



Small Group Study Guide

South Park Church
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Learning to Lament:

When the pain won't go away

The Importance of Small Groups

South Park Church exists to help people walk with God, connect as family, and love people in Jesus' name. When we talk about connecting as family, we're talking about building deep relationships with our brothers and sisters in the family of God. A small group is a place for you to grow in love for God and others. It's a place where you share joy and sorrow, search the Scriptures for wisdom, care for one another, and commit to praying for one another.

Leading Discussion

1. There are 10 questions for each week. Some groups will not have time to cover all of them. Know in advance which questions you most want to cover.
2. If you want to get everyone involved, consider starting each week with this question: "What was the most significant event in your life this past week?" Answers should average about 30 seconds. The leader should go first and model how to answer.
3. Don't let prayer be an afterthought squeezed into the final few minutes of the study. Plan your time so that you can praise God for who He is, thank Him for His blessings, ask Him to apply the study to your lives, and intercede for members in your group.

Why study Lamentations?

The reasons we've chosen to dig into Lamentations fall under three headings:

1. Biblical: "All Scripture is God-breathed and is useful for teaching, rebuking, correcting and training in righteousness, so that the servant of God may be thoroughly equipped for every good work." (2 Timothy 3:16-17, NIV). How will it affect our spiritual health if we leave major sections of the Bible out of our diet? If all Scripture is God-breathed, that includes Lamentations. We need to hear its rebuke and correction as well as be equipped to practice lament.

2. Communal: For a community to be authentic, individuals must feel safe to share pain and be courageous enough to share openly. There are many painful realities in any church or small group that can't be fixed by praying harder or following someone's advice. These issues include chronic illness, mental health issues, infertility, divorce, estranged family members, and loss of all kinds. Lament is the honest and godly response to pain that won't go away quickly.

3. Missional: There are many issues in our society that can't be fixed quickly, even when well-intentioned Christians get involved. Issues like poverty, fatherlessness, broken families, racial prejudice, abuse of power, corruption, and a host of injustices are all complex. If we want to help without hurting, we must learn to listen to those affected by these painful situations... really listen. We must enter their pain and lament with them. Only then can we together discern God's better way.

Context

- Lamentations was written by an eyewitness of the destruction of Jerusalem, possibly Jeremiah. For historical context, see 2 Kings 25:1-30; 2 Chronicles 36:15-21.
- Genre: dirge poetry that would be read aloud at a funeral.
- Chapters 1-4 are acrostic poems. Each verse begins with the next letter of the Hebrew alphabet. Chapters 1, 2, 4, and 5 have 22 verses. Chapter 3 has 66 lines with each letter of the Hebrew alphabet being used 3 times each.
- Lament is grief verbalized. It is being honest with myself, God, and others about pain and loss. When I lament, I turn to God in the midst of circumstances that haven't changed.
- "Whereas Job has done nothing to deserve his disaster and thus wonders how God can be just, the poet of Lamentations readily confesses that Judah is guilty and that God is just" (*Serendipity Bible*, 1132).

Recommended Resources

Jeremiah & Lamentations: An Introduction & Commentary
by R. K. Harrison

Prophetic Lament: A Call for Justice in Troubled Times
by Soong-Chan Rah

A Sacred Sorrow: Reaching out to God in the Lost Language of Lament
by Michael Card

“The Power and Beauty of Lament”

An Interview with Soong-Chan Rah, the Milton B. Engebretson Professor of Church Growth and Evangelism at North Park Theological Seminary in Chicago, IL, by Matt Woodley, editor at PreachingToday.com.

“Lament arises out of suffering; it is when folks are struggling with the reality of their lives because they can’t pay their bills, can’t put healthy food on the table, the heat is about to get shut off, their son has been killed in a drive-by shooting, their father has been jailed for a minor offense, their mom has lost her job, or their grandmother is sick with cancer. Those are very real scenarios, and the Bible actually responds to real life. So lament is the proper response to suffering. We jump so quickly to everything’s going to be okay, everything is awesome, everything is going to be fine. We forget that the Bible actually allows us, and in fact encourages and maybe even commands us, to stay in those places of suffering, to speak the honest truth, “Lord, this is how I’m feeling, God, this is the pain I’m experiencing,” instead of jumping so quickly to “God is so good, God loves me, God’s going to take care of me.” So I think lament is the honesty that sometimes we lack in the church.

When you see the Psalms you see phrases like, “My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?” You see laments that reflect a sense of abandonment, shame, and brokenness. The reality is our lives are not always filled with triumph and victory; our lives are oftentimes filled with suffering and pain, and lament in the Bible allows that, it legitimates our suffering. It says it’s okay to feel that pain, it’s okay to even articulate that out loud. It’s okay to articulate that in your corporate worship. In fact, it’s something that God wants you to do. So I think the genre of lament because we have had such minimal access to it, we don’t realize how important it is to Scripture and that it speaks to a very powerful human reality that the Bible actually responds to and gives us a chance to express that human reality. So lament, I would say at its root is truth-telling.”

Week of October 14

Lamentations 1

1. What do you consider the darkest hour of our nation's history in your lifetime? Where were you when you heard about it? How did you feel? How did you respond?

2. Imagine standing in the middle of Jerusalem as chapter 1 is read. What do you see, hear, smell, taste, and feel?

3. How is poetry different than other literature? Why is it fitting for lament?

4. The poet personifies Jerusalem. Who is Jerusalem portrayed as, and what qualities are described (1:1-10)?

5. What has the Lord done (1:5)? What does the poet want the Lord to do (1:11-22)?

6. What phrase is repeated throughout the chapter (1:2, 9, 16, 17, 21)? How does this shape your understanding of the chapter? Have you ever felt this way?

7. What word picture in chapter 1 stands out to you? How does it help you understand the original context, God's character, and the practice of lament?

8. Is there any hope in this passage? If no, what might we learn from this? If yes, where is it?

9. How does the practice of lament relate to the Beatitudes (Matthew 5:3-12)?

10. Based on what you've learned from chapter 1, what does it mean to lament?

Week of October 21

Lamentations 2

1. How did your family of origin handle grief and loss?
 - a. What loss?
 - b. Move on as quickly as possible.
 - c. Replace what was lost with something new.
 - d. Review the loss in private.
 - e. Review the loss with others.
 - f. Let it all hang out.
 - g. Cry out to God with raw emotion.
 - h. Other

2. Read chapter 2. What word picture stands out to you? How does it help you understand the original context, God's character, and the practice of lament?

3. What actions are ascribed to God (2:1-9)?

4. Why do you think God is destroying what was once so precious to him? What are his reasons? (Jeremiah 18:1-17)

5. When you read about God's judgment in the Bible, do you see God as angry, impulsive, patient, brokenhearted, compassionate, or other? What is your evidence? How does our study of Jeremiah 26-29 shed light on your answers?

6. What does the poet have to say about the spiritual leaders of Judah (2:14)?

7. After ascribing such severe actions to the Lord, the poet counsels readers to cry out to this same God (2:17-20). What does this teach us about the character of God and authentic faith?

8. How do you think God responds when we are angry with him? What do verses 17-19 show about God's desire for relationship with us?

9. God's discipline is a "severe mercy." What evidence of his mercy can you see in his past discipline of you?

10. When and how does Jesus practice lament? (Luke 19:41-44; Matthew 27:46)

Week of October 28

Lamentations 3

1. Suffering seems to inspire great art and literature. Do you agree or disagree? Why or why not?

2. Read chapter 3. What word picture stands out to you? How does it help you understand the original context, God's character, and the practice of lament?

3. How would you summarize what the poet is feeling in 3:1-21? Have you ever felt this way? Can you imagine praying like the poet does in this chapter? Why or why not?

4. If you have read or listened to Lamentations from the beginning, how does it feel when you hit (3:22-24)? What should we learn from the fact that hope doesn't appear until we get halfway through the book?

5. How does the context of these verses change your perspective on the well-loved lines of the hymn "Great is Thy Faithfulness"?

6. What does the poet counsel people to do in the midst of lament and grief (3:25-30)?

7. What actions are commended in 3:40-42? When have you done this? What were the circumstances and results?

8. How would you chart the overall movement of the poet's outlook through this chapter? Has any progress been made from the beginning to the end of the chapter? If so, how would you describe the steps?

9. What happens when we accept the Lord's discipline? What evidence is there in chapter 3 that the poet is doing this? When have you done the same? (Hebrews 12:7-11)

10. What spiritual "weapons" has the poet used to fight his way back to God? Do you need to pick up any of these weapons right now?

Week of November 4

Lamentations 4

1. What songs have ministered to you in a special way during difficult times?

2. Read chapter 4. What word picture stands out to you? How does it help you understand the original context, God's character, and the practice of lament?

3. After the hope of chapter 3, we might expect chapter 4 to be more positive. Instead it feels like regression. Is this true to the process of grief? How so?

4. How would an artist paint a picture of this chapter? Or how might a movie director set the scene?

5. How is vulnerability related to lament? What are the risks you take by lamenting, opening your heart, continuing to enter the pain?

6. What were the sins of Judah's leaders (4:12-16)? How have we been guilty of the same?

7. How is lament helpful, hopeful, and healing?

8. Jerusalem was filled with people who experienced great loss and pain that they couldn't hide. Who among us needs to lament?

9. What headlines does this chapter bring to mind? How can we apply what we're learning about lament to ministry among and with vulnerable populations in our society?

10. When have you experienced the truth of Romans 12:15-16, "Rejoice with those who rejoice; mourn with those who mourn. Live in harmony with one another. Do not be proud, but be willing to associate with people of low position. Do not be conceited."

Week of November 11

Lamentations 5

1. What is a moment during corporate worship service in this series that you really connected with God?

2. Read chapter 5. What word picture stands out to you? How does it help you understand the original context, God's character, and the practice of lament?

3. What are the indicators of poverty listed here? What would the modern parallels be?

4. What were some of the sins of previous generations that affected those who lived through the exile (5:7)?

5. What are some of the sins of previous generations in our nation, communities, and church that we are reaping the consequences of? What should we do about it?

6. In what ways are we storing up punishment for our children? How can we break the cycle?

7. Can we trust that God is still good and at work even if we don't see our hopes fulfilled in our lifetime? How would the poet answer?

8. What do you think it says about God and how to relate to him that this chapter is largely a complaint?

9. How does the book close? Do you find it discouraging, frustrating, or helpful? How might the ending be helpful to someone still in the midst of long-term pain?

10. How does it mess with your theology if God doesn't answer your prayers or give you what you want? What is God more concerned about than our comfort?

