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THE LOOKOUT

MAY 2023

Unit: Lamentations

Theme: God-Given Grief

Overview: Not all grief is bad. There are redemptive tears. Sometimes hurting helps. The first word in Lamentations is “How” (*ekah*). We often ask, “How did this happen?” when we are in pain. Lamentations is attributed to Jeremiah, the weeping prophet. It is a tightly woven poetic piece that is read by the Jews in Jerusalem at the Western Wall every week. It starts with lament (1:1-2) and ends with repentance (5:21-22). Students will learn of God’s discipline and punishment as well as how confession of sins and waiting on the Lord helps his people experience his mercy and faithfulness.

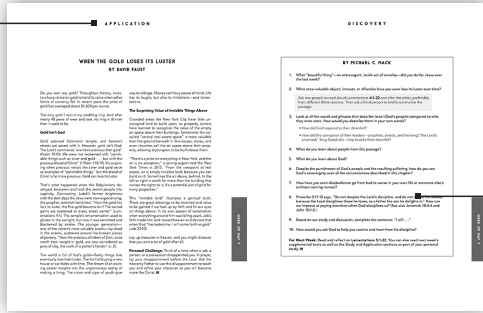
HOW TO USE

Each week has a **lesson aim**, **lesson text**, and **supplemental text**.



Tabs indicate the week of each lesson.

Each week features three sections: **Study**, **Application**, and **Discovery**.



Use the **Discovery** questions to study, discuss, and apply the Scripture passages in a group or class.

WEEK OF MAY 14, 2023

LESSON AIM: **Pray for mercy when
you suffer God's
punishment.**

UNIT: Lamentations

THEME: God-Given Grief

LESSON TEXT: Lamentations 5:1-22

SUPPLEMENTAL TEXT: 2 Kings 21:10-16; Psalm 143:1-12;
Jeremiah 4:16-18; Ezekiel 5:15

STUDY

PUNISHED

BY MARK SCOTT

James Dobson told of a little boy who was cantankerous in church. His mother finally picked him up and hauled him down the center aisle to the foyer to discipline him. The little boy touched each person on the end of each pew as he was being hauled out and said, "Pray for me." Thank God for mothers (and fathers) who wisely punish their children when it is deserved.

Like the mother in this story, God has administered deserved punishment; for the Israelites, the reason was their unfaithfulness. The result was Lamentations, which we are working our way through. Last week we discussed God's discipline (chapter 4), and this week we discuss his punishment (chapter 5).

Bad News

Lamentations 5:1-18

Israel's Situation (vv. 1-10)—Chapter 5 begins with a prayer, "Remember, Lord. . . ." The situation was dire. Israel had been disgraced (reproached or scorned) by their Babylonian captors. Their *inheritance* (possession or property) and *homes* had been *turned over* to foreigners. Their pursuers had nipped at their heels (literally stood on their necks). The Israelites previously had submitted to *Egypt* and *Assyria* (representative of past captivities) to find bread. People groups who should have been Israel's slaves now ruled over them. No one could free Israel from their hands.

In addition to being enslaved, Israel's family life was a train wreck. Fathers had gone to war and were killed, and thus the nation was *fatherless* and many mothers were *widows*. The workforce was depleted, so *water* and *wood* had to be purchased for drinking and cooking. Prices were steep. *Bread* was secured *at the risk* of their lives. Their skin was feverish from working in the hot Palestinian sun, which Jeremiah described as being *hot as an oven*.

Israel's People (vv. 11-14)—Several groups of people are mentioned in these verses—women, virgins, princes, elders, young men, and boys. The women and virgins had been *violated* (raped) in the center of Judaism (Zion and the surrounding towns). The kingly families *have been hung up by their hands*. Older people were *shown no respect*. They were *gone from the city gate* (meaning that their influence in the market and courts was absent).

Jobs typically carried out by animals (e.g., grinding at the millstones and carrying wood) were being done by young men and boys. The music of young men had dried up.

Israel's Spirit (vv. 15-18)—The heart of the Israelites had been extinguished. The defeat of their hearts was worse than the desolation of *Mount Zion*. *Joy* had left their hearts. *Dancing* had *turned to mourning*. Their sense of royalty as God's special people had slipped like a crown from a king's head. Hearts had grown *faint*, and eyes had grown dim. They weren't trying to cover up anything, at least. The broken people of God admitted that their sin had created this dilemma. There was no singing in Zion; the sound of jackals was all that was heard.

Good News Disguised as Bad News

Lamentations 5:19-22

If the first part of this prayer is a plea for God to remember what had happened to Israel, then the rest of the prayer acknowledges that God was God, and he was uniquely postured to renew and restore his people. What is ultimately good news sometimes comes disguised as the bad news of judgment.

Jeremiah acknowledged that God would *reign forever* (in contrast to the Babylonians' reign, which would soon come to an end). God's throne endured *from generation to generation* (in contrast to the Egyptians' and Assyrians' thrones, which had already seen their demise). Israel was allowed to vent their frustration (via Jeremiah) and to ask why God seemed to *forget* and *forsake* them. The nation even wondered if God had *utterly rejected* her and was *angry . . . beyond measure* with her.

But deep within the soul of Israel was the desire to be restored and renewed (repaired or made new) as God's people. That was possible only by the grace of God. As strange as it might sound, the path to renewal is often punishment. That is the good news disguised as bad news.

On this Mother's Day, thank God the Father for being like a tough and tender mother. The stern lines in his face are really marks of love. Let us learn the lesson that Israel had to learn—that is, to pray for mercy when we suffer God's punishment. ■

APPLICATION

SEARCHING FOR GOD IN TIMES OF PAIN

BY DAVID FAUST

Have you ever wondered why there is so much sorrow in the world? Since God created freewill beings, is he responsible for pain and suffering? In his book *Where Is God When It Hurts?* Philip Yancey points out that “giving a child a pair of ice skates, knowing that he may fall, is a very different matter from knocking him down on the ice.”

In the book of Lamentations, Jeremiah used poetic prayers to voice deep sorrow over the fallen city of Jerusalem. He wrote, “Joy is gone from our hearts; our dancing has turned to mourning. The crown has fallen from our head. Woe to us, for we have sinned!” (Lamentations 5:15-16).

How should we handle times of mourning when joy disappears? Where is God in painful times?

Some hurts are hard to explain. The apostle Paul performed miracles of healing, so why did he leave Trophimus sick in Miletus (2 Timothy 4:20)? And why did God say no when Paul asked for removal of his thorn in the flesh (2 Corinthians 12:7-10)? Pain shouldn’t surprise us. In our fallen world, nature itself aches for redemption like a woman in the throes of childbirth (Romans 8:18-25). Some hurts result from our own foolish choices, for “a man reaps what he sows” (Galatians 6:7). Some suffering comes from Satan’s direct attacks (Job 2:7; Luke 13:16) and some is caused by the evil choices of others. God uses hardship to instruct and discipline us, as loving parents do (Hebrews 12:4-11), but it’s not always easy to discern exactly what we’re supposed to learn.

Some hurts are part of the healing process. Gardeners prune plants to make them more fruitful. Surgeons make strategic cuts to remove disease. Physical therapists use the temporary discomfort of stretching and exercise to bring their patients long-term improvement.

Some hurts result from trying to help. Jeremiah is known as the weeping prophet because he bore a heavy burden for the Jewish people. “Since my people are crushed, I am crushed,” he wrote (Jeremiah 8:21). It’s been said, “Hurt people hurt people.” And we’re surrounded by people who are hurting! When we bear others’ burdens and care for the suffering, we may get hurt in the process. “Wounded healers” are in good company, for Christ himself “took up our pain and bore our suffering” (Isaiah 53:4).

Some hurts will be healed only in heaven. The Lord is preparing a place for us where tears, death, mourning, and pain will disappear forever (Revelation 21:4). According to Philip Yancey,

The Bible consistently changes the questions we bring to the problem of pain. It rarely, or ambiguously, answers the backward-looking question “Why?” Instead, it raises the very different, forward-looking question, “To what end?” We are not put on earth merely to satisfy our desires, to pursue life, liberty, and happiness. We are here to be changed, to be made more like God in order to prepare us for a lifetime with him.

None of our hurts escape the heavenly Father’s attention. Jeremiah prayed, “Remember, Lord, what has happened to us; look, and see our disgrace” (Lamentations 5:1). God does see and remember. He is a very present help in times of trouble, and through Jesus Christ, he came in person to share our suffering. “The God of all comfort” (2 Corinthians 1:3) is with us in our pain.

Personal Challenge: With your small group or a trusted friend, talk about your own experiences with physical, emotional, or spiritual pain. What has God taught you through hardship and suffering? **L**

DISCOVERY

BY MICHAEL C. MACK

1. How have you received and responded to any loving discipline from God over the past week?
2. Throughout your life, what has God taught you through hardship and suffering?

Ask two people to read aloud **Lamentations 5:1-22** one after the other, preferably from different Bible versions. Then ask a third person to briefly summarize the passage.
3. How would you describe the situation in which the people found themselves (see vv. 1-10)?
 - What might it have been like for the different people groups mentioned in verses 11-14?
 - Imagine we were living in what is described in this passage. What emotions might we be feeling and what might be the nature of our attitudes? (See vv. 15-18.)
4. What do you learn about people from this passage?
5. What do you learn about God?
6. In what ways can you relate to Jeremiah's prayer in verses 19-22 in your current circumstances?
7. Reread verse 19 out loud. With that truth in mind, how can we find hope in whatever circumstances we find ourselves?
8. Whom will you tell about God's sovereignty and your hope in him this week?
9. Based on our study and discussion, complete the sentence: "I will . . ."
10. In what ways would you like to ask God to restore, renew, and revive yourself, the church, our country, and the world today?

For Next Week: Read and reflect on **Lamentations 1:1, 10-18; 2:5-14, 17, 20-21**. You can also read next week's supplemental texts as well as the Study and Application sections as part of your personal study. ■