

In his Pulitzer Prize-winning novel, *The Road*, Cormac McCarthy imagines a world where everything has ended. It's a bleak story of a father and son struggling to survive in a post-apocalyptic world that's burnt through and riddled with violence. The sky is permanently gray. It's flat and lifeless. The sun is dimmed by ash. Cities are hollowed out. Forests are burned to charcoal, nothing grows, nothing sings, nothing flourishes. The entire novel details this father's journey with his son, pushing a simple shopping cart down this abandoned road, trying to scrape together a life to just survive day to day. The world has not only collapsed, but it seems to have been thinned, used up for all of its worth. At one point, the weary father steps outside at dawn, and McCarthy wrote:

He walked out in the gray light and stood, and he saw for a brief moment the absolute truth of the world. The cold, relentless circling of the intestate earth, darkness, implacable, borrowed time and borrowed world, and borrowed eyes with which to sorrow with. McCarthy

There's a grief that hangs all over this novel. It's the grief that we will read about in Lamentations 1. That gray light that McCarthy describes seems to, at times, break into our own lives. We have experienced that same bleakness when we look at the absolute truth of the world—a diagnosis, betrayal, marriage unraveling, wayward child, and a world riddled with war. These moments, the absolute reality, the truth of what we experience in this life, begs one question. How did this happen? How did we get to this place?

We're in week two in a series we are doing through Lent on the Book of Lamentations, which the title of this book, by the way, in the original Hebrew language, is just that question, "How." It's the very first word of this poem that we see in Lamentations 1. It's a reckoning. It is looking at the dark sides of this world to see how we arrive at this place.

What we find in this first chapter is a meditation, a poem on exactly that. How did the city become desolate? In the way that it's described, what is it that lies beneath the surface of all the ruin that gives context or understanding to why this poem is lamenting in grief? That question, how, is a very Lenten question. It's a question we ask in this season of preparation for Easter. How, Lord, did we fall? How did our sin consume us? How did we come to this place? These are the questions of Lamentations. They are the questions of Lent. It's the question that we will look at head on.

**How deserted lies the city, once so full of people!  
How like a widow is she, who once was great  
among the nations! She who was queen among  
the provinces has now become a slave. Bitterly she  
weeps at night, tears are on her cheeks. Among all  
her lovers there is no one to comfort her. All her  
friends have betrayed her; they have become her  
enemies. After affliction and harsh labor, Judah  
has gone into exile. She dwells among the na-  
tions; she finds no resting place. All who pursue  
her have overtaken her in the midst of her distress.**  
**Lamentations 1:1-3**

As I mentioned, the very first word in this poem is how. How could this be? The poet describes this city as a woman. That is something that will carry throughout the book. It describes what that city woman used to be. It says it was once so full of people. It was once great among the nations. It once was a queen among the provinces. It is this beautiful depiction of what Jerusalem had been, what the people of God had been. It then contrasts it throughout with an opposite image—a slave, a widow, and someone who is deserted.

Dr. Soong-Chan Rah wrote this beautiful book called *Prophetic Lament*, which talks about how Lamentations 1 is in the form of a funeral dirge, meaning like the liturgy of a funeral. What you're reading in Lamentations 1 is just that; it's a funeral, a memorial to this city that has passed away. The first three verses of Lamentations remind us that this grief is emerging from a very real and painful place in the history of the people of God and it must be acknowledged. One of the functions of lament is, in fact, to offer a memorial to the experiences of the dark sides of this world.

One of the griefs that you see described here is that there is no one to mourn with this city woman. No one to give voice to her pain. But in lament, we offer that out. We offer a verbal memorial to the brokenness in the world. The metaphor of the grieving widow, which we see in these first few verses, is also a longstanding metaphor for the relationship between God and his people. It runs all through the scriptures.

This idea, this metaphor that God is the husband, and the church is the bride of Christ. The language around this lament is that the covenant relationship between those two has been fractured. Something has come between God and Israel that has destroyed the relationship, and that's why now she's grieving—not just the grievousness of her sin, which we'll see in a little bit, but

also a grievousness at the fracturing of what was once a loving relationship.

The people whom God had brought out of captivity, who he had wed himself to, they'd been thrown out of the land, and now they were back into brokenness. I imagine it evokes all of those memories from generations before about the troubles that they had when they were in Egypt. This adultery, the imagery that the scriptures use, has caused God, who had long warned them, beckoning them to come and return, yet now they found themselves weeping, lonely, and in despair.

**The roads to Zion mourn, for no one comes to her appointed festivals. All her gateways are desolate, her priests groan, her young women grieve, and she is in bitter anguish. Her foes have become her masters; her enemies are at ease. The Lord has brought her grief because of her many sins. Her children have gone into exile, captive before the foe. All the splendor has departed from Daughter Zion. Her princes are like deer that find no pasture; in weakness they have fled before the pursuer. vv. 4-6**

This woman, described in these opening verses, now emerges. It's the daughter Zion. The idea of Zion is more than just a name for Israel. It would conjure up the images, not just of the people, but it was the center of where the people of God worshiped Yahweh. Zion was the place where the temple of God brought the people of God together. It wasn't just a location; it was representative of the locus of God's presence with the people. So, as the poet is lamenting, they're saying this loss is more than just displacement or exile, it's the loss of the relationship and presence of God.

The question that keeps emerging again is, how, who caused this? Why is this the state they are in? In verse 5, you get a hint of it. In one sense, verse 5 seems like it's because her foes have become her masters. Her enemies are at ease. But notice the second half, "The Lord has brought her grief because of her many sins."

Old Testament scholar Christopher Wright said, "Her [Jerusalem] suffering is beyond imagining, but not beyond explanation. It is unbearable, but it is not innocent." What we'll find in this lament is connected to the very sinfulness of God's people. That is not the source of every cause of suffering. This suffering is, however, directly linked to the sinfulness of God's people.

The word sin there is connected to covenantal failure. It goes back to that relational language I was talking about. That word has to do with the transgression against the relationship with God. It's specifically speaking to their sins that had severed them from that good union, that breaking of the covenant with God.

**In the days of her affliction and wandering Jerusalem remembers all the treasures that were hers in days of old. When her people fell into enemy hands, there was no one to help her. Her**

**enemies looked at her and laughed at her destruction. Jerusalem has sinned greatly and so has become unclean. All who honored her despise her, for they have all seen her naked; she herself groans and turns away. Her filthiness clung to her skirts; she did not consider her future. Her fall was astounding; there was none to comfort her. "Look, Lord, on my affliction, for the enemy has triumphed." The enemy laid hands on all her treasures; she saw pagan nations enter her sanctuary—those you had forbidden to enter your assembly. vv. 7-10**

See verse 7 sets up this city woman, probing her memory as she's looking back, and she's thinking of these "treasures of old." It's likely that this is pointing to just the very things of the temple, the treasures that they stored within there. It's this woman conjuring up the beauty of what once was, but she is now experiencing the loss of that. It repeats that the sins were great. That's what has caused this uncleanness, this naked vulnerability before God.

Nakedness, in the old world, was connected with shame. It's this grief that's saying, "I am shameful before all people, exposed, vulnerable to all that has happened." And it's this shame that has exposed her, that pushes her to say, "Could anyone be here?" But in verse 9, she responds again. The poet says that her fall was astounding. There was none to comfort her. It's this picture of just utter aloneness in her brokenness.

Verse 11 closes the section we're looking at. It moves beyond just the individual to the broader perspective. "*All her people groan as they search for bread; they barter their treasures for food to keep themselves alive. "Look, Lord, and consider, for I am despised" (v. 11).* The metaphor shifts in this last verse from shame to starvation, both a literal experience that they were walking through, but also a visceral metaphor. The city that was once thriving was reduced to a beggar that flips the script of the storied history of the city. Where once the streets were filled with people, the festivals of God, the joy and the celebration, it's all inverted, and now there's nothing but a beggar asking if anyone will hear him, will anyone see that?

The vivid descriptions allotted here does not create or give space for the denial of death. It's one of the harrowing aspects of this book that we will continually have to force ourselves to sit in, something uncomfortable in our day. But the reality of the brokenness of this world, the reality of the brokenness of death, and our experience just sits heavy.

There's much to take on in this first chapter, but I really want to focus on that opening word, that question of how this took place. How did they arrive at this moment? Where does the suffering come from? How does the suffering insert itself into the tragedy of the human experience? The imagery that we just unpacked is the shocking sorrow of Jerusalem, which is portrayed

as a broken and lonely widow. But all of us in here have felt that sting, that edge of death. We've experienced maybe something similar, not the same one, not the same experience, but I'm guessing the majority of us have asked God how did we arrive here? How did that gray light break into my life?

Well, the answer to that in this moment is in verse 5. Go back to it. "Her foes have become her masters. Her enemies are at ease. The Lord has brought her grief because of her many sins." The poet identifies the problem that was happening here, that while Babylon was the direct means of the suffering, they were carrying out the judgment of God on the city. The poet identifies it with this idea of sin. The word here in Hebrew means transgressions, rebellion, or a breach of trust or trespass.

It's likely that we hear this word, sin, a lot. It's a very churchy word. And I would guess we also have a visceral reaction to this because of the way this word has been used in the past. But this is simply the word that the scriptures use to define that which we all feel—something is off in the world. Something is broken in which we are experiencing that reality, that's the word sin.

Understanding this concept of sin is actually good news. Because if the world is broken and you have no context to make sense of that, how do you go about finding a solution to it? So we have to understand this idea of sin because we've all experienced it. We've all engaged in it, and yet somehow a robust understanding of sin actually leads us back to God. To say this is beyond ourselves, we need something to bring about the healing of this problem.

Theologian, Cornelius Plantinga, in his book, *Not The Way It's Supposed To Be: A Breviary of Sin*, writes of the necessity to understand sin by first understanding the biblical concept of shalom. Shalom is the Hebrew word that we translate in English as peace, but we have a pretty flat understanding of that word, too. We think of peace as simply the absence of conflict, but the biblical concept of shalom is much richer than just the absence of conflict. Listen to the way Plantinga describes shalom. "It is the webbing together of God, humans, and all creation in justice, fulfillment, and delight is what the Hebrew prophets call shalom."

It's the idea of harmony. It's the idea of every part of the world working in the way it was intended. It's the idea of flourishing, of each having the fullness, wholeness, and delight. It's the rich state of affairs in which creation is working in harmony towards and in the design pattern of God. Put differently, shalom is the way things ought to be. It's the picture you see in Genesis 1 and 2. It's the picture that we will see in Revelation 21 and 22. It's this idea of harmony, not just the absence of conflict, but rather everything working in its proper order, in which all people experience flourishing.

Well, once we understand that concept of Shalom, Plantinga says, that's how we can then make sense of the concept of sin.

He wrote, "Sin is the culpable disturbance of shalom." What does he mean by that? Culpable is an important word there. It means that we hold a responsibility to disturbing shalom. Way back in Genesis 3, way back in all of our stories, when we sin, what we're doing is not just transgressing an arbitrary moral law, but we are disturbing the very shalom that God is trying to cultivate in the world. We're working against that harmony.

So sin is not this arbitrary thing; rather, God is moving in a direction, trying to have creation work in harmony and shalom. Sin is our responsibility in the ways that we culpably disturb shalom, and whenever shalom is disturbed, suffering ensues.

This goes all the way back again to Lamentations 1:5, answering the question of why this happened. It is because of Israel's great sin. I'd put it this way. Suffering is a consequence of living in a world shattered by sin, but with this qualifier—sin done by us, sin done to us, and sin done around us. These three dimensions of sin are important because it is somewhere in there that we come to see the total experience of suffering. I want to unpack each of these different dimensions, sin done by us, to us, and around us, to help us understand.

### **Sin Done By Us**

In Lamentations, the suffering is directly connected with that first dimension, sin done by us. In this way, the sin done by us is our own toxicity, in which we add our own failures, our own disruptions of shalom, and our own brokenness to the grand heap of suffering in the world. It's when we do all the things we often read about in the Old Testament, all those lists of sin, we are then contributing to the brokenness in the world.

Often, what we see in the experience of Judah here in Lamentations is that their sin had caused this suffering over and over and over again. Jeremiah, giving the words of God, had warned the people to turn back from their failure, turn back from their sin, yet they continued in that way. So eventually God just said, "Okay, you can have what you like." Babylon comes in, and the destruction takes place. That day of reckoning came.

I think the suffering from sin done by us takes place in two forms. Sometimes the suffering results from the natural consequences of our sin. If you just keep lying and lying, eventually that catches up to you. That is a natural consequence in which all of that sin that you've been accumulating just wreaks havoc on your life.

In other ways, like what we see in the second one, there is, in fact, coming a moment in which reckoning is coming, where the Lord will allow judgment to come down on us. But it's judgment not done out of a punitive hatred towards you. It's the same thing as a parent having to wrestle with allowing your kids to learn the hard way in which you release that child to just experience the brokenness of their own choices. Sometimes our suffering is directly connected to the sins done by us.

### **Sin Done To Us**

There's also suffering that is derived from sin done to us. Not only have we sinned and contributed to that, but we also are sinned against, and we have experienced the brokenness of other people's sin. Sin is often from that first category, done in such a way that it impacts others, and the recipient of that can also bring pain and suffering.

I recently heard a theologian make the point that before Adam and Eve sinned, they were sinned against, which I had never seen. The serpent, in its deceit, trying to lie and steal and kill, deceived Adam and Eve. That was the very first sin. Before any of us sin, we are sinned against, as often, as the old adage goes, hurting people, hurt people.

When we are sinned against, our natural tendency, my natural tendency, is usually not to love my enemies. I'm working on that. But often it's to reciprocate in kind. It doesn't excuse it. It doesn't make Adam and Eve innocent of their own sin. But often our sins come from a place of wounding and brokenness in which we were sinned against. And we bear that suffering and pain, and often we just spit it right back out into the world, with the cycle of the brokenness of sin just perpetuating.

In the dimension of sin done by us, sin is my problem or your problem. But when it's done to us, it becomes this communal problem. It moves beyond the individual, and ultimately leads to a third category.

### **Sin Done Around Us**

Sometimes pain and suffering come from sin done around us. This can be a little bit harder for us to grasp because we've been so formed by the individualism in our culture. We've often made individualism the high point of human existence, and so we have a hard time understanding how we can experience something that happened outside and around us.

Sin done around us simply means that the sin within us is transmuted into things beyond ourselves. It's inserted into systems and structures in this world that perpetuate the brokenness over and over. It's what the New Testament calls principalities and powers, and sin is moved from the individual, from the communal, to just an experience of living in the brokenness of the world.

The example I gave last week is that there's no direct connection between sin and cancer, but sometimes the sin around us has just created toxins in a world that then produces something like cancer. It is sin done around us, and we often experience the suffering of that. There are these three dimensions: sins done by us, sins done to us, and sins done around us, with sin never as individualized as we want to make it. Whether or not we are responsible for the sin ailing us, it is, in fact, our call to step into that moment, and we are then responsible for dealing with whatever it is. How do we take ownership of our own issues, our own problems?

What's interesting about the sin done around us is I'm certain that in Judah, there were people who were trying to heed the warnings of Jeremiah. I'm certain there were people there who were, in fact, listening to him when you look at the collective of the whole people of Judah. Yet they were wrapped up in the nation's failure; they were wrapped up in Judah's suffering. Even though they were likely trying to deal with the sins, they were trying to turn back, and yet they experienced all of it.

Your sin, my sin, our sin has ripple effects far beyond what we could ever understand. When you begin to have those ripple effects pile up on top of one generation to the next, it becomes this large swell of suffering. These three areas are the cause of the majority of suffering.

However, there is still a place where accidents and brokenness just happen. Think of the contrast between the Book of Lamentations and the Book of Job. The whole point of the story of Job was that he was a righteous man who walked through suffering undeservedly, and yet that was the experience of Job in suffering. Sometimes that's the case. Sometimes the beast of Behemoth and Leviathan, as Job talks about, are just running rampant. Chaos is in the world, and it just produces that brokenness. God is working to hold back the chaos, but sometimes our lives intersect with that chaos for no other reason than it just breaks through into a broken world. You can experience that kind of suffering.

I want to bring us back and unpack one more layer as to what the sins of Israel were. Because it is not that it is everyone's experience, but here the poet is directly connecting their sins with the grief that God allowed. So let's look one layer deeper. What were the sins of Israel? To do that, flip over to Jeremiah 2. Jeremiah was a prophet of God, which means he spoke on behalf of God. It has little to do, necessarily, with future telling in that it's much more just being the mouthpiece of God. So God had given Jeremiah this message to take to Israel to warn them of their sins and their failures.

**Has a nation ever changed its gods? (Yet they are not gods at all.) But my people have exchanged their glorious God for worthless idols. Be appalled at this, you heavens, and shudder with great horror," declares the Lord. "My people have committed two sins: They have forsaken me, the spring of living water, and have dug their own cisterns, broken cisterns that cannot hold water. Jeremiah 2:11-13**

The sin was that the people of Israel had rejected Yahweh. He draws this comparison in which God is the source of all living water, and the sin that they committed was to say, "God, we don't need your living water. We'll do things on our own." So they create and fashion these cisterns on their own. But the prophet says, they cannot hold that water. They were looking beyond God for means to satisfy the ache in their soul.

It is right there at the beginning of the passage. "Has a nation ever exchanged their gods?" And the answer to that is a definitive yes. The people of Israel had tried to attach themselves to these gods of the Assyrians or the Babylonians or all those around them to say, "This must be the actual God." They were looking beyond Yahweh, even with all of their experience, and that was the sin. Jeremiah goes on.

**Have you not brought this on yourselves by forsaking the Lord your God when he led you in the way? Now why go to Egypt to drink water from the Nile? And why go to Assyria to drink water from the Euphrates? Your wickedness will punish you; your backsliding will rebuke you. Consider then and realize how evil and bitter it is for you when you forsake the Lord your God and have no awe of me," declares the Lord, the Lord Almighty. vv. 17-19**

Jeremiah's warning was that the people had continually rejected God, chasing those other gods. They'd gone to Egypt to drink water, trying to find the living water from the Nile. They'd gone to Assyria to drink water from the Euphrates, and it says that ultimately there came a day when God gave them over to their own desires and said, "If this is what you want, this is what you can have." It's a harrowing moment. The scriptures talk about this word wrath, which is another word or area that we have a difficult relationship with because it's just been abused and used in so many inappropriate ways.

The wrath of God, according to Romans and what we're seeing here in Jeremiah, is when God gives us over to the desires of our own hearts, even if they are not going to produce goodness in our lives. Here, the people of Israel are out searching; they want to find life in Egypt, life in Assyria, and in Babylon. And eventually God says that if this is what they want, after warnings and warnings and warnings, he then gives them over to their desires. The experience of that was his removing his presence and Babylon destroying the city, dragging them out into exile.

I'm not suggesting that every negative circumstance or suffering in your experience is directly connected to a specific sin in your life, but I am saying that every painful calamity is the result of the collective problem of sin. That, somehow, God will eventually, if we reject him over and over, just give us our way. He will allow us to experience the disruption of shalom, and that is a tragic moment. It's a painful moment. It's when we, all of a sudden, find ourselves East of Eden, outside of the garden, outside of the Shalom of God, and it's in that where we then refuse that goodness of God and experience the alternative.

The beautiful thing about Lamentations and about the presence of God is that although God gives us over to that, his arms are always open for us. Our response to this is exactly what the people of God did in the Book of Lamentations. It's to lament. Lamentations 1 is this raw look at their own failure before God,

but it's also the turning to God. It's the lament in which they say, "This is what I have done. This is the pain and the brokenness. My great sin has caused this."

Yet lament is the tool in which we turn back, in prayer, humbly to God. See, lament is more than just providing comfort in painful times. The grace of lament is that it helps us tune our hearts to our own pain and the pain of others and come back to the foundational truths of God before the world. You could say it this way, that lament is honesty before God and others. It's when we come to the end of the rope, and we come before God and say, "We have caused great sin. We look at our own brokenness, we look at our sin right in the eyes, and we no longer make excuses." We no longer try to hide it, to pretty it up, rather we own our sinfulness. We become honest before God.

The reason that this idea of understanding sin and all of its complexities is important is that you cannot heal from that which you cannot name. If you cannot name the brokenness, how do we allow God into those places? So sin is our lament, is our opportunity to come honestly before God to voice our brokenness, voice what we're experiencing, and what we have done, and bring that now to God.

In the scriptures, lament is also coupled with this practice of confession. Lament and confession always go hand in hand. Confession is actually more than just admitting our own wrong. Although it is very much that. But I want to add one layer to it. Confession is admitting our culpability, that's going back to Plantinga's understanding, but it's also naming our wound. Confession is twofold. It's saying the ways that we have broken the world in the ways that we have sinned, and it's also confessing the ways that we have been wounded.

Go back to Genesis 3, where Adam and Eve were sinned against, which culminated in them also sinning. We have to do something with both of those things because we want forgiveness from the sins we commit, and we need healing from the wounds that have been done to us. So confession is emitting both of those things. It's confessing to the Lord the ways that we have been culpable in disturbing shalom, and bringing the woundedness of our heart and asking, "Could you heal that, too?" Lament and confess.

It's about courageously naming our wickedness and our woundedness. It's about confessing sins done by us, to us, and around us. It's a way in which you come before the Lord to name the ache in your heart and ask God if we can work together to receive that forgiveness and turn back to him. Because if suffering is the consequence of living in a world shattered by sin, then we have to have a way of taking stock of that, and that's what lament and confession do.

Our framework for lament was taken from a book written by Mark Vroegop entitled *Dark Clouds, Deep Mercy*, where he uses

this framework for lament: turn to God, voice your complaint, ask boldly, and choose to trust. This fourfold framework is a way in which we take the brokenness that we've committed in the world and experienced in this world, and turn it back to prayer, where we leverage the moment of sin, and ask the Lord to turn it into a moment of grace.

On the night that Jesus was betrayed, there was a sense of lament for the brokenness of the world, but there was also this connection of confession. Communion is the time in which we get to do both of those things, where we come and lament our sinfulness before God, and we also confess that to him.

How could something hold together all of that bleak brokenness in the broken body of Jesus in the poured-out blood of Christ? Lamentations doesn't rush to fix what's broken. It takes a long look at the big, heavy question of how, but Jesus is the response to that. Yes, this is how it has been broken, yet we come and receive the grace of God again.

The imagery, that metaphor that I talked about of the people of God as the bride of Christ, broken, committing adultery against God, the beautiful thing about covenant, which is different than a contract, is that God has stepped into a way in which he will stand by his promises regardless of how much we break them. If that fosters in you a licentiousness to say, "I can just go on sinning," you're missing the point. Rather, what it does is foster a humble heart that says, "Lord, how could you receive me and forgive me yet again?" And we come back to the table with a heart of grief and of repentance.

*This manuscript represents the bulk of what was preached at CPC. For further detail, please refer to the audio recording of this sermon.*

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