

SUMMER A5 - What Can Christians Learn from Lamentations?

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Preacher: Andrew Reid

- [0 : 00] Well friends, great to be with you again this evening for this our last talk on Lamentations. Let's pray and ask God to help us. Our Father, we pray today that as we think about this book again from a larger perspective, that you'd help us to see its ramifications for us and help us to see what it means for us as Christians.
- Father, we pray these things in Jesus' name. Amen. Well, a number of years ago, Christians from all over the world marked an anniversary. It was the 75th anniversary of the conversion of a man who called himself the most dejected and reluctant convert in all of England.
- His name, of course, was Clive Staples Lewis. C.S. Lewis, as most of us know him, wrote two books about his conversion. Their names are *Surprised by Joy* and *The Pilgrim's Regress*.
- And in each of these books, Lewis recounts the search for what he calls joy. And he tells the story of how that search led him ultimately to God. At the end of *Surprised by Joy*, he calls the search for joy a signpost of the road that leads to God.
- [1 : 24] The longing for joy that he felt was ultimately, he said, fulfilled in God. And as I reflect on the conversion of Lewis, it's clear to me that the longing he has is a very common one.
- We all long for happiness, don't we? You can see it in our advertisements, in our movies, in our media, in our language, in all our self-help books. We long for this mysterious state of blessedness where everything is sorted out and where we will be fulfilled and where the whole of our existence will be saturated with contentment.
- To seek a state of happiness or blessedness is a very, very common, if not universal, human desire. And it is one that is regularly addressed in the book of Psalms.
- In fact, the very first word in the book of Psalms is the word for happiness or blessedness. The psalmist cries, how blessed are those who?
- And like C.S. Lewis, the book of Psalms clearly connects our longing for the state of blessedness with our longing for God. The two are intertwined with each other. And all of those of us who know God and experience, will experience the same desire as the psalmist.
- [2 : 42] They know with Lewis and with the psalmist that happiness and blessedness is somehow, somewhere tied up with God. And so they long for God.
- We long for God. We cry out to God. And the deepest yearning we have is for God and his company. Our heartfelt lust, as it were, is for his presence.
- We want to be with God. We want to be, we want God to be for us. With God and blessing by God, we have all that our heart desires.
- Now, all of us know, though, that knowing God and belonging to him does not always mean a blessed state. And if you don't know it, you will. Probably.

The book of Psalms also testifies to this. You see, the believer in God can sometimes feel the absence of God or the judgment of God or the strangeness of God's activity. And it can lead to a state of feeling very unblessed.

[3 : 44] It can lead away from praise to lament. Friends, tonight I want to take up this topic. I want to address the question of lament for us as Christians. You see, I think that the Bible and the book of Lamentations has an enormous amount to teach us in this area.

However, before I do this, I want to make some general observations about what we as Christians can learn from the book of Lamentations. By the way, this is a very different Bible talk tonight.

As you know, my normal pattern, our normal pattern here at Holy Trinity is to work through a passage. We've been doing this. However, what I want to do today is to do some final sort of stepping back from that and to do some larger theological and practical reflection on the Bible as a whole.

To try and sew all of this together. So we won't be working through a passage as usual. But these summer Bible studies give us an opportunity to do this larger theological and practical reflection.

What I will say tonight will be based on theological reflections on what we've seen as we've worked through Lamentations and interacting with other parts of Scripture.

[4 : 52] So, first, let me turn to a list of the things we Christians can learn from Lamentations. Perhaps another way of talking about it would be to ask, why do we need the book of Lamentations?

Why did perhaps God put it within Scripture for us? Why is it important to have it in the Bible? What would be missing if we didn't have it? So, perhaps we could ask, why do we need the book of Lamentations in the Bible?

What can we learn from it? And I have six answers. I'm sorry you don't have outlines tonight. That's due to a number of factors. One is that I'm under pressure because I leave overseas tonight and didn't have time to get it all done.

And the other is our photocopier is not working terribly well as well. So, but you may want to take some notes. So, here are my six answers to the question. The first has to do with God's holiness and the awfulness of sin.

You see, when I ask the question, why do we need the book of Lamentations and what can we learn from it? The first answer is this. We need the book of Lamentations for its depiction of the awfulness of sin.

[5 : 57] You see, my view is that we Christians have a very weak view of sin and of God's attitude to it. We sort of think that sin is something like a misdemeanor. You know, like jaywalking or something like that.

That it's against the law, but you know, it's not a big deal really in the end. We don't think it's really that bad. Well, Lamentations tells us otherwise. You see, it tells us that God loves his people, but sin separates us from God.

It breaches relationship and a holy God must shut sin and sinners out of his presence. After all, that's what Genesis 1 to 3 is all about, isn't it? In one sense, it shows us humans are sinful and if they are sinful, they must be shut out of intimate contact with God.

If God is truly holy, he must punish sin and those who commit it. And friends, we often think, yes, he must punish sin, but you know, he's still, he's still okay with us.

Well, no, it's not true. God must punish sin and the sinners. If he's truly holy, he must do this. Friends, the people of Israel did not have a strong enough view of the holiness of God and the awfulness of sin.

[7 : 06] They found out that God could not continue to live in the presence of sin and those who do it. Those of you who try and grapple with the book of Leviticus think, oh, I don't know what all that's about. We know what the book of Leviticus is about.

If God is to dwell among his people, one has to have a very elaborate set of things in place. So that sin can be dealt with. Otherwise, God would have to vacate the land and the temple and the land because it would not be possible to live without him with him unless sin was dealt with.

Friends, the people of Israel didn't have a strong enough view of about this. They found that that God could not continue to live in the presence of sin and those who did it.

They found out that God was truly holy and if he was truly holy, he must punish sin. And they found out in a very graphic way because God, Ezekiel got a vision of God vacating the land, vacating the temple.

We Christians need to hear this, friends. Our God is holy. Sin is sin. And sin breaks fellowship with God.

[8 : 16] Sin creates distance between God and the sinner. Sin is an affront to God and must be dealt with and cannot be lightly put aside. And lamentations teaches us this.

So that is my first point. We need to come to grips with a God who is holy and sin that is awful.

Friends, that's my second question is this. Why do we Christians? If we ask the question, why do we Christians need the book of lamentations and what can we learn from it?

Then that first answer is clear. We need the book of lamentations to teach us about the holiness of God and the seriousness of sin. The second reason why we need the book of lamentations is that it gives us a phenomenally deep insight into what it means to suffer, how to approach it and how to help others.

Now we've seen this over and over again as we've worked through lamentations, haven't we? We've seen holy God punish sin. We've seen that punishment cause enormous pain amongst the people of God.

[9 : 27] We've seen that cause enormous pain in the heart of God. We've seen it cause pain in the heart of the people of God. And as we've watched God's prophet minister to the pain and suffering of God's people, we have learned a lot, haven't we?

We've learned how, do you remember in those first few chapters of lamentations, the prophet is not a passive observer. He doesn't just sort of stand back like Jonah on the hillside outside of Nineveh, just watching.

No, he enters into the pain of the people of God. He identifies with them. He weeps with them as they wept. He cried out for them and with them. He expressed their angst to God.

He also brought to them a message of relief and a message that God could continue to be trusted. You remember that in chapter three. He did not minimize their pain, but he did not minimize God's anger as well.

He did not tell them not to voice their pain and despair. He told them actually to do it and he led the way in doing it. But he did so while directing them toward God.

[10 : 34] And we can learn much from this, friends. How to deal with suffering. How to approach it. How to help in it. Again, we Christians, I think, don't always know how to deal with pain.

Perhaps you've been in some of those Bible studies I've been in where someone has expressed something theologically not quite right. Or they've expressed the pain of what it means to be Christian for them.

And we have all jumped or seen people jump very quickly to offer what are perhaps not as sensitive answers as they might have been. Even though they may have been theologically correct.

We don't always know how to deal with that pain. And sometimes we pontificate rather than being silent. Or we objectify rather than being passive observers and hearers. We know how to laugh with those who laugh.

We have no problem with that as Christians. But we don't always know how to fulfil that mandate given in the book of Romans and others. How to weep with those who weep. Nor do we know how to bring their pain to God.

[11 : 35] And to weep for them. Not just with them. We learn from the prophet and this poet in Lamentations. Its insights are profoundly deep in terms of how to be with those who weep.

How to weep with them. How to weep for them. So that's my second point. Why do we need the book of Lamentations? To teach us about suffering. And approach it as Christians.

And how to approach it as Christians. And how to help others in it. My third reason why we as Christians need the book of Lamentations. Is that it gives us a picture of Jesus. And the suffering for sin that happened in him.

You see, as Jesus hangs on the cross. He utters a lament. Do you remember that? He utters a lament. Turn to it in your Bibles.

It's Psalm 22. Psalm 22. Middle of your Bibles.

[12 : 40] Got the book of Psalms. You find 22. Look at this lament. Look at how it starts. These are the words uttered by Jesus on the cross. My God, my God.

Why have you forsaken me? And then he goes through this long catalogue of what has happened to him. He is, unlike the folk in Lamentations, the righteous sufferer.

But what Jesus is doing by identifying with this person in this Psalm is he's saying, I'm not here. Because of my own sin. But I am here on this cross.

Because of the sin of someone, of others. He openly acknowledges by using this lament that he is bearing the sin of the world. Of a world that without him would be left abandoned by God.

He, the one true righteous one, suffers the penalty for sin on our behalf. He bears its consequences. Lamentations, you see, shows us what suffering for sin is like.

[13 : 43] And it opens up for us the cost of sin. It shows us a Christ suffering on our behalf. He takes our pain on our behalf.

God allows him to. And bears the pain of the death of his son. On our behalf. Sin was dealt with seriously.

But at the same time, God the Lord, the Lord was the Lord, the Lord, the gracious and compassionate God. Slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love. Even as the writer of Lamentations remembers.

Bang in the middle of his book. Yes, Lamentations opens up for us what Jesus was able to accomplish on the cross. It bears for us the God that God the Father and God the Son have been together working for us and our salvation.

So this is the third thing that we as Christians learn from the book of Lamentations. We gain an insight in what it means for Jesus to suffer for sin. We learn the amazing grace of God.

[14 : 57] That's the third thing. Fourth reason why we should read the book of Lamentations is its realistic portrayal of life. Friends, the book of Lamentations lays bare the life of pain.

It withholds no punches. You might remember that first week when we read through, first session or two when we read through Lamentations 1 and Lamentations 2.

You might have, you heard our reading for today. About young men and young women. And what was happening to them. What happened to them in the destruction of Jerusalem.

There are no punches held. It captures the pain of life in a fallen world. The grief of not understanding God. The anxiety of waiting for God to be gracious.

The doubt that afflicts the whole being of the sufferer. The real anger that spews from mouths which have been afflicted and bodies which have been overwhelmed. It captures for us, remember that tentativeness which we saw in that very last word, unless you have forsaken us forever.

[16 : 08] The tentativeness that people feel after being bruised and pained as Israel had. The snapshot contained in Lamentations is not glossy and not sanitized.

But it is real. You know, I suspect that why so many of you have kept coming back. Is because there's something that we don't, it's something we don't hear in our pulpits any longer. This rather bare approach.

We're too used to being sanitized. It's real. And we know it's real. And we Christians cushion ourselves too easily from such things. Sometimes we actually need to shock our systems to help us see the reality of life.

And Lamentations gives us such a shock. It exposes to us real life and helps us to see it and feel it. A link to this is a fifth benefit in reading this book.

If we ask why we read this book of Lamentations and what we can learn from it, the fifth answer would be that we need it for its realistic portrayal of how to relate to God when we don't understand him.

[17 : 13] Friends, this afternoon I spoke to a young man who had been grappling with great pain and difficulty. His views of God and of Christian life and faith are changing.

Some of the changes I must say are not that positive. But some of them are. But they are overwhelmingly real.

And what this young man is going through is overwhelmingly real. And Lamentations helps us to see this, you see. It helps us to see that relating to God is a real experience.

It is done with real people grappling with a real God in a real world spoiled by real human sinfulness.

Lamentations really does not hold back. And we can learn from this. But as we do so, let's learn to deal realistically with what this means for our relationship with God. But let me turn to the final reason why we need the book of Lamentations.

[18 : 15] We need it and we can learn from it. As it teaches us that there is no pain, no loss, no sin, no thing.

That can spoil God's overwhelming nature to be faithful and gracious. There is no thing. There is nothing we experience that can overwhelm God's nature to be faithful and gracious.

And it gives us an enormous insight, doesn't it, into the faithfulness and grace of God. I mean, he got to that point where he needed to punish his people by relenting and relenting and relenting and relenting and relenting and relenting.

And, well, I can't count the number of times and no doubt. No, he could count them. Not even the awfulness of Israel's sin, though, can dint God's grace and faithfulness.

Right bang in the middle of the book, physically, psychologically and theologically, is this point. God is portrayed as overwhelmingly disposed to grace and forgiveness.

[19 : 24] And, friends, that opens us up to the core of the gospel, doesn't it? For there is the cross. In and because of Christ, we Christians know this beyond all others.

We Christians can hang on to this beyond all others. This is our God and we have been embraced by and have embraced this truth about God.

We, above all people in this world, know the wonder of this grace. That we were totally undeserving.

That we were helpless. And yet God stretched out in his son, Romans 5, and helped the helpless. And goes sucker to those who had no place to go.

So, Lamentations helps us understand this. It thereby offers us a foretaste of the gospel that we have studied unfold in the cross and in the suffering of Jesus.

[20 : 31] So, there are six reasons, friends, why I think Christians should read, mark, learn from and inwardly digest the book of Lamentations. It's a wonderful book.

Though you can't read it without all the pain. However, let me turn now to the notion of Lament. After all, the book of Lamentations is almost entirely focused on Lament.

And we need to learn about Lament. You see, Lament has virtually been eliminated from Christian corporate expression. And given that we've stopped reading the Psalms in church, it's gone.

I mean, you tell me when you last sung a song that was a Lament. Come and tell me if you have in the last ten years. Every now and then, Lament, though, peeps out from various places.

Where do you find it? Well, you occasionally find it with Christian songwriters. Not those who are writing for corporate expression, but those who are writing to have their stuff put for them to be sung and them to be listened to.

[21 : 41] See, Christian individuals often lament. Christian individual songwriters often lament. And you'll find it on their CDs and download their songs. But you also find it with Christian authors.

You find it with C.S. Lewis. Who at the opening of his Christian existence was surprised by joy. At the other end, he was also surprised by suffering and pain.

And here he found Lament. Let me show you. Let me read to you some of the jottings from a notebook that he used to process his grief after his wife died.

Early on in his grief, he writes this. And those of you who have read about C.S. Lewis know that it was a long time getting married. And he loved this woman. And then God took her from him early, as it were.

Anyway, early on in his grief, he writes this. Meanwhile, where is God? This is one of the most disquieting symptoms.

[22 : 50] You see, when you're happy, so happy that you have no sense of needing him, so happy that you feel tempted to feel his claims upon you as an interruption, if you remember yourself and turn to him with gratitude and praise, you will be, so it feels, welcomed with open arms.

But go to him when your need is desperate. When all other help is vain. And what do you find? A door slammed in your face and the sound of bolting and double bolting on the inside.

And after that, silence. You may as well turn away. The longer you wait, the more emphatic the silence will become.

And there are no lights in the windows. It might be an empty house. And you begin to wonder, was it ever inhabited? It seemed so once. And that seeming was as strong as this.

Well, what can this mean? Why is he so present a commander in our time of prosperity and so absent a help in time of trouble? It's not that I am, I think, in much danger of ceasing to believe in God.

[24 : 01] The real danger is of coming to believe such dreadful things about him. The conclusion I dread is not, so there's no God after all. But, so this is what God is really like.

Deceive yourself no longer. Friends, can you hear that grief? Now, what would you do with him in a Bible study group? Not writing it in his diary at home, but bringing it out in the Bible study.

What would you do with that? Can you hear his grief and his doubt? Can you hear his yearning after God, the God he has known and loved? Friends, I wonder if you've been there.

I have. You see, this is the world of reality. Read about it in the book of Psalms, which is more than one-third lament.

That's a phenomenal amount, isn't it? One-third lament. And the lament Psalms often ask the very same questions that Lewis asked. There is one of them and that doesn't resolve it.

[25 : 12] That leaves us hanging in. Doesn't go through the normal process of working it all out. It just leaves us. And yet it appears to me that Christians have difficulty with expressing lament.

Somehow it seems less than Christian. Or unfaithful. Being frank, open, lamenting, somehow seems to be unfaithful or doubting. However, when Christians read the laments, I find many of them comforted.

And perhaps you find yourself comforted as well. Because when you read the laments in the Psalms, I try and read a Psalm every day. So it means one in three, I come across a lament.

Because when Christians read them, they identify with their experiences and they resonate with their feelings. Moreover, what we do with the laments...

Sorry, let me ask. What do we do with those laments that God has caused to be inscripturated? Do we simply shut down this aspect of our being and this part of our faith?

[26 : 17] Friends, I urge you not to do this. You see, in my view, the presence of lament in Scripture is significant. It endorses lament and legitimizes it.

And demonstrates it's open and okay to do it. It is an alright way to express our faith. With that in mind, let's turn to defining lament. Lament is the crying out to God that is done in the midst of pain and suffering or in the face of enemies.

Can I repeat that for you? It's the crying out to God that is done in the midst of pain, suffering or enemies. It's the voice that questions, if not protests, in the midst of difficulty.

It's a response to God, only to God, who is perceived to be sovereign. And it asks questions of Him. It hangs on the fact that God is good and great.

And it says, if you are good and great, then why on earth is this happening to me? It asks questions of His word, His promises, His actions or His lack of action.

[27 : 27] And it often emerges when God is not what He should be and what you have been taught He should be. When experience does not match what faith might have expected.

Or when God's action appears ambiguous or contradictory or unprecedented or above and beyond what would be expected. And so it does in the context of prayer.

That is, it converses with God. Friends, I wonder if you've ever found yourself doing this. I have. I remember in my first few years as Christian that God didn't always make sense.

He's made less sense, perhaps. No, He's made more sense. I've got more ammunition, as it were, to make sense of things as life has gone on. But in those first few years, I found things very difficult.

And I remember once, in a particular context, I couldn't understand God. And I said to Him, God, I've had enough.

[28 : 29] I can't understand you. I don't know what you're doing. I threatened to be out of here. All the time, talking to God.

As though, on the one hand, acknowledging His existence. Acknowledging that He alone had the resources to solve it. Speaking to Him about it.

And saying, I wanted to go away from Him. But at the same time, acknowledging there was nowhere else to go. Jonah does that at the end of Jonah, I think. You see, it's a form of prayer that is therefore very provocative.

It appears to call God and His world into question. It's often therefore a call to God to reverse His current action and to act according to His will and purpose that is known. It's what happens when you know God to be something, but your experience of Him is not.

In essence, it's a call for God to be God and to act as God as He's revealed Himself to you. Lament is not simply an articulation of unhappiness. It's not that you're just saying, I'm cranky with you. I'm unhappy with life.

[29 : 39] It's a call for God, for restoration of God's character. A pleading with Him to restore equilibrium. To be God. That is to be good and to be great and to be the lover of His people.

Because He doesn't appear to be that at the moment. In the Old Testament, the call of distress, the cry out of the depths, the lament, is an inevitable part of what happens between God and His people.

Lament is a call for God to be God. Let me just show you one. In your Bibles, open at the book of Jonah. And someone who finds the page could... That was very quick.

Alright, book of Jonah, chapter 2. Now, for those of... Sorry, yell out the page number again so I can repeat it. 9.25.

9.25 in your Bibles. Let's go to Jonah, chapter 2. Now, remember what's happened. Jonah has been taken by the great fish.

[30 : 46] And he said, In my distress, I called to the Lord and He answered me. From the deep, in the realm of the dead, I called for help and you listened to my cry. So, he's given the answer up front.

He said, God answered. You hurled me into the depths, into the very heart of the seas. And the current swirled over me, or about me. All your waves and breakers swept over me.

I said, I have been banished from your sight. See, here he's expressing, he's saying, I'm distant from you. I have been banished from your sight. Yet, I will look again towards your holy temple.

The engulfing waters threatened me. The deep surrounded me. Seaweed was wrapped around my head. And the roots of the mountains... To the roots of the mountains I sank down.

The earth beneath barred me forever. But you, Lord my God, brought me out of the pit. You see, here he is in the depths. He knows where his rescue is. It is in God.

[31 : 44] He knows that only God can bring him out of that. And he says, when my life was ebbing away, I remembered you, Lord. And my prayer rose to you, to your holy temple. Those who cling to worthless idols turn away from God's...

Here, I'll let you into a little secret. If you've been here the last few studies. Those who turn to idols forsake the keshed that might be theirs.

Is what the Hebrew literally says. Remember that word for keshed? God's loving kindness. Those who turn to idols forsake that possibility. That rescue.

That love. That overwhelming kindness. But I, with shouts of grateful praise, will sacrifice to you what I have vowed I'll make good. I will say salvation comes from the Lord.

So here he is. He's been rescued and he knows where that rescue lies. It's in God. You see, he's pleading with... He's saying to God, I know what you are. I know if I leave you, I leave that.

[32 : 46] I want you to be God, to be good, to be great, to be the lover of me, your person. Now in the Old Testament, the call of distress, the kive from the depths, the lament like this is an inevitable part of what happens between God and his people.

Lament is a call for God to be God. It's a crying for him to act on our behalf. So, lament is therefore fraught with feeling. It gives emotional vent to our sense of disorientation.

The emotions associated with lament are very negative. They include rage, resentment, guilt, shame, isolation, despair, hostility, hatred. They're the opposite of praise, which is the result of being oriented correctly toward God.

Praise is a celebration of a restored order, of things as they should be. It's the heart of lament is the question is, why aren't they that way? Why has this happened?

Why is God absent? Why is God not what I expect him to be? Fix it. Please fix my situation. But more than all of that, please set things right again. Restore fellowship, relationship, restore right and wrong.

[33 : 52] Friends, at its core, lament is therefore a challenge against God, isn't it? It's not the cry of the atheist. You don't make this cry if you're an atheist. An atheist might easily believe that randomness might happen in a random world.

But a theist doesn't believe in a random world. A theist believes in a world overseen by a sovereign and powerful God. And so when the unruly happens, the theist says, why?

It ought not to be this way. A lament is a cry for God to hear. To hear the anger and to feel the angst of his people. Lament also taps into the known tendency of God, which is to act in mercy and deliver.

We saw that in Lamentations chapter 3. It's therefore somewhat two directional, you see. On the one hand, it questions what God's doing. On the other hand, it recalls that God's character is to rescue, like Jonah does.

And that will result in his people praising him. So while it's a protest against God and a reaction against God, it's also directed towards seeking God and his glory.

[34 : 59] It's only something that the theist can do. It's an appeal to the only court that can address things. Those of you who have been here in the morning as we've looked at Job, we see that with Job.

So I might just move on now to Lament in the New Testament. For that background, I want to turn to the New Testament. And one of the striking things about the New Testament is the relative absence of lament.

Have you noticed that? It doesn't seem to appear very often in the New Testament. We need to be careful about concluding that the absence of lament means that it wasn't practiced. After all, the New Testament does not let us into the inner life of God's people like the Old Testament does, does it?

I mean, where do you get a portrayal like that of Job and Jonah and so on? You're not actually let into the inner life of people very often. There's not much of the prayer life of God's people.

We hear their prayers, but we don't actually see them grappling with the reality. So the absence of the sorts of laments we see in the Old Testament does not mean that lament was not practiced.

[36 : 07] Having said that, there are hints of lament in statements in the ministry of Jesus. Do you remember them? Do you remember the centurion? He would be one example.

The ten lepers? The disciples in the storm? I reckon they're lamenting. None of them have the nature, though, of why, do they?

None of them are saying, why? None of them are rebuked either for what they say. One of the closest things we have to a lament is the cry of Jesus on the cross, where he identifies with Psalm 22, which we looked at earlier on.

You see, here we are entering into the anguish of Jesus that we saw in the garden, but which reaches a climax on the cross.

Another example of lament you might have a look at with me would be 2 Corinthians chapter 12. So in your Bibles, flip over to 2 Corinthians 12. A page number?

[37 : 19] 1 1 25 1 1 55 1 1 55 Oh, no. Somewhere around there.

Okay. Do you see what Paul's doing in this particular passage? He calls out to God about a thorn in the flesh that he has.

That he's grappled with. In one sense, he thinks it ought not to be there. And he asks God to take it from him. And God basically says no.

And that's where Paul learns a great theological truth. That God's power is present in weakness. Another example would be the saints in Revelation chapter 6 verse 10.

Who are faithful Christians. Who have died for the gospel. Died bearing witness to Jesus. And they cry. You might remember from under the throne.

[38 : 21] And they cry out for vindication. You see, they're longing for justice to be restored. They're looking around at the people we see even today, as it were.

Persecuted for their faith. And they're saying, how long, oh Lord? Why? Rescue. Put justice in place.

Apparently they have been condemned in human courts and are now looking at the heavenly court to vindicate them. They're asking God to reverse an earthly judgment given. They're given assurance that vindication will come.

But they're also told that this vindication will have to wait to the revelation of Jesus Christ. In the second coming. So the cry, how long, is the cry of Old Testament saints.

But it's also the cry of New Testament saints. So if we grant that lament is perhaps present in the New Testament, how does it help us as Christians? Well, let me explain.

[39 : 22] And I think that the New Testament tells us that unabashed boldness before God is okay. Do you remember the man with an unwilling neighbour in Luke 11?

And he's got to wake up in the middle of the night. And the unabashed boldness in prayer is commended. It's commended by Jesus.

So boldness and unabashed boldness is okay. Second, the New Testament tells us that boldness and faith in the face of apparent injustice is commendable.

You see that with the boldness of the widow. Do you remember the widow? Who comes to Jesus? She's unabashed in her boldness. And she's granted her request.

Third, because of the experience of Christ, the New Testament sees suffering as purposeful and therefore positive. That does not mean that lament is seen to be illegitimate.

[40 : 21] It just means that a new perspective is forged by the suffering of Christ. So why is it then, friends, that Christians no longer lament? Well, one Old Testament scholar I read, a man called Klaus Westermann, thinks that it's because of the emphasis in Paul on enduring suffering patiently.

It is said that Christians should not complain to God because the sufferings of this world take on a new significance in the light of the cross and the hope of the world to come. And I think that's right.

However, when you take that to its extreme, it has a number of effects. Christians begin to cease being honest and frank with God. I rarely hear Christians in pain being frank with God and we don't allow them to.

And so they think they've got to desert God in order to do it. Also, complaint can be seen as a refusal to share in the sufferings of Christ.

And we know that's not godly. And there can also be an almost masochistic acceptance of your circumstances and fate that Christians go on with.

[41 : 35] It may be possible that lament has dropped out of Western society because Christians are in a state of denial. They refuse to acknowledge or deal with the realities of life.

A church, you see, friends, that goes on singing happy songs in the face of Black Saturday fires is a church very different from biblical faith. A church that does not grieve over its fellow brothers and sisters suffering in the rest of the world.

That does not cry with the families of people from a plane that goes down. By the way, Heather told me this.

How many people died, Heather, in that plane crash? About 100, 140, 150, something like that. Amongst them, how many, Heather?

45 Christian people from one particular church. Isn't that interesting? What do we think about that, you see?

[42 : 52] Friends, we can't be happy over that, can we? We can't be happy, not just unhappy about the Christians, unhappy about those bereaved. Unhappy about those who die without being reconciled to God.

Grieved at a world that is out of plumb. Grieved at Boko Haram and what they've done in these last few days. I don't know if you've seen the images, the satellite images and so on, of before and after what happened in Nigeria.

It is awful. They've obliterated whole... And we must grieve over that, friends. In biblical faith, giving expression to angst is an expression of faith, not a denial of it.

God is the only place to go, isn't it? I don't know where else I can go when I see these things and feel these things. He alone is able to bring restoration and order.

Lament is therefore very bold. It is an act of bold faith. And it insists that the world is a real place where anomalies exist. And it boldly asserts that such anomalies belong to the God of all the earth to resolve.

[44 : 09] It is therefore the stuff of discussion and discourse with the God of all the earth. We bring them to him. We Christians are intercessors for the rest of the world because we know that the world is not meant to be like this.

And we come to our God and ask him to set it right. There is nothing out of bounds with our God. Nothing precluded. Nothing inappropriate, as it were.

To withhold it from conversation with him effectively means withdrawing part of our life from him and shutting it away from him. Lament is then, in my view, an example of supreme faith.

What's more, denying lament to God's people may result in denying them growth. So let's learn from lamentations and let's learn from Jesus. And I want you to help me because I think I would like to start bringing the Psalms back into our readings in our morning services at least.

So that we can recall lament. So if I haven't done it within six months, you remind me. Let's learn from Jesus. Let's learn not to rejoice with those who rejoice, friends.

[45 : 21] But let's learn to hear the voices of those who weep. And let's help them to express their pain. And let's weep with them. And to do so is entirely Christian.

Entirely Christian. Let's pray. Father, we thank you for this book of lamentations.

We thank you for what it teaches us about Jesus. And what it teaches us about relationship with you. Father, please help us as Christians in this contemporary world which has sort of shut down the voice of lament.

Help us not only to rejoice with those who rejoice, but to hear the voices of those who weep. And to help them express their pain.

And to bring their pain to you and weep with them. Father, we pray that you'd help us with this. In Jesus' name. Amen.

[46 : 26] Amen. Amen. Amen.