

In 1885, a Jesuit priest was sitting in a small, dark room in Dublin, Ireland, and he wrote a poem that would never be published. His name was Gerard Manley Hopkins. He was chronically overworked, profoundly lonely, and homesick for England. He felt this crushing weight that God had abandoned him. He had taken vows; he'd surrendered his ambitions; he'd devoted his life to the pursuit of God, and in that small room, God felt absent. Read the words of that poem that was never published in his lifetime, entitled "No Worst, There is None."

**No worst, there is none. Pitched past pitch of grief,
More pangs will, schooled at forepangs, wilder
wring. Comforter, where, where is your com-
forting? Mary, mother of us, where is your relief?
My cries heave, herds-long; huddle in a main,
a chief Woe, wórd-sorrow; on an áge-old anvil
wince and sing—Then lull, then leave off. Fury had
shrieked, "No lingering! Let me be fell: force I must
be brief." O the mind, mind has mountains; cliffs
of fall Frightful, sheer, no-man-fathomed. Hold
them cheap May who ne'er hung there. Nor does
long our small Durance deal with that steep or
deep. Here! creep, Wretch, under a comfort serves
in a whirlwind: all Life death does end and each
day dies with sleep. Hopkins**

This poem was a set in a series of writings by Hopkins called *The Terrible Sonnets*, written in a time of grief, depression, physical frailty, and spiritual desolation. He's writing in specific circumstances, but it seems that his writing transcends those circumstances, giving picture and voice to a soul in anguish. It's written from the bottom of the pit, and he discovers there that nothing further could be worse. That haunting line in the middle, "Comforter where, where is your comfort?" It is the oldest cry in the human condition.

We've been looking, through this series of Lamentations, at just that. The very human ache of the shadow side of life, and then the haunting final words of that poem, all life, death does end, and each day dies with sleep. It's Hopkins writing that the only thing that could seemingly take him from this moment was death or sleep, an escape from reality.

We're in the fifth week of Lent, working through the Book of Lamentations. It's a series that can evoke some deep emotions. It's been largely uncomfortable, an unflinching look at grief, pain, suffering, and consequences. Lent is the season just for that, not to eschew those emotions, but rather to enter them, knowing on this side of resurrection, that Easter is coming.

Last week, we left off with the most hopeful part of the Book of Lamentations. If you expect that trajectory to continue, you will quickly realize that the poet brings us back down into the pain of the moment. If you are getting tired of Lamentations, I want you to know that I am too. It is not just you and me that are growing tired, but actually the poet of Lamentations is also. What you're watching in this scene is a poet limping, exhausted, and barely making it to the end. While the lament may be tired, it isn't done. It continues to push deeper and deeper down to the bottom of the pit. However, I will give you this one hope. We will land with a final line of hope in this text, and we're going to hold onto that one.

Lamentations was written in the lowest moment of the life of Israel. In chapter 3, we found the primary words of hope in this book, but chapter 4 actually mirrors chapter 2. Lamentations is an acrostic poem, so chapter 1 mirrors chapter 5, chapter 2 mirrors chapter 4, and chapter 3 sits at the pinnacle of the acrostic. So we are working our way down the hill, if you will.

So chapter 4 is mirroring what we've seen in chapter 2, which offered a picture of the desolation of the physical structures of Jerusalem. Chapter 4 does not talk about the physical structures but talks about the interiority of the people. It is a spiritual desolation that we watch, and it begins just like chapters 1 and 2 with the word "how." This Hebrew word is this offering of how we have gotten here.

Degradation of the Wealthy

The main theme of this chapter is degradation. Things that were once precious and valued are now treated as worthless, and you watch the undoing of the very people of God. So, let's begin in verse 1.

**How the gold has lost its luster, the fine gold has
become dull! The sacred gems are scattered at
every street corner. How the precious children of
Zion, once worth their weight in gold, are now
considered as pots of clay, the work of a potter's
hands! Lamentations 4:1-2**

There's no material more precious than gold. There seems to be an illusion that the mix between the gold and the gems are likely talking about the items that were inside the temple, and it says the temple has been destroyed. So that which was sacred is now scattered everywhere. Then verse 2 seems to indicate that it's not just the material items, but something that is mirroring that—the precious children of Zion, once worth their weight in

gold, are now considered like pots of clay, which is to say they have been rendered cheap and broken, ready to be tossed out.

There's this interesting line, "the work of a potter's hand." The metaphor of clay in the potter's hand should sound familiar. It's because that imagery all throughout the scriptures is about the covenantal relationship between God and his people. God is the potter and we, his people, are the clay in which he is forming and shaping us. In Isaiah 64, "*Yet you, Lord, are our Father. We are the clay, you are the potter; we are all the work of your hand*" (v. 8). Given the preciousness of the covenant relationship with God here, it shows that this has been overturned.

The failure of the people of Israel is that they have abandoned their high call to be the covenanted children of God. We begin to ask the question: how did they arrive at this point? Jeremiah 2 demonstrates the high place that the people of Israel have been and how they have forsaken all the benefits to what it comes to at the end.

The word of the Lord came to me: "Go and proclaim in the hearing of Jerusalem: "This is what the Lord says: "I remember the devotion of your youth, how as a bride you loved me and followed me through the wilderness, through a land not sown. Israel was holy to the Lord, the firstfruits of his harvest; all who devoured her were held guilty, and disaster overtook them," declares the Lord. Hear the word of the Lord, you descendants of Jacob, all you clans of Israel. This is what the Lord says: "What fault did your ancestors find in me, that they strayed so far from me? They followed worthless idols and became worthless themselves. Jeremiah 2:1-5

You hear the heartbreak of God himself. "What fault did you and your ancestors find in me that you would abandon me for worthless idols?" It's the breaking of the heart of a God who loves his people, and yet they continually reject him. For 40 years, Jeremiah the prophet, sent from God, had gone to Israel and proclaimed, "Return. Repent. Come back. My love is here. It has been present for you for four decades." The prophet had warned the people of God, and they continually refused. That refusal, over and over, is what caused what we find at the bottom of this pit in Lamentations, because they had followed worthless idols over and over. They rejected God.

God said, "I'd rather have it this way than be in relationship with you." As we read this ruin, it's easy for us to start getting almost angry at God like the poet. How could this happen? But don't mistake God saying, "You can have what you desire," for vengeance and hatred from God. God's patience is long, and his love is endless, but at some point, he gives them over to what they desire. And that's where we arrive at here. Look at this reversal of that which was once precious.

Even jackals offer their breasts to nurse their young, but my people have become heartless like

ostriches in the desert. Because of thirst the infant's tongue sticks to the roof of its mouth; the children beg for bread, but no one gives it to them. Lamentations 4:3-4

The jackal is a wild animal, something akin to a coyote or wolf, and it's now setting up this contrast, saying as fierce and wild and barbaric as a jackal is, they still care for their offspring. He's mirroring that and saying that the people have become heartless. They don't even nurse their young as the jackals do. Verse 4 is heartbreaking. It's this picture of the children and women suffering. They are in contention. What used to be a nurturing, loving relationship is starting to fray. The thirst and hunger that coincide with the suffering of children may be the most diabolical outcome of evil and violence. You're reading it as the poet is reflecting on what's taking place in Jerusalem.

Those who once ate delicacies are destitute in the streets. Those brought up in royal purple now lie on ash heaps. The punishment of my people is greater than that of Sodom, which was overthrown in a moment without a hand turned to help her. Lamentations 4:5-6

He's speaking now about the rich and the wealthy. If verses 1 through 4 were talking about the vulnerable, verses 5 through 10 are talking about the other end of the spectrum—the wealthy and powerful. Those who used to enjoy the delicacies, who were wrapped up in royal purple, that imagery, the cloth that cost much, he says, are destitutes. They're walking around the streets in ash.

Suffering has a way of equalizing the human experience, never totally, of course. There is always a disproportionate amount of suffering that lands on the poor, but nonetheless, suffering is a universal experience to some degree or another. No one gets a pass. The poet here in Lamentations is looking out across the horizon and says, "Those who used to have everything, that had access, they now are destitute in the streets." It's the poet saying that if you believed and trusted in wealth, that didn't save you. The pain still comes.

Then the poet says the punishment is worse than that of Sodom. That's an allusion to the story of Sodom and Gomorrah, which for the ancient Israelites was an archetypal story of God's wrath against human arrogance and wickedness. He's saying that would've been better. The punishment of the people, here in this moment, is greater than the punishment of Sodom. His point is that was in the story of Sodom and Gomorrah God's punishment came down in an instant, but here it's dragging on. It is the difference between immediate death and the slow agony of famine and starvation. It says that this is what the people are experiencing. It then moves from the wealthy to the powerful.

Their princes were brighter than snow and whiter than milk, their bodies more ruddy than rubies, their appearance like lapis lazuli. But now they are

blacker than soot; they are not recognized in the streets. Their skin has shriveled on their bones; it has become as dry as a stick. Those killed by the sword are better off than those who die of famine; racked with hunger, they waste away for lack of food from the field. vv. 7-9

All of that imagery is showing that while the wealthy, rich, and powerful once looked like these vibrant colors, they are now black as soot. They're dried out. Their bones are shriveled. And then we get to the honesty, the unimaginable. "*With their own hands compassionate women have cooked their own children, who became their food when my people were destroyed*" (v. 10). The poet goes from good food to good clothing, to good health, all of it is corroded. This part gets to me, not just the unthinkable; it seems to break the limits of imagination. That suffering could go so far as to say that these women, who once cared for their children, were now consuming them.

Now it's obvious to say, but worth saying, this is descriptive, not prescriptive. This does not speak at all of what God wants or desires or tolerates. God does not desire this, but it's the picture of this reversal of all things; rather than women pouring their lives out for their young ones, the opposite has come true. Just like the gold had lost its luster. Just like the powerful have been made weak, the nurturing women have now become consumers. The unraveling of the social order, every component of it, every part of it, frayed, pulled apart—destruction. Listen to what commentator Adele Berlin says about this:

The picture is...of the abrogation of all that was normal in Judean society, a drastic reversal of fortunes, socially and physically, caused by the ravages of wartime famine...all human dignity has been lost. Berlin

So by the end of the opening section of this chapter, a great reversal has taken place. What was treated as precious is now worthless. Children who should be nurtured are being starved. The rich are reduced to a rubbish heap, vibrant colors turned black, ruddy, good health has shrunk and shriveled. Mothers who should feed their children are consuming them. Holy men become dirty and defiled. The royal protector of life himself is trapped and removed from the pit and yet pay attention to the line in the second half of verse 10, "When my people were destroyed."

In these first 10 verses, that's the third time that phrase has been used, "my people," and it's very intentional. It's quite beautiful because what the poet is doing is inserting this imagery of "my people." What it asks of the ancient reader and will ask of us is, "Who is speaking?" Is it the poet or is it God? That's important because this line of "my people" means that the poet and or God is lamenting the horrendous state of his people.

Scholars make the point that the repetition of this phrase seems to indicate that it's moving from the poetic to the prophetic. That

even though the form is a lament to God, it can be read, with all justification, as a lament by God. It is no longer just that the poet is speaking about the circumstances.

This line, "my people," is saying that the poet's emotions are God's emotions. Just as the prophet has tears, so too, God has tears. It's the heart of a parent who knows their child is now having to learn the hard way. It is of tremendous grief. It is God weeping over his people, just like Jesus wept over Jerusalem in the New Testament. God is watching all of it happen and is moved to tears when he says, "My people are being destroyed."

If you're a parent, you can touch that emotion, can't you? When you've watched your child go off and know there had to be a moment when you couldn't help them anymore, at some point, you have to allow your child to go off and learn however they're going to learn, and it breaks your hearts. God looks at all of this disaster, the unthinkable, and he says, "My people were destroyed."

Degradation of the Leaders

If verses 1 through 10 are about the degradation of the wealthy, verses 11 through 20 move to the degradation of the religious and the political leaders of Jerusalem. The only reason I'm laying that out is that there's a systemic and poetic unraveling of all the things that you place your trust in. If it's wealth, that's not going to hold up. If it's religion, those leaders are failures. If it's politics, they're also complicit. Over and over, the things that Israel put their hope in are meticulously pulled apart. The poet is saying, "Look where all of them left you."

The question I want in your mind is where do we continue to put our hope? It's one thing to read about it here, but we all know we put our hope in things other than God. May it be of us that we can learn from our forebearers who've gone before us, maybe there's something here for us.

The Lord has given full vent to his wrath; he has poured out his fierce anger. He kindled a fire in Zion that consumed her foundations. The kings of the earth did not believe, nor did any of the peoples of the world, that enemies and foes could enter the gates of Jerusalem. vv. 11-12

The physical reality of the city of Jerusalem at the hands of Babylon was only part of its devastation. We get to this line, "The Lord has given full vent to his wrath." Another way of translating that is that his wrath has been fully poured out. It's emptied. It's gone to its fullest conclusion, so much so that the unthinkable happened. It was beyond the imagination for the ancient Israelites to believe that a foreign nation could come into the temple and exist in the very space of Yahweh, but that is what happened. It was unthinkable, unimaginable, and yet that is what they were experiencing. That's verse 12.

“But it happened because of the sins of her prophets and the iniquities of her priests, who shed within her the blood of the righteous” (v. 13).

This is probably the hardest verse for me to read, because if anywhere I find myself in this text, it's here, akin to something like a priest. The poet names the cause of all of this as the religious leaders' own failures.

I wish I could read this as an indictment of a bygone age. I wish I could read it as a poetic depiction of that which ravaged ancient Jerusalem. The reality is, there are many in here who can name the pain and the hurt of church leaders who have failed them. On top of that, the sins and iniquities of the priests and prophets were that they were carrying out, by what the poet says, the spilling out of the blood of the righteous. Now, scholars don't know if this was actually taking place or if it was just descriptive of the pain of the abuse of a religious leader, but nonetheless, the potential for violence and murder lies so deep in the fallen human heart that simply attaining the status of priest or prophet was no longer a guarantee of innocence.

Religion can be used to cloak and condone all sorts of acts of violence. And God's anger rages against the abuse that's carried out by those he's entrusted with authority. The sex abuse scandals within the Catholic Church. The sex abuse scandals within the Protestant church and its many denominations. The many abuses of power, money, coercion, and manipulation that take place within churches. The many political scandals by church pastors, priests, and leaders who've abandoned the call for their own purposes to help and encourage their own. Violence, married with religious fervor and political power, offers an intoxicating cocktail of evil that bemoans the heart of God. Religion can and is often used to justify all sorts of violence.

Lord have mercy. Christ have mercy. Lord, have mercy.

I find all too often, while talking with people outside the walls of the church, that the reasons they don't come are because they have been on the receiving end of exactly what is being denounced here in this text. And all I'm left to say in those moments is, "I'm sorry." Some of you have experienced that, and I'm sorry. The truth is that religion will fail. The church will fail. I will fail. And if the church becomes the place of your identity, I promise you it will become your wound. But the hope is that by the grace of God, we can be a community that seeks to be quick to repent, quick to listen, and hopefully be a place of healing as well. In verse 14, he is talking about the priests and the prophets.

Now they grope through the streets as if they were blind. They are so defiled with blood that no one dares to touch their garments. “Go away! You are unclean!” people cry to them. “Away! Away! Don't touch us!” When they flee and wander about, people among the nations say, “They can stay here no longer.” The Lord himself has scattered them;

he no longer watches over them. The priests are shown no honor, the elders no favor. vv. 14-16

Those typically meant to live in the presence of God for the sake of others, and to be a mediating presence between God and the people, are the roles of a priest. It says their failure to listen to the prophet Jeremiah for 40 years meant they have been disgraced and cast out because of their dereliction of their duty and abandonment of their call. That's the bleakness of God's judgment here.

Moreover, our eyes failed, looking in vain for help; from our towers we watched for a nation that could not save us. People stalked us at every step, so we could not walk in our streets. Our end was near, our days were numbered, for our end had come. Our pursuers were swifter than eagles in the sky; they chased us over the mountains and lay in wait for us in the desert. The Lord's anointed, our very life breath, was caught in their traps. We thought that under his shadow we would live among the nations. vv. 17-20

Verses 17 through 20 speak to the political hopes of the nation of Israel that they were upholding the Lord's anointed, likely a reference to Zedekiah, the last king of Jerusalem before the Babylonian invasion. What you're watching unfold here is the last vestige of hope that maybe there's some political thing that could uphold and save the people.

It says all of that is a failure, that this is the total nail in the coffin, everything is undone. There's no salvation. There's no escape. There is no longer any hope. The fate seems total, and by this point, it is seemingly all without hope.

What future could exist for a people without their city, their temple, and now without their king? What you're describing here is the utter bottom of the pit. There is no way to look for a path forward. This is ultimately what leads to the concluding chapter 5. It's a last desperate prayer from the people, the community of God, crying out to God.

“Rejoice and be glad, Daughter Edom, you who live in the land of Uz. But to you also the cup will be passed; you will be drunk and stripped naked” (Lam. 4:21). Rejoice? What's going on here? You have to understand who Daughter Edom is. Edom was a brother nation to the nation of Israel. We know this from the prophet Obediah. They were the descendants of Esau. And basically, what they were doing was looking at all that was happening to Jerusalem and mocking them. They had refused to help Israel earlier when the Babylonians were coming, and so they're sitting back and mocking what was happening within Jerusalem.

The poet looks at them and says that their day is coming. Go ahead and rejoice, but judgment comes for all of us. The judgment of God is total, and it's coming. No one has escaped it. Not Jerusalem, not Edom, and not us. Not every nation and every

power, every empire that has ever stood in arrogance, the cup will be passed through it. It always is. This chapter has leveled everything, and it's in the rubble where we ask, how do we find hope?

Lamentations 4 is not just a lament. It's a systematic and poetic ruthless audit of all the places we tend to see hope. It's stripping away every layer of misplaced trust, and it's here that the poet understands what we often don't understand about ourselves. We as humans are hopeful beings. What I mean by that is you can't not hope. You have to put something out on the horizon that's drawing your life forward. It's what gets you out of bed in the morning—hope and desire.

There is something that propels you. It's the engine of life that gets you up. Even here, the poet, limping and exhausted, has some vestige that's getting him awake in the morning. The question is not will you hope, it's where will you place your hope? What we saw was the systematic undoing of the three big hopes that we tend to trust in over the course of the human life—wealth, religion, and politics. Let's look briefly at each one in turn.

Wealth

The poet says that the gold had lost its luster. The rich ended up in the ash heaps. The people who had access to the best food, the best clothing, the most comfortable lives, none of it insulated them from the devastation. We are not all that different than them. We live in one of the wealthiest areas in the world, and it is easy for us to slowly imbibe in this mentality that we can outearn the pain of consequences.

We placed an enormous weight on financial securities, in our 401(k)s, and the equities in our houses. All the while, these things are largely neutral, but that can be dangerous to say in the wealthiest area in the world. To say that those things are neutral would also discredit the teachings of Jesus, who spoke about how difficult, painful, and hard it is for the rich to enter the kingdom of God.

What we learned from this moment in the story of the people of God is that wealth cannot insulate you from the devastation of your own consequences and that which takes place around you. Wealth deceives us into thinking we're isolated from the world's ills, but that is deception, and it will hold you captive. The warning here is to fight that urge to assume that if the bank account looks good and the stock market's going alright, then I'm okay. You can try it. You can place your hope in that, but we know it all could be taken away in a moment.

I don't want to make you feel guilty, but I want us to learn. What I see in the people of God is their ability to place their trust in wealth, and yet it is empty. It is just as vacuous as you feel in your gut.

Religion

The prophets and the priests, the very people entrusted with the mediating presence of God, became the cause of the ruin. We've seen this play out time after time in our own generation with devastating clarity. Institutional Christianity has taken blow after blow, and God has rightfully pulled the curtain back on the failure of church leadership. Abuse scandals cover up some manipulations of power. Many of you can attest to it.

There's one thing I can be certain of: the Church will let you down. Pastors will let you down. I will let you down because we are flawed humans that have been given a big responsibility, and by the grace of God, we try to hold that well. But I will inevitably let you down. Do not put your hope in me. Do not put your hope in the board of elders. Do not put your hope in this church. We are mere conduits to the presence of God, trying to create a space where God can dwell. Church, putting your hope in God is the only true and sure thing.

Politics

It says, "Our eyes failed looking for help from a nation that could save us." And then finally, that end blow was the Lord's anointed himself was caught up in their traps. The people were watching, searching on the horizon for a political solution to a spiritual problem. And the very leader who was supposed to embody God's protection over his people was captured.

Don't we do this constantly? We place the weight of our hope on political outcomes, the right administration, the right party, the right policy framework. We transfer an enormous hope onto individual people, believing that if the right person is in the right seat at the right time, then all things will be okay. This chapter doesn't say that politics is irrelevant. I understand it has consequences, very real consequences for our lives, but it is very clear that the nations cannot save you. It could not save them at this moment.

That horizon, if you're looking out over there seeking solutions, will continue to disappoint you. No matter how Christian that figure says they are, they will fail you because, just like me, as a pastor, I will fail you; we are humans trying to stumble our way through life. Nations rise and fall. History is nothing but the long lineage of this reality. It has been and always will be true. There is no nation that will provide you with ultimate hope, no matter how much it claims to be that hope. No election can deliver what only the resurrection can. Every leader you've ever placed your ultimate hope in has and will let you down.

Here is the structural problem. The point that the poet is relentlessly exposing is that none of these items, religion, wealth, or politics, was designed to bear the weight of your ultimate hope. They are finite. They're ultimately penultimate. They are not ultimate things. They are contingent. They're staffed and sustained by human beings who in and of themselves need rescue. We're asking to do to creation what only the creator can do.

And creation, no matter how solid it appears, will always buckle under that weight.

So I return to the question of where do you put your hope? Where does the poet put their hope? Remember, I said there's one little shrivel of hope in this text. It feels like the right time to turn to it now—verse 22, *"Your punishment will end, Daughter Zion; he will not prolong your exile. But he will punish your sin, Daughter Edom, and expose your wickedness."* One single line, but it's enough. It's enough to sustain the poet. It's enough to sustain us. The punishment will end. The exile will end.

Old Testament scholar Christopher Wright writes,

Hopeful, certainly, but oh, how slender! A single penultimate line out of the forty-four lines in the chapter. But as always in the Bible, the power of hope lies not in the quantity of rhetoric that expresses it, but in the character of the One in whom that hope is placed. Wright

God looks at the devastation and doesn't forget, he says, "My people." The God who is pouring out judgment is the same God who is lamenting over the destruction. It's the judge weeping over his own verdict, and that is not a contradiction. That is covenant love. His grief is not in spite of the judgment. It's the proof that his love was never the problem. It's that they rejected it and walked away. They chased the worthless idols until they became worthless themselves. God, in all of his holiness, could simply only look at it and eventually say, "If you don't want me, you don't have to have me." He gives them over to it, full of grief.

I want to go back to verse 11, which is a beautiful contrast that's hidden in plain sight for us. "The Lord has given full vent to his wrath." Now that could be translated as fully used up, poured out, but that contrasts directly with the etymology of the word that's used in chapter 3:22, where it says, *"Because of the Lord's great love, we are not consumed for his compassions are not fully poured out."* Do you see the contrast? The author says, "Your punishment will end." The poet says, "Thank you, Lord, your wrath has found its bottom." It is, in fact, something that is finite, but his love and his mercies are not; they are not fully poured out. They have not reached full vent.

What's also beautiful is that phrasing at the end there can also be translated as it is finished. We're marching towards Good Friday, and we will hear those exact words. Jesus, hanging on the cross, says it is finished. A similar lament, a similar word spoken from ruin and pain, and the depths of despair in which our savior takes that on, and he says, "It is finished."

The point is, if I were to summarize it down, is that when everything collapses, one thing remains—a love that cannot be exhausted. Church, do not put your hope and wealth in religion and or politics. It will always let you down. At the bottom of that, when everything has collapsed, what you will find is that the love of God is still there. It is not exhausted like the lament. For you and me, his mercies are new every single day.

Where do you put your hope? Where do you find a foundation that won't shake? It's only in God that we will find that when everything collapses, one thing remains, a love that cannot be exhausted. Be still and know that he is God.

Lord, have mercy. Christ have mercy. Lord, have mercy. Amen.

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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