LifeStone

AMPLIFY CHRIST

VOLUME 9

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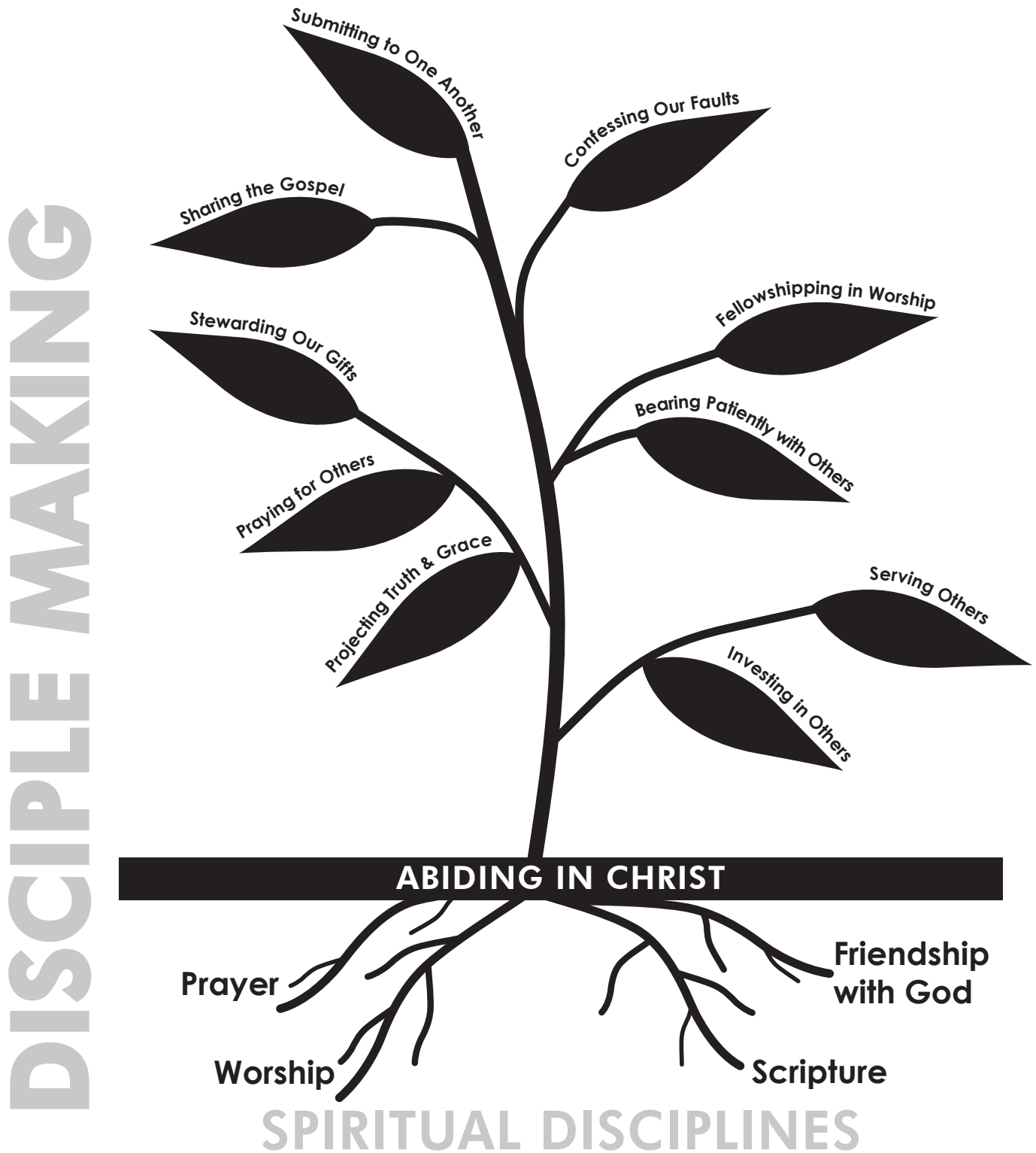
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OUR MISSION

LifeStone exists to empower **DISCIPLES** to make **DISCIPLES.** We seek to fulfill our mission by publishing Bible study and **DISCIPLESHIP** curriculum as well as offering real-life application training. We equip **DISCIPLES** as they journey through the various stages of life. As **DISCIPLES** grow in Christ, we continue to partner with them and their churches through training and other resources to empower **DISCIPLES** to make **DISCIPLES.**



FROM OUR PRESIDENT AND MANAGING EDITOR

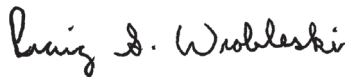
Dear Almighty Father,

Thank You for Your unconditional grace and mercy bestowed on LifeStone Ministries for 120 years. We are humbled by Your Son, the Master-Servant, who became the Living Stone rejected by men. You love us and build us up to be spiritual storehouses. We pray for Your strength and courage to be the living stones in our culture. We pray for perseverance to sacrifice ourselves to live wholly in subjection to Jesus Christ. May we glorify You in all our words and deeds as we strive to grow Your flock to spiritual maturity. We pray for the filling of the Holy Spirit as we engage Your flock.

Lord, we pray that this exposition of Your Word meets 2 Timothy 3:16. May the lessons contained in this labor of love emulate profitable teaching, graceful correction, and righteous training. We pray for all those who will be receiving instruction from these lessons. We pray for the teachers to approach this inspirational work with humility and meekness. May Your holy character and love for us leap from the pages and bring us all to our knees in thanksgiving.

Our glorious King, may we build the confidence and convictions of Christian leaders in our homes, churches, and missional fields to fulfill the Great Commission. Let us be renewed with strength and peace to empower Christian disciples to make disciples.

Under truth and grace,



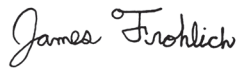
Craig S. Wrobleski, M. Div., D. Min.
President & CEO
LifeStone Ministries

Dear Christ follower,

Our mission at LifeStone Ministries is to empower Christian disciples to make disciples. The *Amplify Christ* series is one of our many endeavors to fulfill that mission. *Amplify Christ* features a five-step Bible study method that focuses on both learning and application. The series explores biblical books and topics while keeping an eye on how each study affects discipleship.

We desire to present you with a rigorously researched study of the Bible that intentionally emphasizes discipleship. *Amplify Christ* is more than a Bible curriculum. It is a discipleship tool that connects the Bible's backgrounds, themes, and doctrine to one of the Bible's main intents: fashioning disciples into the image of Christ.

We pray that the Holy Spirit will use *Amplify Christ* to deepen your faith, strengthen your walk with Christ, and empower you to make disciples.



James Frohlich, Ph.D.
Managing Theological Editor
LifeStone Ministries

HOW TO USE AMPLIFY CHRIST

Christian discipleship is a matter of following the Master's footprints. The first disciples did just that—they followed Jesus from place to place, shared the same meals, slept at the same campsites, celebrated the same special occasions, and met the same people. In all these experiences, Jesus taught them verbally and through His actions. The disciples saw Jesus react to different people in different situations. They examined His work habits, observed His demeanor, and scrutinized how He practiced what He preached.

Even though we moderns can't follow Jesus physically, we are nonetheless called to be like Him in word and deed, conformed to His image. This is our calling, and we dare not ignore it. The only way we can know how to follow in Jesus' footprints is to learn about Him in the Bible. In the New Testament, eyewitnesses and other early disciples detail Jesus' life, ministry, and teaching. Similarly, the Old Testament helps us understand God's intentions for us through stories, worship materials, prophetic messages, and the Mosaic Law. God has given us His precious Scriptures to know how we should live. For this reason, disciples should have an intense thirst and hunger for God's Word.

Modern-day disciples, however, sometimes get discouraged about reading the Bible because of its antiquity and foreign culture. Sometimes they get so enthralled by the Bible's antiquity and alien culture that they fail to apply its teaching. Modern-day disciples may segment a familiar verse from its context and fail to understand its intended meaning, and sometimes they fail to integrate Scripture into theology.

For all these reasons, our new discipleship tool emphasizes five key elements for Scripture study. We hope *Amplify Christ* helps you become more like Christ.

THE METHOD

FIVE KEY ELEMENTS

1. **Amplify the Background.** Because the Bible was written long ago in a culture different from ours, we investigate rigorously to bridge the gap separating us moderns from the biblical writers. We present to our readers those backgrounds that help them understand the biblical passage.
2. **Amplify the Text.** One of the legacy features of our publications is the exposition of the text. We focus on the original author's intended message to his original audience, addressing the question, What was the author conveying to them back then? We hone in on the verse-by-verse details to explain the passage's big picture.
3. **Amplify the Context.** Many Christians see Scripture as piecemeal. We want disciples to see how individual stories and texts are connected to the whole biblical story. We read the text as sentences within a paragraph and paragraphs within a larger text unit. This is basic exegesis. But our readers should also understand how the entirety of a book fits into the whole of Scripture and the larger biblical history. We write to show how each text interconnects to form a majestic and awe-inspiring picture of God's plan.
4. **Amplify the Faith.** Christians need to allow Scripture to inform their thinking and basic Christian doctrine. We believe that God inspired His Word and that we should accept it as the rule of our lives as we seek to follow the Spirit's guidance. To this end, we spell out how the biblical text informs Bible doctrines and how we should think.
5. **Amplify Your Life.** Our goal is not to create a bunch of smart, brainiac Christians. Yes, we want Christians to be competent readers of the Bible, but this is not enough. We do everything we can to help disciples apply the text to their lives so that they grow in Christ's likeness. We think deeply about the text, explicitly seeking ways to articulate the principles of the ancient text to us today and to the specific individual. We are most urgent about the Christian formation of Christ followers.

TIMELINE

Unknown	Adam and Eve
Unknown	Noah
Unknown	Tower of Babel
2166-1991 BC	Life of Abraham
1916-1806 BC	Life of Joseph
1876-1446 BC	Israelites in Egypt
1446 BC	Exodus
1446 BC	Law at Sinai
1446-1406 BC	Wilderness wandering
1406-1399 BC	Joshua leads the conquest
1360-1075 BC	Judges Period
1051-931 BC	United monarchy
1011-971 BC	David reigns
959 BC	Solomon builds the temple
931-586 BC	Divided monarchy
722 BC	Assyria conquers Israel
605 BC	Babylon conquers Assyria
586 BC	Babylon conquers Judah/temple destroyed
539 BC	Persia conquers Babylon
538 BC	Exiles return to Judah
515 BC	Temple rebuilt
458 BC	Ezra returns to Israel from Babylon
445 BC	Nehemiah rebuilds the wall
331 BC	Greece conquers Persia
175-164 BC	Seleucid rule over Israel by Antiochus IV Epiphanes
63 BC	Rome captures Jerusalem
7 to 4 BC	Birth of Jesus
AD 26-30	Jesus' ministry
AD 30	Jesus' death and resurrection
AD 45-56	Paul's missionary journeys
AD 70	Rome destroys the temple

IMPORTANT DATES



God's Compassion for His People

Written by Matthew Swale

READ AND TAKE NOTE

Read Lamentations 3:1-3, 19-39. Look for:

- Jeremiah's pain (vss. 1-3, 19-20)
- attributes of God (vss. 22, 25)
- lessons learned from experiencing God's discipline (vss. 26-39)

FIND IT

Isaiah
Jeremiah
Lamentations
Ezekiel
Daniel

Who: Jeremiah

What: recalling the fall of Jerusalem

When: about 585 BC

Where: Jerusalem or Egypt

Why: to lament God's recent judgment and to hope in God's gracious character

How: by expressing grief and hope

Spiritual Formation: Disciples hope in God during times of crisis.





AMPLIFY THE BACKGROUND

Lamentations 3 gives a window for one of the Old Testament's darkest moments. Imagine watching your hometown fall apart while a cruel army waited outside the city for the population to go mad from hunger. Imagine upstanding neighbors resorting to cannibalism. Now imagine the army finally deciding to breech the city walls. Without regard for age or frailty, the ruthless invaders methodically kill your neighbors. There is no Geneva Convention to curb their evil and no one to bury the dead who lay in the streets. Imagine the terror. Now imagine that your government was housed in the burning city, so your nation's political existence is over. Imagine seeing your holy places crumbling and burning. The place where you once worshipped God no longer exists.

Imagine a massive line of thousands of horrified survivors being led away to live, mourn, and serve in a godless land where the enemy believes their gods beat your God. Imagine that you had been pleading with your slain and captive neighbors for forty years to return to the Lord or the city and temple would be destroyed. Imagine an unshakable sensation that God wanted you to write a poem about what you saw, how it felt, what it meant, and why—against all earthly logic—you still trusted in the goodness of God. Now imagine that even though you had every right to say, "I told you so" to your fellow countrymen and assert your innocence in the disaster, God was leading you to mourn with the guilty and innocent alike and give them words to lead them back to God. If you have been

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able to imagine this nightmare scenario, you have stepped into the tattered shoes of the writer of the Old Testament's saddest book—the prophet Jeremiah. God called the city's prophetic prosecutor to write the city's eulogy.

How does one express inexpressible grief? The Lord led the Hebrew poet to use a method known as an alphabetical acrostic. The poet started each line or verse with a letter of the alphabet and the next line with the next letter, and so on. The Hebrew alphabet has twenty-two letters in it, so Lamentations 1, 2, and 4 each contain a twenty-two verse acrostic. But Lamentations 3 is a triple acrostic, containing three verses that start with each letter of the alphabet for a total of sixty-six verses. That may be how Jeremiah signaled to the reader that this chapter is the centerpiece of the book. These acrostics allowed Jeremiah to get out a great deal of grief onto the page, for the words keep flowing as the alphabet keeps going. Alphabets are comprehensive, but they also end, which keeps grief from taking over. The acrostic allows Jeremiah to "itemize, organize, and finalize grief" (Kaiser, *Grief and Pain in the Plan of God: Christian Assurance and the Message of Lamentations*, Christian Focus, 15).

THOUGHTS

The fourteen alphabetical acrostics in the Old Testament are Psalms 9 and 10 (often considered one psalm), 25, 34, 37, 111, 112, 119, 145; Proverbs 31:10-31; Lamentations 1 through 4. Nahum 1:2-8 is a partial alphabetical acrostic.

AMPLIFY THE TEXT

THE GRIEVING MAN'S CONFESSION (Lamentations 3:1-3)

Jeremiah introduced himself in these verses by describing what he had seen. And what had he seen? Suffering. We do not always know why we suffer, but Jeremiah did. He knew that centuries of covenant-breaking led to the ultimate earthly punishment from Deuteronomy 28—destruction and exile from the Promised Land. God's forewarned response to sin is wrath, not a frivolous or wild anger. Jeremiah pictured God's wrath like a rod (Lamentations 3:1). The shepherd imagery may remind readers of Psalm 23, where the rod comforts, but the same shepherd sometimes needs to discipline and teach. Jeremiah knew that both the rod of comfort and the rod of discipline came from the same hand.

Next, Jeremiah described his journey. He had been expelled, or cast out. Again, this is what the Lord said He would do to the nation if they persisted in covenant-breaking. It is what He did to the Canaanites in Joshua's day, and now He had done it to His people. Jeremiah's journey was through darkness. Later in the poem, Jeremiah would see rays of light. But for now he saw only darkness. The hand of God was against him. Like the rod, God's hand can protect and guide or correct and punish. But at least God's hand was still there.

THE GRIEVING MAN'S REMEMBRANCE (Lamentations 3:19-21)

Memories can enliven or haunt. If Jeremiah had lived in an age of mental health concerns, he would have likely received a lifetime of counseling to deal with the memories of what he had seen. When the Old Testament talks about memory, it is not just referring to the life of the mind. When God remembered His covenant in Exodus 2:24-25, it did not mean that it had previously slipped His mind but that He would act on it. When the psalmists asked why God had forgotten them, they were not questioning God's omniscience but were lamenting that He was not acting to alleviate their suffering. In Lamentations 3:19, the prophet was not asking God to keep his pain in mind but to intervene.

Jeremiah asked God to intervene in his bitterness and homelessness. His home was likely destroyed. In addition, Jeremiah 42 through 43 reported that the prophet was taken to Egypt against both his will and the Lord's direction. The bitterness settled so deeply in his person that mentally, physically, and spiritually, he was laid low.

His memories were the headwaters of his grief, so he dropped something into the headwaters that changes what flows from mind to heart to disposition: thinking about God's character. Before long, this change of mental reflection did not remove the pain, but it added a new undercurrent: hope. Hope is faith's future-looking relative, looking ahead to what God said He would do but has not yet done. The word for "hoping" is sometimes translated "waiting." While false prophets in Jeremiah 28 promised quick fixes, hope settles in to await healing and restoration that might come after Jeremiah's lifetime.

THE GRIEVING MAN'S INHERITANCE (Lamentations 3:22-24)

Why did Jeremiah have hope when most people would have given up? What did he call to mind? While we cannot read his mind, his poem used a cluster of words from Exodus 34:6-7, suggesting that he remembered Scripture. Exodus 32 saw Israel idolatrously invite God's judgment right after making a covenant with Him. Moses interceded for Israel—not unlike Jeremiah did in Lamentations 5. Then Moses asked to see the glory of God. In response, God passed by Moses and proclaimed His attributes in Exodus 34:6-7. He told Moses that He is full of loyal love. This term concerns the kind of love someone has for a person to whom he is committed. Jeremiah remembered this attribute in Lamentations 3:22, noting that God's love is why Israel did not end as a nation. Jeremiah knew God was committed to doing things for Israel that He said He would do in promises like Genesis 12:3, where He said He would bless the whole world through Israel.

The Lord also told Moses that He is merciful. "Merciful" relates to looking with compassion at someone in desperate need. Moses' era did not exhaust God's mercy, nor did subsequent spells of rebellion. There was enough left for Jeremiah and Jerusalem's ruins. Like the manna God gave Israel every morning, God's mercy kept arriving and getting Jeremiah through the day. Then, finally, God told Moses that He is faithful. He is dependable and truthful. Exodus 34 uses the adjective "great" or "abundant" to describe God's loyal love, but Jeremiah used the adjective to describe God's faithfulness. God's massive commitment occurs at the center of Lamentation 3's long poem and is the centerpiece of Jeremiah's hope. Loyal love, mercy, and faithfulness are the gift that the book of Exodus gave to Jeremiah when he meditated on it.

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These attributes of God caused Jeremiah to say something surprising. Back in Jeremiah 32, Jeremiah bought land in a town near Jerusalem that was probably destroyed in the Babylonian invasion and uninhabitable. Any land he might have inherited from his family was uninhabitable too. The book of Joshua described land inheritance with the word "portion." Jeremiah had no earthly portion, but he boldly declared that the Lord was his portion. He would probably never see his broken homeland again, but God was his home. Land can be taken away, but God cannot. God was enough for Moses when he could not enter the Promised Land, and He was enough for Jeremiah even though he would probably never enter the Promised Land again.

THE GRIEVING MAN'S WAIT (Lamentations 3:25-27)

Hope is future-oriented, but what about Jeremiah's situation? His simple answer in verse 25 was that God is good to those who trust Him. Not just good in the abstract sense but personally good to His people. Verses 25-27 all start with the Hebrew word for "good." Jeremiah explained two human postures that invite the experience of God's goodness: waiting (synonymous with hope in verse 22) and seeking the Lord. Seeking the Lord in the Old Testament includes prayer (cf. Psalm 34:4), meditating on Scripture (cf. Ezra 7:10), depending on Him over the long journey of life (cf. Psalm 105:4), and a commitment to obeying Him (cf. 119:2). What did Jeremiah wait for? Salvation. Sometimes this word refers to physical deliverance and sometimes to spiritual rescue. Which one did Jeremiah seek? Both.

Lamentations 3:27 introduced an idea that would carry through to the next section also. Jeremiah, by now an old man, offered advice to younger believers. Jerusalem's fall was not Jeremiah's first brush with suffering. Mocked, beaten, imprisoned, and left for dead—Jeremiah had an earned doctorate in enduring pain. So for those reeling from this grim moment in Judah's history, he presented them with a lesson in suffering.

THE GRIEVING MAN'S LESSON (Lamentations 3:28-30)

In this section, we can picture Jeremiah as a professor giving a lecture to his audience. Experience and biblical knowledge taught Jeremiah that there are different kinds of suffering: innocent suffering, suffering punishment, suffering because of the sins of others, and more that will be explained in the application section. For now, Jeremiah began his lesson by counseling his audience to silently acknowledge that God was indeed disciplining Judah—regardless of their role as individuals in the collective discipline. By silence, Jeremiah did not mean to avoid talking to God about their pain, for that is what he did all throughout Lamentations and what the psalmists do in dozens of psalms. No, this silence referred to thinking and reflecting. One reader of Jeremiah, Daniel, exemplified this posture well. In Daniel 9:1-19, we observe that Daniel read Jeremiah's prophecies, thought deeply about them, and then humbly asked God to restore Judah.

Lamentations 3:29 directed its readers to the dust. Dust, in texts like Job 42:6, is an image of humbly trusting in God's difficult plans. Why so much focus on humility? As asserted in the second half of Lamentations 3:29, that is where hope grows. When God restores people, He does so with humble believers, not with those who arrogantly avoid introspection. Next, in verse 30, Jeremiah advised his followers not to resist the domination of Babylon. Like Jesus would later teach in the Sermon on the Mount for different reasons (love of enemy), Jeremiah advised that Judah

should accept disgrace from Babylon on the cheek. This does not mean the prophet endorsed Babylon's evil, for verse 66 asked God to judge Babylon (and He would). Trusting that vengeance belongs to the Lord enabled Jeremiah to learn from his pain instead of scheming to make it end or seeking revenge.

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THE GRIEVING MAN'S FUTURE (Lamentations 3:31-39)

Jeremiah's Hope (Lamentations 3:31-33). Jeremiah explained the reason for his counterintuitive advice to accept suffering: God's heart. Verse 31 declared that judgment does not last forever. How did Jeremiah know this? Again, he knew his Bible. Verse 32 returned to words from Exodus 34:6-7 to explain why judgment would not be God's final word to His people. He has compassion and abundant loyal love for them.

Another reason judgment would not last forever is that, as Ezekiel 33:11 says, God does not take pleasure in meting out death and judgment on the unrepentant. Jeremiah expressed this beautifully. Lamentations 3:33 asserts that the Lord does not afflict from His heart. This is what theologians call an anthropomorphism, or attributing human characteristics to God. God does not have a cardiovascular organ. The heart refers to the seat of one's emotions. When Jesus described His heart in Matthew 11:28-30, He used words like "gentle" and "humble." The Lord longs to deal gently with sinners. In His justice, He also judges but not with pleasure of heart. Similar to Jesus' invitation to come to Him in Matthew 11:28-30, Lamentations 3:33 refers not merely to the Lord's disposition toward Israel but to all His image bearers.

Jeremiah's Case (Lamentations 3:34-36). Jeremiah now reviewed why Judah received God's punishment. Perhaps the prophet was preemptively answering this potential question: if God does not afflict from His heart, why afflict at all? Verses 34-36 read like a highlight reel from the preexilic prophets, now summarized to remind Judah why destruction and exile came for them. In verse 34, Jeremiah used a word from Isaiah 3:15 to describe how prisoners were crushed, which Isaiah blamed on civil leaders. Jeremiah experienced this in an unjust imprisonment in Jeremiah 38.

Jeremiah's next reminder in Lamentations 3:35 sounds a lot like Amos 2:6-8, with a description of manipulating justice through bribes. In Lamentations 3:36, the next reason for judgment sounds like Habakkuk 1:3, where crooked dealings in court cause pain and injustice.

According to Lamentations 3:35, the problem is that these things were done right in front of the Lord. What the perpetrators thought was covered by the chain of command was seen, assessed, and judged by the highest authority. Verse 36 literally says that the Lord did not see, which means He did not like what was done among His people. The Lord's sight often refers to His gracious attention, as in Psalm 138:6, when He saw the lowly. The track record of Jerusalem did not invite God's gracious attention but His just judgment.

Jeremiah's Questions (Lamentations 3:37-39). Like a good teacher, Jeremiah rounded out this section with three rhetorical questions. Whose word created the world's conditions? None but God's. This is an important point for two reasons. First, the crooked leaders of Judah spoke and acted to build a culture that padded their pockets, but their words did not have the final say. Evil seemed to flourish for centuries, but in the end, only God gets to decide the destiny of His people, His world, and His image. That should haunt the unrepentant and give hope to the repentant. Neither corrupt Judah nor conquering Babylon would decide the

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fate of Jerusalem, because the Lord is the Great King. They could not speak into existence their vision for the world, but God can, does, and ultimately will.

The second rhetorical question is whether good and calamity both come from God. The answer is yes. He allows both pleasant conditions and unpleasant ones. People cannot always know why He allows certain conditions at certain times—though Jeremiah knew in this case—but believers can know that nothing occurs without His permission. That equips believers to endure both the good and the calamity.

THOUGHTS

Laments for other fallen cities were produced by other cultures in the Old Testament world, but unlike Israel, they did not know why their demise occurred.

The final rhetorical question in Lamentations 3:39 is why anyone who is disciplined would complain. Readers of the book may think that Jeremiah was complaining throughout the work. Was he contradicting himself? He was not, for there are good and bad complaints in the Old Testament. Psalm 55:3 shows the good kind: pouring out one's pain to God in hope and trust. That is what Lamentations does. Lamentations 3:39 shares a rare Hebrew word for "complaining" with Numbers 11:1, where the complaint was one of unbelief and accusation toward God. When God judges sin, no one can accuse Him of injustice, at least not rightfully. But, like Jeremiah, believers enduring God's discipline can cry out to Him in their pain, expecting His healing power to begin repairing their lives.

AMPLIFY THE CONTEXT

PLACE IN THE BIBLE

For modern Bible readers, Lamentations occurs in the Major Prophets section after the book of Jeremiah. This placement makes good sense because tradition says Jeremiah wrote both books. Lamentations presents the emotional side to the writing prophets in the Old Testament. Prophets were not unaffected by their message, their audience, and the judgments they announced.

For Jewish readers of the Hebrew Bible, Lamentations is placed elsewhere. In the Hebrew Bible's arrangement, readers encounter Lamentations in a group of short books called the Megilloth, or five scrolls, along with Ruth, Song of Solomon, Ecclesiastes, and Esther. These books deal with living under God in the complexities of life. This highlights how Lamentations prepares God's people to remember past suffering in a formative and redemptive way.

THOUGHTS

At some point in Jewish history, Lamentations began to be read every year on the anniversary of the fall of Jerusalem.

PLACE IN THE STORY OF SALVATION

When God redeemed Israel from Egyptian bondage, He gave the people laws that would remind them of their need for His atoning forgiveness and guide them to honor Him through worship and right treatment of one another. In Deuteronomy 28, God promised tangible blessings when the people humbly followed His law and tangible curses when they did not. From then on, readers of the Old Testament can drop into nearly any moment in Israel's history and ascertain how Israel was interacting with God based on whether they were experiencing the blessings or curses. The ultimate covenant curse was exile, and Lamentations shows what it was like when, after nearly a millennium of rejecting God, He finally did what He said He would do. Lamentations stands at a climactic turning point for God's people when they learned that God is faithful even to His hardest words. Deuteronomy 30 also explained how God's people—once the ultimate covenant curse fell on them—could return to Him and experience restoration and blessing again.

PLACE IN THE NEW TESTAMENT

Since Lamentations 3 speaks about the fulfillment of Mosaic covenant curses, it foreshadows the New Testament in at least two ways. First, it foreshadows the work of Jesus Christ on the cross. Galatians 3:10-14 explains that although sinners deserve the curse of the law, Jesus absorbed it for believers by being cursed by God on the tree. Reading about the horrors of the fall of Jerusalem is an opportunity to think about the pain of God's wrath that believers will not have to endure since Jesus took the curse of sin for them and established a new covenant that does not feature such curses for those who are in Christ. The Mosaic covenant made provision for forgiveness and cleansing from sin for those who approach God in repentance, often including a sacrifice at the temple. Now, as we approach God in repentance, we do so on the basis of Christ's sacrifice on the cross.

Second, Lamentations 3 foreshadows another dark moment of judgment to come. The temple was destroyed in 586 BC and rebuilt in 515 BC. Jerusalem would grow to function and flourish again. But Jesus prophesied in Luke 21:20-24 a Lamentations-level destruction that would befall Jerusalem again. Like Jeremiah, Jesus lamented this fate in Matthew 23:37-39, but it came to pass in 70 AD through the Roman army.

AMPLIFY THE FAITH

Lamentations 3 highlights many aspects of the Lord's character. Before explaining three of them, there is a preliminary doctrine that can help avoid a potential misreading of Lamentations 3:33, which says that the Lord does not afflict from His heart. This can make it sound like God begrudges judgment or that His mercy is more native to His character than justice. It could also lead to thinking of God's nature as possessing attributes in conflict. To guard against this error, theologians speak of divine simplicity. Divine simplicity means that God is not the sum of His attributes being added together, but He is completely united in who He is. He is who He is, and the attributes of His nature are not in tension. Rather than being more merciful than just, He is completely both. He is just in

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His mercy and merciful in His justice. With God's simplicity in mind, here are three truths Lamentations 3 teaches about God's character.

First, He is a just Judge. Verses 1-3 reflect on God's wrath. His wrath is different from human wrath, for it is always merciful. His wrath cannot be explained away as unnecessary or fickle either (cf. vs. 39). Jeremiah showed that reflecting on God's wrath can be a tool for humility and learning to delight in God's goodness. Only a good and merciful God could show His mercy and sufficiency to a prophet who was experiencing His wrath at that very moment.

Second, God is good, merciful, gracious, and overflowing with loyal love. This love was enough for Jeremiah to say that he was not without a portion in the land of the living (vss. 22-24). Justice and love were articulated in the passage to which Jeremiah alluded, Exodus 34:6-7. God proclaimed His love, His forgiveness, and His justice there. There is one aspect of Exodus 34:6-7 that does not recur in Jeremiah's reflection in Lamentations 3—slow to anger. If God's anger toward sin were a fuse, it would be very long, but it would not be endless. Jeremiah was living at the end of the fuse.

Finally, Lamentations 3 makes fascinating contributions to a biblical understanding of God's providence. Verse 32 speaks of God's causing the suffering of Jerusalem in 586 BC—a fact consistently affirmed by the prophets. Verse 37 contrasts God's will with human initiative. People can say things will happen, but they might not. When God decrees something to happen, it happens. Verse 38 declares that both good and disaster are from the mouth of God. So the judgment of Jerusalem resulted from God's providential ordering of the Babylonian army. This does not mean that God is the author of evil but that He at times allows evil to take place to fulfill His ultimate purpose. The good news for Jeremiah in verses 31-32 was that the same Sovereign King would restore Judah because of His overflowing compassion. The God of Lamentations is not a god of feel-good, self-concocted, sentimental spirituality. He is the just and merciful King from Genesis to Revelation.

AMPLIFY YOUR LIFE

Lamentations teaches about suffering, addressing the kind of suffering that results from God's discipline due to disobedience. This, however, is not the only kind of suffering in the Bible. Walter Kaiser explained that the Old Testament teaches God's people about eight types of suffering, and to these a ninth can be added. These types sometimes overlap. First, there is the kind of suffering prominent in Lamentations: sin leading to God's punishment. Second, and hinted at by Lamentations 3:27, is the kind of suffering that teaches wisdom. Jeremiah wanted his listeners' suffering to lead to greater understanding. Hebrews 12:3-11 says this is normal for God's children. The first type of suffering is not a feature of the new covenant, for Jesus absorbed God's wrath and the punishment for sin for believers. When believers are disciplined by God, it may be best to think of this in terms of the second type of suffering and not the first, for Romans 8:1 teaches that God does not punish and condemn those who are united to Jesus.

Third, there is suffering for someone else's sin. Jeremiah experienced this type. Eventually, and in a far greater way, Jesus would endure this kind of suffering to save

sinners. Fourth, there is suffering with others out of compassion for them. Jeremiah did this throughout Lamentations by mourning with them. Fifth, there is suffering that leads to God being glorified, like the man's blindness in John 9:3. Sixth, there is suffering in one situation that serves as a teaching mechanism for others not in that situation. Job suffered in this way. Seventh, there is suffering that conveys God's truth and will. Jeremiah suffered this way when he was told not to marry as an object lesson in Jeremiah 16:1-4. Eighth, there will be suffering unique to end-times judgment (Kaiser, 128-30). To Kaiser's list, a ninth can be added: unexplained suffering. Job never learned why he suffered, and sometimes believers will not either.

When believers suffer, it might help to think through these types of suffering to consider what type might be occurring. Together with the Psalms, Lamentations teaches that God wants to hear from His people in all these kinds of suffering. All suffering should drive believers to God, even when it is their own fault. There are innocent suffering prayers like Psalm 13, there are prayers amid suffering that is the psalmist's own fault like Psalm 51, there are prayers during unexplained suffering like Psalm 88, and there is the hybrid kind of prayer in Lamentations, where it is not Jeremiah's fault but his people's fault.

These prayers teach believers not to leave their pain unexpressed but to boldly, emotively, completely, and sometimes even poetically and creatively express their pain to God. Is the suffering you experience your fault? Pour out your heart to God. Is it someone else's fault? Pour out your pain to God. Are you not sure whose fault it is? Pour it out to God. Jesus Himself, while He absorbed God's wrath for sinners, cried out to God in words of lament. Great is His faithfulness, indeed.

NOTES

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. Like Jeremiah, have you ever passed on to someone else a lesson you learned through suffering?

2. Has someone else, like Jeremiah, passed on to you a lesson learned through suffering?

3. When have you had to wait patiently for the Lord's intervention, and how did the Lord give you hope?

4. How do the famous words in Lamentations 3:23 shine brighter because of the painful words that surround them?

5. Jeremiah mourned with his guilty countrymen. How can this example change the way you view others who are suffering for their own foolish decisions?