Dr. Leslie Allen, Lamentations, Session 15, Lamentations and Christianity

This is Dr. Leslie Allen in his teaching on the book of Lamentations. This is session 15, Lamentations and Christianity.

We have left behind the direct text of Lamentations, but what I want to do with you now is to study with you Lamentations from a Christian perspective.

I have 15 points that I want to bring to you.

The first is that there is, in fact, a New Testament counterpart to Lamentations. We find it in the Gospel of Luke in chapter 19 and verses 41 through 44. Here is Jesus coming to Jerusalem, coming near to Jerusalem, and he weeps over Jerusalem, not for what it has suffered, but for what it's going to suffer.

So, whereas Lamentations looks back, Jesus looks forward. He has the same expression of grief as we find in Lamentations and also a hint of guilt. As Jesus came near and saw the city, he wept over it, saying, if you, even you, had only recognized on this day the things that make for peace, but now they are hidden from your eyes.

Indeed, the days will come upon you when your enemies will set up ramparts around you and surround you and hem you in on every side. They will crush you to the ground, you and your children within you, and they will not leave within you one stone upon another because you did not recognize the time of your visitation from God. And so there it is, looking ahead to AD 70 and the renewed fall of Jerusalem and the destruction of the second temple, Herod's temple.

And so, there is a parallel of sorts with Lamentations and we find a similar expression of guilt and grief there on the lips of Jesus. Let me go on to say there are two good ways of summing up Lamentations. And here is one way.

I quote from the Zondervan Handbook to the Bible. Lamentations is a collection of five laments that grieve for the destruction of Jerusalem by the Babylonian army in 587 BC. My only quarrel with that is that I think it was 586, but that's a minor point.

But that's fine. That's a question of historical exegesis, and we have to look at the historical context of the text, and it does so very well here. But we can't stay there.

Let me now turn instead to Brevard Childs's Introduction to the Old Testament. Significantly, the book's full title is Introduction to the Old Testament as Scripture. Here, he finds a hermeneutical approach.

He finds something of permanent value in the book rather than simply history. And this is what Childs wrote. The book of Lamentations serves every successive generation of the faithful, the suffering faithful, for whom history has become unbearable.

And there it is. And it's so good. He's summed it up so well.

He has every generation of believers in mind who go through times of dire trouble. So that's the second point.

The third point, Lamentations, has a canonical significance in that it aligns with other parts of scripture, too, in various details.

For instance, God is sensitive to suffering. That was a point that's very much implied by the mentor and in the congregations venturing to come to prayer in Chapter 5. But God is sensitive to suffering. I refer you to the book of Exodus, Chapter 2, verses 23 through 25.

After a long time, the king of Egypt died. The Israelites groaned under their slavery and cried out. Out of slavery, their cry for help rose up to God.

God heard their groaning, and God remembered his covenant with Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. God looked upon the Israelites, and God took notice of them. And I'm reminded very much of that petition we find more than once in Lamentations.

Look and see, Lord. Look and see what God does here. Moving on to Exodus 3, verses 7 to 9, we find a similar statement.

The Lord said I have observed the misery of my people who are in Egypt. I have heard their cry on account of their taskmasters. Indeed, I know their sufferings.

I've come down to deliver them from the Egyptians and to bring them up out of that land to a good and broad land, a land flowing with milk and honey to the country of the Canaanites and so on. The cry of the Israelites has now come to me. I've also seen how the Egyptians oppressed them.

And that very much is an underlying thought that the mentor had and that the congregation seized onto, that God would be sensitive and would indeed come to their help. A second area of canonical significance is that there was a lesson for God's people to learn in the sort of language that we read in Lamentations. And here I'm thinking of Exodus chapter 12 and verse 15, the exhortation to rejoice with those who rejoice and weep with those who weep.

And this was something that the mentor, above all, could do. He was one who wept with those who wept. And why do we need to do so? Well, in Ecclesiastes, there's a basic statement that we need to take seriously.

And it's in Ecclesiastes chapter 2 and verse 6. And let me quickly turn to it. It's talking about them; it's chapter 3 and verse 6, actually. Let's get it right, and it's chapter 3 and verse 4. And it's talking about different times.

And sometimes, we have good times and other times; there are bad times. And there's this differentiation. And verse 4 of chapter 3 says, there's a time to weep and a time to laugh, a time to mourn and a time to dance.

We need to recognize those times, both for ourselves and for others around us. If it's a time to weep, then we need to weep for ourselves and for others who are weeping. If it's a time to mourn, then we need to mourn and give time to that, in fact.

And overall, then, there's very much a necessity of human grief. Lamentations are very much affirming grief is necessary; one must grieve. We find that the emphasis in the funeral lament, which dominates so much of that book, is the necessity of human grief.

And so, overall we can speak of the spiritual value of lamentations as a lengthy exposition of grief. We need this book. This book is a book for us. It's very much part of scripture.

Then, there is a fourth point: the need to verbalize grief. I came across a book, I think it was in a foreign language but it had been translated into English, it's called Suffering.

And it was by a woman called Dorothee Surla. And she spoke of suffering and language. In fact, chapter three of that book was called Suffering and Language.

She said the first step towards overcoming suffering is to find a language that leads out of the uncomprehended suffering that makes one mute. We need a language of lament, a language of crying, a language of pain. This emphasizes the need to verbalize grief and to get it out of one's system by verbalizing and articulating it.

There's a book that I found valuable, perhaps more than many other books, a technical book on grief. It's called The Path Through Grief, and it's by a woman called Marguerite Mouvard. And I'm going to be looking at different things I want to quote from that book in this particular video.

And for instance, she says, let me turn to the reference. She's the one that quotes. Do you remember I quoted a poem by Ruth Feldman? This was the poem, and this was where I got it. When the waters of loss rose, I built an ark of words, took two of every part of speech, and rode the flood.

And there we are. The poem goes on, but it was very much that first stanza that I thought was so valid. Marguerite Mouvard goes on to say that, later on in that chapter, talking is the most obvious way of expressing our feelings.

We can describe them in all their fullness and detail. We can give examples and bring up shades of meaning, color, intensity, and nuance. We can even use metaphors for the subtle feelings that are not easily defined.

She goes on to speak of the necessity of talking. Certainly, there's a lot of talking going on from the mentor first when the congregation couldn't do it, but guiding their thoughts, getting them to understand what was going on, and then finally, they can speak for themselves. And that's the great climax.

The fifth point is that we have a quest for interpretation and evaluation in Lamentations. Is there any meaning in what has happened to us? And in this particular case, there's very much a yes brought by the mentor in reply.

And there's a finding of meaning. We said we had to be very careful with this particular issue. Grief is so different, and one must not assume that we know the nature of grief for any individual.

We have to listen very carefully. But for these people who've been left behind in 586, what they needed was a message very close to that of Alcoholics Anonymous, as we've been mentioning. To take responsibility for what had happened and to realize that they were responsible, to realize that they were to blame in this particular case.

As I say, grief takes many shapes and sizes, and most examples of grief will not fall into this category, but if it does, then it has to be pointed out.

The sixth point is the sanctification of human grief. What do I mean by this? Well, the name of the book, we call it Lamentations, and there's a reason for that.

In the Hebrew tradition, in the Jewish tradition, the book has got two names. And the first one follows a pattern that we often find in books in the Hebrew Bible. You take the first word, and that's the name.

And so Echa, that shriek, that scream, you can refer to Lamentations. It says in Echa, and there you are. But they had another name for it, and that was Kinot.

And Kina, I think I've mentioned before, it's the word for a funeral lament. And Kinoth is the plural, funeral laments. And it's very striking that that's the name of the book.

It could have been called Prayers or Lament Prayers and there would have been a Hebrew word that would have fitted that description. But there's this sanctification of human grief in the naming of the book. Funeral laments.

Grief is necessary. Those grief processes are necessary, and they fasten upon one of the two genres we find in the book. Not the prayer lament, perhaps the more respectable way, the spiritual way, the theological way, but that human process of working through grief slowly but surely, the Kina, this funeral lament, with all its physical manifestations of tearing your clothes and bursting into tears and so on. And so, it's a celebration of what's happening there in the actual title.

And then the next point, the seventh point, it gives us support in grieving by providing a scriptural model. Grieving is right because here's an account of people who grieved all the way through Lamentations.

This reminds me of a couple of other models that we find in the Old Testament, and one of them is a narrative in 1 Samuel. Do you remember Hannah? She had no baby. There was a second wife who had a baby, and perhaps she said, hold my baby for a little while, but not for long.

I've got to nurse my baby because it is my baby, isn't it? It's not your baby. And she was rather nasty. That other wife was rather nasty.

And Hannah was so grieving, and the poor husband, caught in the middle tried to console her; well, I do love you, I do love you, but somehow that wasn't enough. And so at festival time, she goes to the temple at Shiloh, and it says, 1 Samuel 1.10, she was deeply distressed and prayed to the Lord and wept bitterly. And she made this vow, O Lord of hosts, if only you would look on the misery of your servant and remember me and not forgive your servant but will give to your servant a male child.

Then I will set him before you as a Nazarite until the day of his death. I will commit him to your service. And there we are, that's another religious model and the promise that Hannah makes, but she so wants, she's trying to persuade God, I so want a child.

I won't keep him, I'll nurse him for three years but then I'll hand him over to your care, give him over to the sanctuary. And then the second model is not a narrative itself, but it's found in prayer; it's found in Solomon's prayer in 2 Kings. 2 Kings chapter 8 and verses 37 through, no it's 1 King isn't it, 1 King chapter 8 verses 37 to 39.

It's talking about the use to which the temple can be put, and a prime use is it being a place where prayer laments can be heard. And so there might be all sorts of crises, but whatever the crisis, you can come to the temple with the assurance that God will hear and God will answer those prayers. And so, if there's any famine in the land, if there's plague, blight, mildew, locust or caterpillar, so much could go wrong and prevent the harvest.

If their enemy besieges them in any of their cities, that brings us close to lamentations. Whatever plague, whatever sickness there is, whatever prayer, whatever plea there is from any individual or from all your people, individual or communal. All were knowing the affliction of their own hearts so that they stretch out their hands toward this house.

And the affliction of their own heart, that is, this subjective reaction to this objective crisis, whatever it may be. To stretch out their hands toward this house, that's what they need to do. And then here the prayer is, here in heaven your dwelling place, forgive, act, and render to all whose hearts you know.

And so there it is, there's another model in the particular use to which the temple may be put. And I believe that this prayer is brought to the physical context of the ruined temple.

And then the eighth point, we've noticed it's a long process in lamentations and it seems to be going on and on.

And it was sometimes going around in circles. Grief kept coming back, as did grievance and guilt. But that sense of loss kept coming back and dominating in all of the poems in turn.

C.S. Lewis, I haven't made much mention of him, but his little book, A Grief Observed, is very much a classic in the study of grief. Because he wrote down his reactions after his wife, beloved wife Joy, died from cancer. And this is one thing he said, grief is like a bomber circling round and dropping its bombs each time the circle brings it overhead.

So, it keeps coming back and back and back over a long period of time. And this is what grief is like. And you sense in these repeated references that it keeps coming back, and it's a reflection of how the congregation was thinking and ought to be thinking.

That is a natural part of the processing of grief. And here again I refer to that book, The Path Through Grief. I think it has a good comment at this point.

Grief is unpredictable. A person has a string of good days and then plunges back into a renewed sense of sadness. But that doesn't mean a sliding back or lack of progress.

Frequent ups and downs are a normal part of bereavement. And there's this uncertainty. It takes over for a while, goes away, and comes back again. This is what is happening in Lamentations.

The ninth point is that there is room for protest. There's room for challenge, even challenging God. And we saw this in the previous video, that why, why? Not just one why, two whys.

Why, why? And this is a why of bewilderment and of protest. And Lewis observed that in his book, A Grief Observed. And one comment he makes sounds cynical, but it's how he felt.

God is so very absent, help in trouble. And this is very much in line with the way that Lamentations closes.

And then the tenth point, there's room for grievance.

Grievance against other people is a call for justice to be done. And we saw in Lamentations itself this call for grievance put in terms of a petition. In chapter 1 and verse 9, we find that Zion interrupts.

Oh Lord, look at my affliction, for the enemy has triumphed. The enemy has acted big. The enemy has acted arrogantly.

There is a protest against this enemy, and there's a call to punish them. They're in the wrong, and they need to be punished.

I may well be in the wrong, I am, but they're in the wrong too. And so be fair, punish them. And towards the end of chapter 1, let them be as I am.

Let all their evil doing come before you. Deal with them as you've dealt with me because of all my transgressions. There's wrong on their side, too.

And for justice's sake, something must be done. And it moves on in that grievance prayer that the mentor repeats in 3:59. You've seen the wrong done to me, oh Lord. Judge my cause, take my side.

And 64 to 66, pay them back for their deeds, oh Lord, according to the work of their hands. Pursue them in anger and destroy them from under the Lord's heaven. We might say unchristian, but we may remember that I referred you to 2 Thessalonians chapter 1 in verses 5 to 10.

There's this same compassionate statement that Paul is making—compassionate on behalf of the persecuted Thessalonian Christians—that God will punish those who are persecuting him. We find this picked up, for instance, in the book of Revelation.

Revelation chapter 6, verses 9 and 10. When he opened the fifth seal, I saw under the altar the souls of those who'd been slaughtered for the word of God and for the testimony they had given. They cried out with a loud voice, Sovereign Lord, holy and true, how long will it be? Protest there, challenge.

How long will it be before you judge and avenge our blood on the inhabitants of the earth? We find it, too, in a parable that Jesus told in Luke 18. He told a parable about a widow who keeps coming to this judge and saying, Grant me justice against my opponent. And she nags him and nags him, and eventually this judge says, I will grant her justice.

So, she may not wear me out by continually coming. And the meaning of the parable, listen to what the unjust judge says. Will not God grant justice to his chosen ones who cry to him day and night? Will he delay long in helping them? I tell you, he will quickly grant justice to them.

Justice against their opponents, in point of fact. And there it is. I like reading mystery books.

At the moment I'm going through a series, about 15 or so, written by a British author, P.D. James. And she actually was an Anglican. And we find theological themes coming out here and there.

And she wrote a book called Original Sin. And that title, behind that title, is the fact of a publishing firm beside the River Thames in London. And there was some past wrong that had been done in former generations among those who had owned and run this printing firm.

And it worked itself out in different ways. And that was the general plot. But what I want to refer to is a particular scene in it.

There was an office there. And you find this man, this middle-aged man, who's actually Jewish. And then there's a young girl, a young woman typist.

And she hasn't got many spiritual feelings or aspirations at all. But one day, she talks about God. And she says to this clerk, this office man, this Jewish man, If I had a God, I'd like him to be intelligent, cheerful, and amusing.

And her Jewish fellow employee said I doubt whether you'd find him much of a comfort when they herded you into the gas chambers. You might prefer a God of vengeance. And there it is.

That sums it up. It depends on where we are. And when we're persecuted, we do cry out in the way that these scriptures indicate in the New Testament and Old Testament.

So there's room for grievance, says the scriptures. And a call for justice against human enemies who are doing us wrong.

Then, the eleventh point, a turning point, a turning point.

As I've said before, it's not closure. Eventually, one hopes to reach closure, but there's a turning point at which the pain is as bad as ever.

But yes, you can see the beginning of a dawn, the beginning of that darkness slowly lifting away in the east. Just a little sign of it. And this is the point that Lamentations 5 reaches.

This turning point and glimpses of hope for a positive future. And this was what the mentor experienced in talking about his reflections to that first lament that God did answer. And God came near and said, do not fear.

And that was a turning point for him. And along with that turning point, he thought through that suffering. I haven't reached the end.

I haven't reached the end. I'm a survivor, in fact. And this leads him to explore Exodus 34 and verse 6 and the treasure that he finds there.

But these glimpses of hope for a positive future, but they must be self-realized. And over against that, we can have well-meaning friends who come alongside us and assure us that it's going to be better in the end. We're going to get over it.

And we don't appreciate it at the time. And that book, The Path of Grief, mentions that. In fact, I have gained some ways of dealing with people that say such things as, it's all for the best.

You don't know that now, but you will someday. I think I would say now. I just don't feel that way.

And so, it is not helpful. And there are people who like to quote Romans 8:28. It's going to be okay. Romans 8:28. All things work together for good for those who love God, who are called according to his purpose.

That's all right. Just believe that. And it's not as easy as that.

And what you have to remember is the context in which Romans 8:28 is spoken. And it's spoken by and to people who are undergoing, in verse 35, hardship, distress, persecution, famine, nakedness, peril, or sword. All these prospects were very real or actually experienced.

In that context, we can use Romans 8:28. And so, we can use it if we have come through that suffering and say, yes, it's true. We can use it for a fellow believer who is suffering if we use it as testimony. I know it to be true, but just to toss it off by itself, this is not helpful.

But self-realized glimpses of hope for a positive future, that's a wonderful place to reach. And it's a turning point.

The twelfth point I want to raise is the question of the wounded healer, which I've gone into before.

I won't treat it at length now. We saw that it goes back to that ancient myth picked up by Carl Jung and then echoed by Henry Nowen, who applied it to pastors in his book The Wounded Healer. The mentor is very much a wounded healer.

And his scars qualified him, one might say, to treat the open wounds of those who were around him. But also, there's another sense that is true, and which we saw the mentor succumbing to, that it can be all too much trying to help somebody who is suffering. And one takes it upon oneself too much, and it's so overwhelming.

And one needs time out afterward. We saw two places in chapter 2 and chapter 3 in which the mentor responds in that very way. He can't take it.

It's so overwhelming. This is true as well. It goes along with the concept of the wounded healer.

The 13th point, there's a need for adequate time in grieving. We can get impatient with other people who are grieving. And we say, get over it.

Get over it. That's what we want to say. This is a luxury you're indulging in to stay here.

And in a way, the mentor was faced with this situation. And I think that's the secret of chapter 4, that he realized that he needed to show patience. You can't jump from chapter 3 to chapter 5. You've got to grieve a bit more.

The congregation, you've got to grieve more. And so, grief has its own timetable. There's a need for adequate time.

Fourteenth, we have to realize that grieving can cause a risk to faith or life. And there's the case of Charles Darwin. And I was reading an article the other day who talked about this very thing.

Charles Darwin, he lost his faith. And let me tell you why he lost his faith. Charles Darwin never really recovered from the death of his favorite daughter, Annie, age 9. He couldn't bring himself to attend the child's funeral or to visit his grave for 12 years.

Indeed, he avoided the whole district in which he and she had been living. And in a way, this was unexpected to say that Darwin lost his faith because he lost his favorite daughter, that child of 9 years old. And the article goes on to say that this was what cost Darwin his Christianity.

It's a common misconception that the great man ceased to believe in God as a result of his research into the origin of species, and especially ours. In fact, his professional work had nothing to do with his religious beliefs or lack of them. He himself said science and faith were quite separate and not necessarily connected at all.

He deplored, as all sensible men and women do, the fallacy that science was the enemy of religion. He thought the opposite, if anything. But he could not see the justice or reason for Annie's death.

And rather than rage at an unjust and unreasonable God, he preferred to shrivel up his belief in God. And there's such a great risk among believers who are grieving. And this was the great problem that fell upon Jewish believers as a result of the Holocaust.

So unthinkable that many Jews gave up their faith in God completely. And one of the great missions of Elie Wiesel was to deplore this and say, yes, I cannot take the Holocaust, but it does not take away my faith in God. So, there is a risk to faith.

And there is a risk to life. I thought it was rather exaggerated at first. Dorothee Sulla, in her book on suffering, she went so far as to say, you must verbalize your grief, you must speak it out, or otherwise it might lead to suicide.

Your grief may such, if you don't deal with it, if you don't go through the processes of grief, then it may well be that suicide is the result. But I remember that in one of my chaplain's visits, I came across a Christian young man who was suffering in that very way. And let me read you what I wrote.

Raymond was brought to the hospital late one evening as a precaution against suicide. He was a fine man in his mid-twenties, assisting the youth pastor at his church and dedicated to helping teenagers. Now, he needed help.

A few months before, his parents had died, one after the other, two bitter blows. Then he learned his girlfriend was dead of an overdose. It was all too much.

He was brought by ambulance to this locked psychiatric unit. The next day, the staff made a request for a chaplain to visit. When I arrived, I gently woke Raymond out of an exhausted sleep.

Bleary-eyed, he sat up in bed and said, All I want to do is sleep. I was glad to hear him demonstrate this safe form of denial. It made me realize his stay would not be an extended one, and he would soon be passed to outpatients.

And so, this was likely to be my only visit. I also realized this was not the occasion for a long pastoral interchange. What short message could I leave about the way forward? I thought for a moment and said, I want to leave three words with you, Raymond: tears, talk, and time.

I added a brief sentence to each word and then told him to go back to sleep and remember those three words when he woke up. I left him and said, God bless you. Later, at the end of the book, I come back to this story.

When Raymond, the young man whose story of inconsolable grief was related in the introduction to this book, awoke from his much-needed sleep, he may not have recalled my visit. Exhaustion and depression are powerful soporifics. Yet I suspect those three words, tears, talk, and time, fell like seeds in his unconscious and germinated in the weeks that followed.

The mourning of his personal tragedy would not have a quick or easy closure, but hope emerges from mourning. Hope, the instrument of healing, has very small seeds, but they are life-giving. And so there we are.

That risk has to be very much borne in mind, the risk of a loss of faith and the risk of loss of life even.

Then, the fifteenth point, the last point I want to say, I refer again to a book by Gerald Sitzer, and I refer to the title, A Grace Disguised, How the Soul Grows Through Loss. And at first, I was offended.

How on earth could he say it's a grace disguised? He lost his mother. He lost his wife. He lost one of his children in that terrible car crash.

Eventually, it was long after he could recognize it as a grace disguised, and he could back it up with this subtitle: How the Soul Grows Through Loss. At one point, he speaks in that way, and he says how, in a strange way, his sorrow has helped him grow, and his grief has changed him for the good. This is something that we need to bear in mind, something that in no way can we appreciate for a long while when we're obsessed with grief, and we find that grief is obsessive, in fact.

Jesus said, Blessed are those who mourn, for they will be comforted. Sorrow indicates that people who have suffered loss are living authentically in a world of misery, and it expresses the emotional anguish of people who feel pain for themselves or for others. Sorrow is noble and gracious.

It enlarges the soul until the soul is capable of mourning and rejoicing simultaneously, of feeling the world's pain and hoping for the world's healing at the same time. However painful, sorrow is good for the soul. Deep sorrow often has the effect of stripping life of pretense, vanity, and waste.

It forces us to ask basic questions about what is most important in life. Suffering can lead to a simpler life, less cluttered with non-essentials. It's wonderfully clarifying.

That is why many people who suffer sudden and severe loss often become different people. They spend more time with their children or spouses, express more affection and appreciation to their friends, show more concern for other wounded people, give more time to a worthy cause, or enjoy more of the extraordinary, of the ordinary, enjoy more of the ordinariness of life. In the film, The Doctor, an arrogant physician who shows little regard for the real needs of his patients is transformed when he suddenly becomes a patient himself.

His own account of his encounter with cancer makes him sensitive to the people whom he had only previously treated as sick bodies. And there we are. Strange to say, there's something very positive to say about grief and suffering and sorrow, that it has, it can enlarge us, it can change us for good, and we can happy, actually be happy for it, and even think to thank God for it, that some good came out of it.

Romans 8:28, that good effect, it's true after all.

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