

Walking Through Grief

Lamentations 3:1-9; 18-24

March 9, 2008

Introduction

Peter Scazzero tells the following story ...

The Bible tells us that followers of Jesus always grieve with a deep sense of hope, but we still grieve. Obviously, by not facing grief head-on we diminish our selves and our communities. Grief is part of living on this fallen planet, a world in rebellion against God. The New Testament reminds us that in this life we will always groan (see Romans 8:18-25 and 2 Corinthians 5:1-5). So we need someone to help us groan, to walk through grief and loss and agony.

In his infinite wisdom and goodness, God has provided a guide, a roadmap, a handbook to help us walk through grief and to help us walk others through their grief. It's called the Book of Lamentations. It's short but powerful, beautiful but raw. For the follower of Jesus, it deepens us in holiness. Holiness means becoming more like Jesus and Jesus was the "man of sorrows" who "bore our grief."

Three weeks ago I told the history behind this book: in the year 587 B.C. the Babylonian army broke through the walls of Jerusalem, the capital city. They destroyed the land and then gathered up the people before marching many of them 600 miles away into exile. The grief was enormous (see 2:13). The loss was devastating. But God in his wisdom and goodness did not allow the grief to become unspeakable. He provided a voice for his people's grief. As our guide to walking through grief, there are five practices that help us to grieve our losses and help us guide others through grief as well. Please don't take this as a neat formula, because grief never works that way.

Be Patient – Here's the first reality about grief found in this book: grief is a long, slow journey. It takes time – lots of time. If you read Lamentations you'll find something very interesting about the literary form. First, it's an extended poem but it's also written as an acrostic. In other words, each of the verses in the chapters begins with the first letter of the Hebrew alphabet and then continues to move through the pain by beginning each verse with the next letter of the Hebrew alphabet. As we would say, it covers the pain from A to Z not once but five times. As a result, the literary form assures something very important about how we deal with grief: take it slowly.

You see, one of the most common ways to deal with grief is to attempt a shortcut. Grief is painful and we don't like pain, so we try to avoid it or sweeten it or shorten it. Lamentations provides a structure so we don't let that happen.

I have to be honest: I find this terrifying and frustrating. Most of us want to fix pain. I read the following quote this week: "Most people who deal with suffering, pastors prominent among them, are by training and temperament doers and fixers ... (But)

encouraged by Lamentations, the pastor (and other helpers) will have the strength to *do* far less in relation to suffering, and *be* far more” (Eugene Peterson).

This is a difficult lesson to learn! Most of us want to shorten the timetable of grief and fix people. I know I do. Think about what happens when someone loses a loved one or goes through a profound loss. At first everyone gathers around and brings meals and offers prayers and condolences. But then a few weeks or months later everyone disappears. We all move on. We want the grieving person to move on. But what do they want more than anything? Not advice, not solutions, but our presence, our friendship, our patience.

After the author Joe Bayly lost his son he told the following story: “I was sitting torn by grief. Someone came and talked to me of God’s dealings, of why it happened, of hope beyond the grave. He talked constantly, he said things I knew were true. I was unmoved, except to wish he’d go away. He finally did. Another came and sat beside me. He didn’t ask any leading questions. He just sat beside me for an hour and more, listened when I said something, answered briefly, prayed simply, and left. I was moved. I was comforted. I hated to see him go.” Which kind of friend am I? Which kind of friend are you?

Be Emotional – Lamentations is an emotionally-packed book. It’s gripping. It’s intense. It doesn’t let up. This is another very difficult lesson for me. I want to move straight into point 3 – Be objective. I want other people to move there too. I can be a very impatient person – and I bet you can too.

But look at some of the intense emotions expressed in Lamentations:

- Chapter 1:2
- Chapter 1:4
- Chapter 3:7-9 → Notice the way the author feels about God.
- Chapter 3:19-20
- Chapter 3:48 → Notice how he weeps for others, not just for himself

The goal at this stage is to get the feelings out. Listen to the wise words of John Eldredge ... → clip from “In the Wildflowers.”

Grief is intense. Many of us grew up in families or churches that didn’t allow any expression of these feelings. So we really don’t know how to handle the rawness of grief. I wish I would have discovered Lamentations when I was younger, but then again, I may not have understood it.

How do we grieve? We find someplace where it’s safe to get our feelings out. It may be a Christian counselor or a support group or a good friend. Not everyone can handle our grief, and that’s okay. We bless them and move on to someone who can.

Be Objective – Lamentations is an emotional book but it’s also very objective. The author is working through the stages of grief and he’s starting to get some perspective,

some objectivity. Where do we see this? Once again, it's woven right into the literary style of poetic acrostic. There's a certain brilliance and beauty and power flowing out of the literary style chosen to express this grief. The acrostic form makes sure the grief gets expressed – five times – but it also makes sure that it arrives at some sort of resolution. The pain is expressed with emotions but it also defined and objectified. This repeating acrostic form makes sure that nothing is left out, but it also puts limits to the repetitions. It can't go on forever.

If you read through Lamentations and compare it with 2 Kings Chapter 25, you'll find that you can trace everything in this book to actual historical events. The feelings are intense but the facts are also firm. As someone has said, "Each feeling is riveted to a fact, which means that the suffering at not time is allowed to become mere feeling ... for if suffering is severed from historical data, it diffuses, filling up the room like gas."

We usually can't do this alone. It takes time and some wise guides to help us sort through the emotions and objective facts. The very nature of traumatic events is that they overwhelm the ordinary systems of life. They drown us. So part of the healing process will be to learn how work through this overwhelming feelings.

Be Vulnerable – Most of these five poems were written as a communal lament. In other words, our grief was never meant to be borne alone. God's plan is for us to share our grief – with him and with others. Most of the other laments written in the Bible were written for the whole community, not just for one person. There's healing power in this approach because sometimes when we're in grief we can easily get isolated but also self-centered. We assume that no one else is grieving in this room – at least not as much as I am. But look to your left, look to your right, look in front of you, and you will find a story of grief and loss – a story that has happened or a story that will happen soon. In this poem of lament, the whole city of Jerusalem was grieving. Everyone had experienced loss. And God gave them this poem as a way to come together in their grief, to share their grief, to raise their voices in a unified cry of lament.

Grief can so easily isolate us. I love what the Jewish author Elie Weisel once said, "It is inhuman to wall yourself up in pain and memories as if in prison. Suffering must open us to others ... But you, you insist upon suffering alone. Such suffering shrinks you, diminishes you. Friend, that is almost cruel."

The New Testament tells us quite clearly that grief should open us to others. It opens us to God's comfort and then in our grief and through our grief we become agents of healing to others. There's a wonderful description of this process in 2 Corinthians 1:3-5 → "Praise be to the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of compassion and the God of all comfort, who comforts us in all our troubles, so that we can comfort those in any trouble with the comfort we ourselves have received from God." What a wonderful privilege. (Story about the little girl).

So Weisel is right: when we try to suffer alone, it is almost cruel. It does shrink us. But when we're vulnerable and open to God and our need for others, our grief can expand us,

it can expand our ministry to others. We even become a holy vessel of the comfort of God to others. That is a wonderful privilege, my friends!

Be God-Centered – At this point Christian approaches to grief separate from other approaches. For instance, most of us have deep assumptions about suffering. We've bought into a story of suffering that goes like this: suffering is totally bad, thus suffering must be eliminated immediately. When something goes wrong, we have to call in the therapists or the engineers or the organizers or the marketers or the politicians or the pastors or the whatever – anything and anyone just so suffering can be eliminated and eradicated and mopped up right now because even God is powerless in the face of suffering. Or perhaps we could say that suffering shows us just how powerless God is.

On the one hand, there is some truth to this because in the Christian view suffering is an abnormality in the sense that God created a world without suffering. God created a perfect universe. But on the other hand, the Bible also makes it clear that we live in a fallen world, a world marred by sin, a world in rebellion against God and therefore off-kilter in relationship to God and to everything else. One day this rebellion will end, the brokenness in the universe will be healed completely. That is the work of Jesus who died on the cross not only to save us from sin but also to restore and bring in a new creation. It's here we see how huge the Gospel is. It doesn't just make me right with God – o it does and it is a glorious work – but it also ushers in a new creation.

But we're still in this fallen world so how do we explain suffering? Well, the Bible doesn't talk so much about how to explain suffering; instead, it spends more time talking about how God enters into our suffering.

We see that especially in the passage we heard read from Lamentations 3. Most of lamentations is just that – a lament, a work of getting the grief out. But not all of it. In the center of the laments there is a pool of light: pain's chaos gives way to God's faithfulness. Notice it happens surprisingly at the height of pain (see verse 18). At this point of darkest night, God's light begins to shine. The focal point for the whole book comes in verses 3:22-24. I said a few weeks ago that this ray of hope shines right in the middle of the book, right in the middle of the pain and chaos and grief. And I said that God keeps doing that – showing up in the middle of the pain and even the sin of our lives. There's a reason why the early church made such a big deal out of the fact that Jesus was crucified between two common criminals. (See Romans 5:8).

(Os Guinness story about the people of the crossed sticks).

So the author of Lamentations writes before the cross of Jesus, acknowledging and even pouring out his grief but also clinging to the faithfulness of God's character. As someone has said, "In the face of direst of adversities, Israel and we are offered hope. It is a word not about answers to the problem of evil; not a word about circumstances or men and movements. It is not a word about systems of (politics); it is simply a word about our Lord. He is faithful, He is love, He is gracious, He is full of compassion, he is our portion."

If you are grieving this morning ...

If you are not grieving this morning ...