain: there are others who are hurting as well. Notice verse 2:11-12 where he begins with “My eyes fail from weeping, I am in torment within, my heart is poured out on the ground...” In our highly-individualistic culture, most of us would stop right there in the grieving process. My grief. My pain. My torment. Now, please don’t misunderstand: we have to work through our personal pain. We can’t circumvent it. But notice the resource of community as he starts to put his pain into the context of a larger story: “because children and infants faint in the streets of the city. They say to their mothers, ‘Where is bread and wine?’ as they faint like wounded men in the streets of the city, as their lives ebb away in their mother’s arms.” His grief doesn’t stand alone. Others are grieving around him – and it’s the suffering of children that truly breaks his heart. Now his grief doesn’t stand alone. Others are grieving as well. Now his heart expands with compassion for others. You see, if we don’t move into this larger story, we get stuck in our own story of private pain. We wallow in self-pity.

Secondly, we see another glimpse of the larger story in 3:19-25. The nation and the author have been looking for someone to see, to comfort, to turn to me. Who will do this? There’s a sense in which no one can walk with you through your pain. It is too big (see 2:13). So who will see? God does see – like no one else. God even collects our tears in his wineskin (see Psalm 56:9 – “put my tears in your wineskin.” According to this tradition, when the people were deported and sent into exile, God would gather all their tears into his own God-sized wineskin. When the wineskin was finally full of the tears of his people, God would remember and would deliver his people. We have a God who collects our tears. That shows God’s compassion

Wouldn’t it be nice if the book ended right there on verse 25 – “The Lord is good to those who wait for him!” With an exclamation mark! Yes, the Lord is good, end of story. Crisis resolved. Grief work done. The weeping is over for good. But grief isn’t neat and linear. It’s messy and convoluted. It’s unpredictable. So in the span of a few verses, he moves from the triumph of confidence in God’s love and faithfulness back into the abyss of sorrow found in verse 49 – “My eyes will flow unceasingly, without relief, until the Lord looks down from heaven and sees. What I see brings grief to my soul...” That’s the way grief works. It’s utterly unpredictable. You can’t put it on a flow chart or into a formula or a timetable.

Fourth, there’s a calling within grief and loss. Where is God? Where is God’s voice, God’s presence? God never speaks. And yet, this is the Bible. This is God’s word – and

how does God choose to speak? He places the words of the broken, the poor, the ripped-off, the losers, the suffering children, the raped women, the hungry and he puts their voices front and center. It's as if God says, "This is what I want you to hear. I can be quiet for a few minutes because I want you to hear this. Hear these cries. Hear the groans of the poor and the broken."

My experience at Lighthouse Mission.

1. There is another side to grief. It may not be what you expect. It won't be pain free. Life won't be back to normal. It will be different. You will create a new normal. Right now you may be feeling stuck, and it's a feeling worse than being in traffic. For there you know there will eventually be relief. It's more of being mired in quicksand where each step you try to take, you sink deeper. I've been in quicksand before. You feel trapped, and soon panic takes over. With grief it's easy to believe the numbness or pain or sorrow or anger will be your constant life companion. It won't. All that you experience will diminish. But it's like learning to swim. You have to step into the water to begin the process. It's safe on the shore because it's familiar.
2. The journey of grief will take you through uncharted waters. The unfamiliar, though, will become familiar. It will become your new life. And it's better than remaining frozen with grief. Grief has a beginning but it also has an end even though it doesn't seem possible.
3. Even a brilliant, spiritually mature believer like C.S. Lewis could experience grief and loss and offer this heart-wrenching but honest paragraph:
4. Where is God? This is one of the most disquieting symptoms. When you are happy, so happy that you have no sense of needing Him, so happy that you are tempted to feel His claims upon you as an interruption, if you remember yourself *and* turn to Him *with* gratitude and praise, you will be—or so it feels—welcomed with open arms. But go to Him when your need is desperate, when all other help is vain, and what do you find? A door slammed in your face, and the sound of bolting and double bolting on the inside. After that, silence. You may as well turn away. The longer you wait, the more emphatic the silence will become. There are no lights in the windows. It might be an empty house. Was it ever inhabited? It seemed so once. And that seemingly was as strong as this. What can this mean? Why is He so present a commander in our time of prosperity and so very absent a help in time of trouble?³
5. Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of mercies and God of all comfort; who comforts us in all our affliction with the comfort with which we ourselves are comforted by God. For just as the sufferings of Christ are ours in abundance, so also our comfort is abundant through Christ. But if we are afflicted, it is for your comfort and salvation; or if we are comforted, it is for your comfort, which is effective in the patient enduring of the same sufferings which we also suffer. Corinthians 1:3-6.

Groaning in the The Book of Lamentations

1. What he sees horrifies him. It's not nice. He sees women being raped and defiled (5:11). He sees children with their tongues stuck to their mouth, begging for bread, but no one gives it to them (see 4:4). The elderly have vanished (5:14). The young men don't play music and no one dances

³ C.S. Lewis, *A Grief Observed* (London: Fober and Fober, 1961), p. 9.

- anymore (5:14 and 15). Mere boys are doing the work of grown men (see 5:13). Notice the searing honesty and how it records the details in 4:3-5.
2. This is a prayer about seeing and listening. It validates us and our suffering. As a matter of fact, in five chapters we don't hear the voice of God. God does not speak. God does not issue a direct promise. Instead, the voice of the traumatized and the grieving is pushed front and center. In a strange way, God stays in the background, humble, quiet and compassionate, so others can pour out their pain. God wants them to be heard. Thus, this strange prayer of sorrow gives voice to suffering like no other book in the Bible. It becomes a "shelter for sorrow. In the words of O'Connor, "Lamentations is ancient poetry of truth-telling, an act of survival that testifies to the human requirement to speak the unspeakable, to find speech in traumatized numbness, and to assert boldly the 'sheer fact of pain.'"
 3. The poet-prayer wants to see – and he wants someone else to see as well. He calls on God and the watching world and the uncaring and indifferent universe to see as well. But over and over again he feels like there is not one to comfort his people (see 1:2, 7, 9, 16, 17, 21). The negation is expressed in the Hebrew word *ajin* which has its root meaning in "non-existence." In other words, it doesn't just mean that this person is absent; but that this person, this comforter, doesn't even exist. That's the way grief feels. It's too much for everyone. No one would understand what I'm feeling. In one sense, this is a lie – and it's a dangerous lie because it keeps us isolated, cut off from others when they need them the most. But in another sense it is true that the fullness of our grief is truly unfathomable to one human being. This is something true about deep grief: it really is too huge for anyone to handle. No one can fully fathom your grief. At one point he also cries out, "What can I say for you? With what can I compare you ... that I may comfort you ... Your wound is as deep as the sea. Who can heal you?" (see 2:13). In a sense this is true. When you've been smashed by the waves of sorrow, when you experience deep grief and loss, on the one hand, no one person can fully walk with you in your pain. That doesn't mean that you should isolate yourself – not at all, this poem is the antidote to isolations, it's about a whole community lifting up their corporate grief as a community. But there is a sense in which your spouse, your small group, your church, your family, may not comprehend the full story of your grief. No one can walk full in the path of your personal grief story – well, almost no one. But we'll save that story for later.
 4. Why do this? Why do grief work (and it is work)? Why not bury it, move on and forget about it? Why do I have to face it? Why can't I just decide to get over it and move on? You can't do that. Your soul won't let you; even your brain won't let you. Trauma changes the way our brain functions. The memories stay within us, trapped deep in our brain. And they will affect us. Secondly, the way our body is structured, we can't just decide to shut down grief and pain and sadness without shutting down our

entire emotional system. We have to choose to not feel for significant areas of our life. We choose numbness over aliveness. See Dan Allender here. Lamentations is about restoring a passion for life, for others, for justice and for God. But it isn't an easy or short path, but it will lead to joy. We get glimpses of that in Lamentations, but this isn't a book about the end result of grief and loss. It's a book that throws us into the messy, confusing, sometimes dark and agonizing, middle of the grieving process. We like stories with happy endings – and we'll get to a happy ending because God promises the end of all grief (see Revelation 21:1-3) – but this plops us not at the end but in the middle. The shock is starting to wear off; reality is setting into his soul; but the pain and grief are still like a wound that's cut right to the bone. It's raw. It hurts.