Lamentations As Practice

SIX STUDIES FOR LENT

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Lament As Practice

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Introduction

No matter how long we live, but especially as we grow older, somewhere, somehow, our lives will be marked by pain and grief.

It could be because we have failed in some terrible way and let others down; it might be through death or loss, or simply because of a social crisis of some kind like losing a much beloved friend. No human life is untouched by pain and loss.

This book takes seriously the expansive reality of our pain and suffering and makes it its subject matter.

Grief, all seem to agree, is about incurring loss and overcoming it. Each of us suffers losses in this life, and so in a real sense this book dealing with grief is for anyone and for all of us.

The English term *grief* stems from an Old French word *grever* meaning to "afflict, burden, oppress," from the Latin a-stem verb *gravare* "to make heavy; cause grief."

The Latin *gravare* is itself formed from a root *gravis* referring to something "heavy" or "weighty." Grief weighs us down as we try humanly to adjust ourselves to our losses. Grief concerns things that are *grave*.

In the Bible, especially the Old Testament, there are a surprisingly vast number of key terms around our concepts of

grief and mourning. Some of the key ones are *atzav*, *ka'as*, and *tugah*.

The Bible knows and understands grief and loss, and represents the stories, the ways and customs, and the traditions of a people (Israel) who know what it is to lose and to overcome loss.

This book, therefore, takes up traditional themes associated with pain and grief but hopefully quite distinctively – by connecting them with the Christian pre-Easter Season of Lent and also by doing so through the lens of the Scroll of the Book of Jeremiah's Lamentations.

We must define and understand at least two key terms therefore: What do we mean by the common notion of *grief* and by the Christian term *Lent*?

1. Grief As Loss

In Lamentations 3.48 we hear Jeremiah describing grief in its relation to human loss:

"Streams of tears flow from my eyes/
because my people are destroyed."

C.S. Lewis, in his profound meditation on bereavement, *A Grief Observed*[i], wrote: "The death of a beloved is an amputation." Amputation describes physical *loss* — the destruction of a limb.

Jeremiah's grief-stricken poetry in Lamentations is about loss and begins, therefore, with powerful poetic images of social *deprivations*:

"How deserted lies the city,/
once so full of people!/
How like a widow is she,/
who once was great among the nations!/
She who was queen among the provinces/
has now become a slave."
(1.1)

Here, Jeremiah offers three poetic metaphors that summarise how grief and loss are intertwined:

- *a city brimming with people suffering the loss of population and so being emptied out;*
- *a splendid wife who has lost her husband and so is*

widowed; and finally,
- a proud queen who has experienced the loss of her status and so is now reduced to slavery.

As Jeremiah rightly announces, grief plumbs the depths of our losses: loss of health, loss of life, loss of relationship, loss of status … *loss*.

Grief is the very real human response to loss.

Lamentations is intimately tied up with painful loss — the destruction (on two different historical occasions) of the Jews' beloved temple, the earthly instantiation of their sojourn with God.

A similar picture of loss emerges from v.2 in the very same opening chapter of Lamentations. There, Jeremiah associates tear-smeared cheeks with the loss of a lover's comfort and he also highlights a loss of friendships as they turn to enmity.

"Bitterly she weeps at night,/
tears are on her cheeks./
Among all her lovers/
there is no one to comfort her./
All her friends have betrayed her;/
they have become her enemies."

Painful feelings of unassuageable grief are rooted in the human reality of loss:

"What I see brings grief to my soul/

because of all the [exiled and dead] women of my city."
(3.53)

This ancient Jewish Scroll appears to belong to a particularly old literary genre — the archaic "city lament" — which is known to us from now 4,000-year-old Sumerian exemplar.

City laments are categorised by their vivid and profoundly rich descriptions of a beloved city's destruction, the mass genocide of its citizens, and the loss of its central citadel or temple, which is very appropriate to Jeremiah's concerns in Lamentations.

These ancient Sumerian laments, scholars now assess, possess both thematic and linguistic parallels to the poetic Scroll of Lamentations. One important example of a parallel highlights the return of a once civilised and humanized space (the city now lost) to a tract of wilderness, marked by the territorial activity of wild "foxes":

"Because of Mount Zion, which lies desolate;/
Foxes walk over it"
(Lamentations 5.17)

It is unclear what dependence Jeremiah's Lamentations may have with respect to other Ancient Near Eastern city laments, but what might be helpful to see is that lament is a highly flexible literary form.

For example, an ancient lament over the destruction of the great city Sumer by the Gutians[ii] near the end of the third

millennium BC was recast and used afresh some 2,000 years later, but now deployed for any new situation involving enemies from the northern or eastern frontier.

This example illustrates the literary freedom of ancient Near Eastern cultures to re-deploy older materials in new contexts, applying concepts first thrown up in one historical situation for application to a new but similar threat. And this in itself suggests the value to us of using the biblical prophet Jeremiah's Lamentations in the setting of Lent to deal with our own losses in life.

C.S. Lewis, again in *A Grief Observed*, describes the permanence of human suffering:

> "We were promised sufferings. They were part of the program. We were even told, 'Blessed are they that mourn,' and I accept it. I've got nothing that I hadn't bargained for. Of course it is different when the thing happens to oneself, not to others, and in reality, not imagination."

Grief *as loss* is necessary in a world defined by *human loves*.

That great social philosopher Winnie the Pooh sums it all up when he says: *"How lucky I am to have something that makes saying goodbye so hard."* Grief is, therefore, part of a natural process of saying goodbye to things we have loved and lost.

Because loves are eternal, grief, in a very pertinent sense, never evaporates. Grief is a permanent, unmoppable puddle lying on the ground floor of our lives.

Elizabeth Kübler-Ross and David Kessler say in their book *On Grief & Grieving: Finding the Meaning of Grief through the Five Stages of Loss:*

"The reality is that you will grieve forever. You will not 'get over' the loss of a loved one; you'll learn to live with it. You will heal and you will rebuild yourself around the loss you have suffered. You will be whole again but you will never be the same. Nor should you be the same nor would you want to."

German-Jewish Composer Irving Berlin (born 1888) describes the kind of loss that death represents like this: "The song is ended but the melody lingers on." In a profound sense, grief is the melody that lingers on because of the once real presence of a love song in the world.

In a 2005 Sci-Fi novel *Shadow of the Giant* by Orson Scott Card we read: "Life is full of grief, to exactly the degree we allow ourselves to love other people."

In her 2011, 1000-page novel set in New York, *Brushstrokes of a Gadfly,* American author E.A. Bucchianeri has one of her characters observe: "So it's true, when all is said and done, grief is the price we pay for love."

Grief, therefore, is a reality in every human life because love is what drives us, what draws us on into the heart of our human existence. Because we love, we must suffer loss and so we hurt.

Because grief is about loss and because human love always

takes a cultural shape and form, we have to find ways humanly and culturally to process suffering, grief, and loss.

Culturally speaking, all societies offer us ways to do this — from the profoundly personal to the uniquely public and social.

Let me illustrate some of the distinctive cultural shapes grief takes.

Deuteronomy 34.8 suggests that Israel observed a mourning period after the loss of Moses their original leader:

"The Israelites grieved for Moses in the plains of Moab thirty days, until the time of weeping and mourning was over."

Their mourning was ritualised and performative. (In truth, among the Hebrews public mourning never exceeded 30 days — this is one of the "rules" of public grief.) Otherwise, it could not strictly be contained within a lunar month.

There was a set, prescribed "time of weeping and mourning." There is no evidence that personal feelings were at issue here[iii]; potentially people who did not even rate Moses as a leader ritually mourned along with everyone else, because this kind of mourning (for a renowned) leader signals socialized honour.

Mourning did not exceed 30 days; however, in poignant words from Lamentations 2.5 — full of pathos — Jeremiah contends that Israel has had these agreed periods of mourn-

ing extended beyond their usual measure:

"He has multiplied mourning and lamentation/ for Daughter Judah."

Not only is the grieving period generally constrained by time, but it is also confected through particular social practices. For example, it is common today amongst religious Jews, when a loved one dies, to tear one's garments or a piece of black cloth to indicate the torn fabric of human social reality caused by losing a loved one.

Further, these rules are often gendered amongst humans: women might cut their hair and their fingernails as a marker of grief — a sign of the destruction of feminine beauty — while men might do the reverse and let theirs grow.

Mourning is also characterised by well worn and time-honoured practices such as the wearing of the colour black or eating special foods — "the bread of mourners" (Hosea 9.4) — or tearing one's robe (as David did — 2 Samuel 1.11-12). All of these cultural practices signal that a significant *loss* has befallen us.

The Jewish mourning period traditionally featured, for example, professional mourners who would play instruments and chant funeral dirges. This occasionally included musical accompaniment such as by flute players.

We know that Jesus engaged with such practices when arriving at the house of a synagogue official who had just lost his

daughter. There, the Saviour found a large number of professional mourners such that there was "a commotion, with people sobbing and wailing loudly" (Mark 5.38).

Mourners, as I have indicated, wear black — as we still generally wear black at funerals — but we must note that for weddings brides wear white! As weddings signal life so the black of funeral paraphernalia[iv] signals death. Jeremiah gives us an example of grief as a set of embodied symbolic-practices when he claims:

"The elders of Daughter Zion/
sit on the ground in silence;/
they have sprinkled dust on their heads/
and put on sackcloth./
The young women of Jerusalem/
have bowed their heads to the ground."
(2.10)

Silence … the sprinkling of dust upon the sacredness of the head … the wearing of special sackcloth as opposed to the usual daily clothing … bowing the head to the earth … these are just some of the cultural forms the painful grief associated with human loss takes, through human social embodiment.

Grief and loss are human, and therefore grief is socially shaped by the garments of human tradition and community. Just as festivals have liturgical shape and form, so likewise does mourning. The prophet Amos (8.10) acknowledges this, for example, when the Lord threatens to "turn your [liturgi-

cal] feasts into [practices of] mourning". Loss is social and shares the cultural garments of any society.

While different societies may shape these myriad cultural forms of grief, what remains constant, nevertheless, is the connection with death and loss.

In Lamentations 1.3 Jeremiah mourns by complaining "Judah has gone into exile." Grief is very much an expression of a kind of homelessness — a separation from lost comfort and meaning, with all the paranoid confusion that attends the loss of the security of home. Hence, he adds:

"She dwells among the nations;/
she finds no resting place." (1.3)

And notice 3.2:

"He has driven me away and made me walk/
in darkness rather than light;"

These verses indicate the *loss* of home — a "resting-place" — and the *loss* of a clear path — hence, "darkness rather than light."

In the next chapter, Jeremiah points to the countless confusions, the distorting absences caused by a *loss* of meaning, and the mental disorientation the enervating *loss* of place, time, and steady relationship unbinds:

"The Lord has made Zion forget/

her appointed festivals and her Sabbaths" (2.7)

And, he adds, the law too has been lost:

"…the law is no more" (2.9)

There is an 'unworlding' that happens with loss, expressed, for example, through ancient Sumerian city laments in terms of a breakdown of the social systems that were in place before the loss and destruction the city suffers.

This same rootlessness and a profound sense of shakiness and murkiness is a product of Israel's sin, says Jeremiah. As a consequence,

"The Lord has brought her grief/
because of her many sins."

Grief, therefore, attends our lives in some cases because our losses are associated not just with accidents and human happenstances but with our misdeeds.

This is an important reason that makes Lent a perfect season for Christians to reflect upon grief and loss, even if we are not currently suffering. Lent can be a chance, as Jeremiah suggests to us, of testing ourselves:

"Let us examine our ways and test them,/
and let us return to the Lord." (3.40)

During periods of grief and loss we look back on the good

times of our walk, on what we once had that is now taken from us:

"In the days of her affliction and wandering/
Jerusalem remembers all the treasures/
that were hers in days of old." (1.7)

In a sense, Lent as an availability of looking backwards over our lives can only be possible because we are liturgically looking ahead to Easter — to the sacrifice of the Saviour Jesus.

Of course, there are genuine times of mourning and grief in human life not caused by sin or failure, and not associated with a liturgical season such as Lent. The obvious example of such is when a loved one unexpectedly dies.

We cannot control the timing of these events or the flash flood of feelings that attend them. In these palpable seasons of pain and loss we will, right along with Jeremiah, wish to *feel* quite powerfully and to express this sentiment forcefully:

"Your wound is as deep as the sea./
Who can heal you?" (2.13)

Grief is real because pain can be almost bottomless.

Pain and loss led C.S. Lewis to liken feelings of grief to the passion of fear: "No one ever told me that grief felt so like fear," he says in *A Grief Observed*. To lose a loved one is to feel threatened in one's own human existence[v].

In seasons of pain, therefore, we may feel exactly as Jeremiah does in Lamentations:

"The hearts of the people/
cry out to the Lord./
You walls of Daughter Zion,/
let your tears flow like a river/
day and night;/
give yourself no relief,/
your eyes no rest."
(2.17)

The city itself must cry along with the hurting people who have lost almost everything.

That is a lengthy overview of how grief relates to loss, but what do we mean when we relate grief and loss to the Christian season of Lent?

2. Lent As A Season

The Jews associate their national losses with the great religious festival of the *"Ninth of Av,"* the meaning of which we will explore especially in chapter one. For now, it is sufficient to attend to the fact that these historic instances of public pain can be gathered up into one religious season.

Lent for Christians is the 40-day period prior, and leading up, to Easter.

The forty days begin on Ash Wednesday every year and they exclude the Sundays prior to Easter Sunday, ending on Maundy (Holy) Thursday.

It is a solemn 40 days holding rich significance for Christians as the church relives Jesus' temptations in the Wilderness; it is a dedicated season of penitence and preparation for the Great Feast of Easter.

Throughout Lent, Christians engage in many spiritual disciplines and practices such as increased prayer, fasting, and almsgiving[vi].

These practices serve to deepen one's connection with God, increase sensitivity to sin and suffering, and enhance one's sense of the loving heart of Jesus.

At Lent, Christians prepare their hearts and minds for the Paschal Mystery—the journey of Jesus' passion, death, and resurrection.

Lent is, therefore, a divine invitation to reflect on one's life, repent of undealt with sin, and to renew a commitment walking by faith, culminating in the joyful celebration of Easter. *Lent is a kind of self-enforced loss*[vii].

This little book will suggest that, when we look at the Jewish precedent, as they deploy the poetry of Lamentations to measure their pains and grief, that Lent is the perfect liturgical season for Christians to bring back into focus important personal losses that may be having repercussions in the spiritual life.

3. The Structure Of This Book

This book, therefore, is intended as a small, easy to read, but hopefully helpful tool for every Christian at any time of year, but readers may find it especially useful as a resource for both individual and group study for Lent.

They may also find it a valuable resource when thinking through the problem of personal suffering or dealing with individual tragedy or an as yet unprocessed grief.

There are six chapters included that draw insights from the one Jewish Scroll, the Book of Jeremiah's Lamentations.

Rather than a straightforward exposition or commentary on Jeremiah's five chapters of Hebrew poetry, however, this book you have in your hands tries to draw meaningful connections between the Jewish liturgical use of Lamentations – how Jews use Lamentations to guide their worship at the annual celebration of the *"Ninth of Av"* – and the reality of the Christian experience of suffering and grief. This is something else that makes it somewhat distinctive.

There are many wonderful scholarly commentaries and studies on this Jewish work of poetry; this book does not even try to compete with them.

Rather, something quite *distinctive* about this book is its *practical* focus on using Lent as a period in which either to overcome or to re-narrate the griefs and pains of our everyday lives, by seeking out understanding from the Jewish use

of Jeremiah's poetry.

How do Jews use this ancient Scroll?

This question is answered in chapter one, where it is explained that the Jewish worshipping communities of the world take up the reading of Lamentations during one of their five important religious "feasts," *Tisha b'Av*, the *Ninth of Av*[viii].

This 'celebration' is marked by a solemn preparation with fasting, and has as its locus of orientation the many and great calamities and losses the Jewish people have experienced on this date throughout their long journey through this world.

This direction *from within the practices of Judaism itself* reveals just how suitable Lamentations is for use by Christians at Lent – as a practice. (Hence the *title* of this book you hold – *Lament as Practice!*)

However, it would be a mistake to restrict its reading to Lent. Lamentations, as I hope you may see in this little book, provides a form of gracious help for all those seasons in which our lives are blighted by pain or grief.

Chapters two and three set out from the observation that there is a certain structure to the composition of verses and chapters in Lamentations. Lamentations is a set of poetic acrostics[ix] – each line starting with consecutive letters of the Hebrew alphabet – from A to Z, shall we say?

Chapter two explores this special *acrostic* character of the Hebrew poetry, which suggests some very interesting things about the nature of human suffering and the grief and lament which are just its literary and social manifestations[x], while chapter three explores the importance of the use of language to express grief and examines this through the life of Job in particular and also in relation to the divine silence that is so striking in Lamentations.

Focus on alphabetic letters, and therefore on the necessary formation of a *lexicography*[xi] of grief, is shown to be part of a healthy grieving process through the many difficulties of life.

Chapter four is something of a *thought experiment* identifying links between the classical "five stages of grief" and the emotional topsoil Jeremiah excavates throughout Lamentations. It does not argue that Kübler-Ross's 1969 theory – based on several hundred interviews with terminally ill patients – of the so-called "five stages to grief" is psychologically correct, but rather aims to see what help we can get here by thinking through grief by means of a lens which joins this existing theory to a close reading of Lamentations.

Chapter five concerns the matter of *confession* – a central subject of Lent – and a necessary feature and material *practice* of the truthful Christian life. Sin must be processed and truthfully engaged; confession and repentance are the practices which help us here.

The final chapter – chapter six – aims to address the matter of understanding human suffering in relation to the good-

ness of God (what has classically been called *theodicy*) using material mined from Jeremiah's mastery of words and concepts in Lamentations[xii].

Why does God allow us to suffer? How do we pour this suffering and grief into a true mould of our life-histories and into our present walk with God? There are many cases in which life seems all too unfair.

Chapter six argues from Jeremiah's Lamentations for the importance of truthful speech toward God – of finding the correct language of pious complaint.

Each chapter is followed by a handful of questions for either individual or group study at Lent or at any other time. But the book can be read helpfully just for its content about lament, suffering, and overcoming grief.

4. This Writer

It is important every writer identity themselves and their expertise (if they have any).

I am a pastor and theological ethicist trained at Regent College (Canada) and Duke University (North Carolina). Neither a trained counsellor nor a practicing psychologist, I have served in academic positions and in pastoral ministry where I have dealt directly with grief and pain and loss – both my own and others.

Much of what is said here is just reflection upon pastoral cases and experiences, but filtered through the lens of the literary beauty and poetic wonder of the hidden theological promise of Jeremiah's Lamentations. Not for small reason is Jeremiah called the "weeping prophet," and pastors, too, know their fair share of weeping, I'd say!

As was suggested earlier, those looking for a technical "commentary" on Lamentations would be better served to look elsewhere. Just as there is no expertise in psychology or counselling here, so there is no chapter-by-chapter or verse-by-verse exegesis.

Though I am competent in Hebrew, detailed philological studies and complex reflections on the ancient Semitic background are virtually non-existent. The point of this book is very *practical and pastoral* in its intent.

What is said here aims to encourage us to use liturgical

seasons such as Lent to reconnect with our deepest pains and losses, to ensure that we have assimilated them truthfully and meaningfully into our stories.

In saying the book is practical, I should spell out some of my assumptions about what it is for something to be *practical*.

The first and most basic assumption is that Christian faith is a *formative* orientation into the world. Faith represents the *true story* in which we humanly live (the Gospel of Jesus Christ) and inculcates a culture and way of life – a set of habits, if you will – about *how we live*.

Second, this culture is by definition not so much personal and individual as *social*. (I am with Wittgenstein[xiii] when I assert, *there are no private languages or private cultures*.)

I assume liturgical (worship) life – and Lent is just a liturgical season – inculcates shared habits in us, *forms* us to be certain kinds of people (Christians), by gifting us *communal* practices – and *shared* (Christian) language.

One such practice – or so I shall argue from my reading of Lamentations – is *lament*.

In seasons of lament we *practice* our faith. The practices of grieving themselves represent a complex symbol system drenched by an equally complex substrate worldvidew; and we speak to God and witness to one another just by *practising* our *formation in the skills of lament*.

Finally, I assume (and hope) that by examining Lamentations' Jewish liturgical background, we may, by God's grace and the loving work of the Holy Spirit whom Jesus sends upon us, come to see how all our painful losses can be gathered up in one place to be made whole in the shared, redeemed life of God's saints, and so be processed successfully.

1

Lamentations: Jewish Liturgical Use:

This little book's aim is to provide studies and meditations to encompass the Christian Season of Lent.

Lent is a period of 40 days (approximately the six weeks) prior to Easter, a season when Christians fast, pray, and follow a discipline (*askesis*)[xiv] to prepare for Easter and the coming sufferings, death, and resurrection of Jesus of Nazareth, Saviour of the World[xv].

Lent's goal is not to "earn one's salvation" through personal hardship, but rather to encourage faith, hope, and love toward God. Lent cultivates the soil of our hearts so that there in the inward self the virtues of faith, hope, and love may grow and flourish.

The six studies (chapters) presented here have as their goal pressing believers/readers to take up the opportunity of the 40-day period of Lent to reconsider their own life story in terms of sin and suffering, judgement and death, grief and overcoming. We aim to make *lament a practice*.

The six chapters all address matters raised by the biblical book of Lamentations, especially issues of mourning and grief. The studies originate in meditations upon this five-chapter book in the Hebrew Old Testament and they encourage Christians to focus their Lent discipline upon

learning from the readings of this book expressed by the Jewish communities of the world.

Lamentations first belongs to Jewish religious life before it plays any role in Christian worship. Listening is always learning. Learning is lifelong. Hearing the faith language of our faithful brothers and sisters in Judaism is a wonderful way to learn about our own commitment to Christ.

In short, this book assumes that Lamentations should be *first* read as a *Jewish* book before seeing it as a Christian one and that there is value to be had from initially studying the book in its Jewish liturgical[xvi] setting.

Our goal is to *hear* this wonderful, if challenging, Scripture in light of Jewish experience and faith.

You might ask, as a Christian, *why bother?*

The easy answer is because Jesus was Jewish; and the faith traditions of the Jewish people provide the rich soil in which whatever Christians believe about Jesus has grown. That should be good enough to get us going.

But there is much more to say: knowing *how* the Jewish people read their own sacred literature should help us to reflect upon its meaning *for us* today – i.e., for Christian believers.

Perhaps, Jewish reading strategies have something to teach us as we, Christian followers of Jesus, try to learn from Jeremiah's ancient poetic dirges.

Jeremiah's poetry as read by the Jews may help us to *go on* with our own faith in this vale of tears.

What's the connection we are making with Lent?

The prophet Jeremiah is said by the Jews to be the author of Lamentations and often in ancient Translations the book is appended to the end of the full prophetic book. In Lamentations 3 Jeremiah speaks in his own voice, but for the whole Jewish community, saying:

"I am the man who has seen affliction/
by the rod of the Lord's wrath."
(Lamentations 3.1)

Jeremiah is a Christlike figure, I would suggest. For Jesus, as he is tempted in the Wilderness and eventually tested to the point of death at Easter, is the man who can most truly speak of himself as "afflicted" by the "rod of God's wrath," as he becomes "sin for us" (2 Corinthians 5.21).

We can reprise the story of Jesus as our own and we do so especially in Baptism and at Lent, as we practice spiritual dsciplines in preparation for the Great Christian Feast of Easter.

Lent is, therefore, a season of *self-enforced suffering*.[xvii] Christians fast, they pray, they give alms – give money etc. away to those in need. Why?

The point of Lent is to suffer with Jesus, to experience suffer-

ing, *temptation*. The 40 days of Lent celebrate Jesus' 40-day experience in the Wilderness, being deprived and starved.

We are readying ourselves for the high point of Jesus' life experience – his "glorification" (John 7.39; 13.31) on the cross. This 'high watermark' of Jesus' experience is really the ground of the Christian life – best expressed in baptismal initiation, imitation, and participation. We die and rise with Christ at Easter. We prepare to re-enact his Easter journey each year, throughout the 40 days of Lent.

If we consider *how* the Jewish people have used Jeremiah's book of Lamentations devotionally and liturgically (in terms of public worship), we may learn something valuable about the meaning of suffering, *askesis* (discipline), confession, and reflection at Lent.

This may have the added bonus of helping us to manage the pains of life, our grief – if we are grieving. Lamentations is a kind of *technology*, I think, for *helping to process our grief*.

Is Lent about grief? Not *per se*, I would suggest, but Lent can be a season for self-assessment and thus a chance to revisit our pains and griefs.

How may these pains be plotted in the trajectories of our unique stories? Each and every human life is a witness to the one true story – the Life of Jesus (the Gospel). Lent has its place in each of our stories.

How did Jews *use* the Scroll of the Book of Lamentations as a

part of their Scriptural Canon? What role does this odd, sad book play in their religious life – and, following on, what role might it play in *ours*? These are our questions here.

The Date of the 'Festival'

We can start by acknowledging that in Jewish tradition we read the following:

> "Five misfortunes befell our fathers ... on the ninth of *Av*. ...On the ninth of *Av* it was decreed that our fathers should not enter the [Promised] Land, the Temple was destroyed the first and second time, Bethar was captured and the city [Jerusalem] was ploughed up." (*Mishnah Ta'anit 4.6*)

The claim covers a lot of Jewish history. This date – the 9th day of the month of *Av* – sees a procession of terrible events happen to ancient Israel, even to Medieval Jews.

Tisha b'Av is a kind of drumbeat, or a bell tolling out Israelite doom. These sad events must be assimilated into their faithful story and tradition. The tradition of the "five misfortunes" asks:

> *"...Should I weep in the fifth month [the month of Av], separating myself, as I have done these so many years?" (Zechariah 7.3)*

Misfortune breeds sadness and lamentation. It draws forth ascetical theology[xviii] – *should I separate myself, as I have*

done these many years?

Tisha b'av is the name of *the* sacred day, which falls on the doom-fated 9th of the month of *Av*, when Jews reflect back on their painful history and take up the sorrowful funeral dirge that is appropriately tapped out on the Scroll of Lamentations, so to lament their historical losses.

But how may we be certain of this unique date? Even the Jewish scholars questioned and debated:

> *"In the fifth month, on the seventh day of the month ...came Nebuzaradan ... and he burnt the house of the Lord..." (2 Kings 25.8-9)*

> *"In the fifth month, on the tenth day of the month... came Nebuzaradan ... and he burnt the house of the Lord..." (Jeremiah 52.12-13)*

"How then are these (irreconcilable scriptural) dates to be reconciled?," ask the Rabbis in their sacred *Talmud*; they creatively reply:

> "On the seventh the heathens [Babylonians] entered the Temple and ate therein and desecrated it throughout the seventh and eighth and towards dusk of the ninth they set fire to it and it continued to burn the whole of that day. ...
>
> How will the Rabbis then [explain the choice of the 9th as the date]? The beginning of any misfortune [i.e., when the

fire was started] is of greater moment."
(Talmud *Ta'anit* 29a)

The evil beginning of the fire trumps the final destruction by the date of the 10th!

The Name: Lamentations

The Jewish or Hebrew name for *Lamentations* (the book) is *Eychah*, which is the very *first* Hebrew word you encounter in the Hebrew text (1.1), translated "How" or "Alas…"

Lamentations is one of the Five "Scrolls" (known as the *megillot*) in the Hebrew Bible. (The others are Esther, Song of Songs, Ruth, and Kohelet, also known as Ecclesiastes.)

Each of these scrolls or "rolls" is read in the synagogues of the world on a different Jewish festival/holiday. The Five Scrolls form part of the third section of the Hebrew Bible, the *Ketuvim*, (also known as 'Writings' or Hagiographa.)

In the Roman Catholic version of the Bible, Lamentations is appended to the book of Jeremiah, which is in the Prophets section of the Bible. The belief is that Jeremiah the prophet wrote this little funeral-dirge book.

As I have said, Lamentations features in the Jewish holy day of *Tisha b'av* (the 9th of the month of *Av*). For this Jewish holy day rabbinic and religious tradition emphasises four key elements starting with:

(1) The Three Prophets Of Eychah ("How!" Or, "Alas...")

In Jewish tradition these three prophets or, perhaps we could call them, prophetic moments are:

a. *Moses*' mistake (The Jews believe that when Moses used *Eychah* in regards to the burden of carrying the people in Deuteronomy 1.9-12, he opened the door to later sin and suffering.)
b. Isaiah's fallen woman ("*Eychah*(!) the faithful city has become a prostitute!" Isaiah 1.21)
c. Jeremiah's destitute widow (*Eychah* = the city in Lamentations 1.1)

These Scriptures incorporate important uses of the term 'alas': Eychah.

The second thing emphasised by the celebration of *Tisha b'Av* is:

(2) A Memorialisation Of Jewish Suffering

Suffering is real in all human life and must be processed adequately.

The Jews do their processing at *Tisha b'Av.* Their focus is not so much personal suffering – as ours might be – but national suffering in which each Jew participates. Yet the analogy of faith, I think, permits and encourages us to wrap up our own sufferings here, even the personal ones.

Now, think of all your hardest days, things you have been through yourself!

Death, divorce, divine absence! *How did you cope?* How did you deal with grief? How did you process the feelings evoked by your suffering? How did it affect your relationship with God and others? How did you explain it to yourself to make sense of it? Did you have to take some time to manage your own anger with God? Did you blame God and feel betrayed? These are just some realistic questions human pain raises.

Every one of us must deal with hardships that produce pain and griefs.

Sometimes these sorrows are intensely spiritual temptations that cause us to doubt God, to question Him, even to mistrust Him.

Even when we have healed from these bitter feelings, there may be value in revisiting them regularly in order to remind ourselves that they are a genuine and honest part of our *whole* story (the story of our *wholeness*) that have contributed to our true growth as people of faith. Lent can be a beautiful season in which to do this work.

The questions mentioned above are navigational tools to help us understand *Tisha b'Av* for Jews.

Lamentations is, if I may call it this, *a sadness map*, a scroll for directing and processing my pains and disappointments[xx].

Lamentations concerns grief and pain, but it is more importantly a rich manifestation of hope, precisely because it is a literature and practice of "repair."

Repair means fixing what is broken. That means finding the requisite materials to bring once orderly things now broken down back into rude good health. This can be a diagnosis of our emotional and mental health as well as it can a dilapidated building. Desperation, I suggest, names action *without orientation*; despair names action *without hope*.

Lamentations truthfully names an honest, (ironically) hope-filled sadness that is its own kind of *repair* because it dwells in a sound and healthy hope of a better future. This is critical to see. Only a people who believe they have a future under God could live out the radical character of *Tisha b'Av's* (Jewish) theology!

The scroll or *Megillah* of Lamentations is taken up in the synagogue on the fast-day of *Tisha b'Av*, the ninth day of the Hebrew month of *Av*, which is the eleventh month of the civil year and the fifth month[xxi] of the ecclesiastical year in the Jewish calendar. The date commemorates the anniversary of the destruction of the Temple(s), especially the first, Solomon's, which is the subject of prophetic books like Ezekiel.

The public proclamation of Lamentations is followed in the synagogue service by the reading of other historical Jewish lamentations, or *kinot* (dirges), composed throughout the centuries by rabbis, poets, and sages in response to other major Jewish tragedies, such as the Hadrianic persecutions

(2nd c. C.E.), the Crusades (11th-12th centuries); and the burning of the Talmud in Paris (1242 C.E.)[xxii]. These *kinot* ("woes") follow the literary model of Lamentations in some ways, and many begin with the word that opens Lamentations, "*Eychah*…"

So the "Christian" ("Old" Testament) book we know as Lamentations is used by the Jews in the liturgy of *Tisha b'Av* to memorialise the sufferings of this special religious people, God's chosen ones.

This is suggestive of how Christians might helpfully use Lamentations today as we learn and borrow from the Jewish people during our Season of Lent in preparing our hearts for Christ's passion at Easter.

The third thing *Tisha b'Av* does for Jews is that it memorialises:

(3) The 40 Days And The Spies (*Tisha B'Av*)

Moses sent Joshua, Caleb and 10 other spies into the land, we read, in Numbers 13. On the 8th of the month of *Av* (one day before *Tisha b'Av*) the spies bought back a 'bad report.' If they had not done so, say the Jews, the Millennium (the Kingdom) would have come. But as it was, on the eve of *Tisha b'Av*, the people mourned the giants and other terrors of the Holy Land they had been promised, and so they missed their opportunity to enter their promised *rest*.

Tisha b'Av's reading of Lamentations is a way of reminding

us that sometimes the bad choices we make in life have far-reaching and long-lasting consequences that can produce much sorrow afterwards.

Death and sorrow are not a last word, however. *Tisha b'Av* also looks forward from suffering as well; it points to hope in:

(4) The Coming Of Messiah (Always Hope)

The reading of Lamentations, therefore, also looks forward to the good future, the coming of Messiah, which for Christians is an event already past and yet still remains our future hope.

Why do the Jews *use* the book in these ways? Why all the commemorating and memorialising the ugly stuff of life, our sufferings and the laments they inspire?

Here we need to understand something more about the date: *Tisha b'Av*.

Tisha B'Av

The Jewish Year 5784 (2024) this particular year, as I write, is sunset (Monday) 12 August, 2024 through to nightfall (Tuesday) August 13, 2024.

In synagogues worldwide, the book of Lamentations will be read and mourning prayers recited. The ark in the synagogue (the wooden cabinet where the Torah scroll is kept) will be draped in solemn black.

The *Sabbath* immediately preceding the ninth of *Av* is known as the Sabbath of Vision (*Hazon*) for the prophetic reading Isaiah 1.1-27. Isaiah clearly sees the coming *doom* of his beloved nation.

(Anyone who has ever seen the death-spiralling sentence upon their own nation, people, or civilisation as it has abandoned God's will may appreciate what Isaiah sees, and perhaps some Westerners are even feeling bleak about their nation(s) today).

After recounting heinous transgressions, however, it offers the hope of reconciliation, which will come when the Israelite people "cease to do evil, learn to do good."

The Sabbath of Vision (*Hazon*) and Shabbat *Nahamu*, which provides words of consolation a week later, protectively bracket *Tisha B'Av* from opposite directions, softening the horror of the sacred temple's destruction.

After *Tisha b'Av* Sabbath readings focus on consolation, especially from the prophet Isaiah. Mourners enter *Tisha b'Av* knowing that there is salvation and are able to emerge from it reassured that their redemption will come. The entire portion of *Shabbat Hazon* may be chanted to the melody provided by the Scroll *Eychah* (Lamentations).

Tisha B'Av itself is a full fast day, so the last meal must be eaten before sunset prior to the ninth of *Av*. This final meal marks a sacred and holy boundary between periods of eating and fasting; it is called the "*seudah ha-mafseket.*"

The meal is typically comprised of round foods such as eggs or lentils. These symbolise mourning in Jewish tradition because their circular shape evokes the cycle of life.

Some people eat an egg or bread sprinkled with ashes; some Jews may sit on the ground during the meal. The *birkat ha-mazon* (grace after meals) is said individually and typically silently.

This is the place Lamentations takes in Jewish ritual life. Understanding this suggests that Lamentations is the perfect book for Christians to be studying at Lent, for Lent signals the temptations, sufferings, and death of Christ looking ahead to Easter; and also summons us to take seriously our own sin and their ensuing losses, the price we pay for being the type of people in need of Christ's sacrifice.

The blackness of this period is a shadow of the ugliness of human sin, human refusal to be God's good creatures and the proud hunger to be more than that which God has made us to be.[xxiv]

This is a chance to mourn for our own sins and for the world's, too. It is a chance to remember our world is not all it should be, our society is deeply flawed and often very twisted and dark. That is no excuse for a loss of hope; it is an invitation to reality in *hope*.

It is not a terrible thing to remember that we who know Jesus as Lord were as much "children of wrath" as anyone. Jeremiah speaks in Lamentations 3.8 reminding us that sin

separates us from God and shuts heaven against our cries for help:

"Even when I call out or cry for help,/
he shuts out my prayer."

Lent is thus also a chance to confess *our* sins as well, to get right with God afresh.

It's a chance to show our remorse by repaying debts, forgiving evils, or just by fasting and lamenting.

It's also a chance to solemnify our own postures and hearts, to let grief have its way in us so that our sins and failures as people might take up a right place in our stories as a beautifully restored and redeemed people in Christ. It is a chance to own what we have done[xxv], without letting evil have the last word or our grief for our pasts overwhelm us.

Our master is he who promised us: *"Blessed are those who mourn, for they will be comforted."* (Matthew 5.4)

In the final analysis, Lamentations shares a great truth with us: mourning and literary lament are valid forms of expressing grief for the dark parts of our stories, our pains and our woes, whether self-inflicted or forced upon us by life.

Questions

(1) Where have you suffered? How have you handled that in your story? Has Christ redeemed it?

(2) What do you think Christians can learn from the Jews memorialising their sufferings on *Tisha b'Av* (the 9th of Av)?

(3) How might you practice lamentation in your own life? Or would it be better just to be happy and joyful always?

2

Acrostics "A-Z" I: The Journey That Is Suffering

The Book of Jeremiah's *Lamentations* is a complex literary piece of five chapters in length. Each of the first four chapters is what we know as a poetic acrostic.

A Jewish "acrostic" is a piece of complex poetry where each line begins with a consecutive letter of the Hebrew alphabet '*aleph* to *tau*, A to T (Z[*ayin*] comes earlier in the Hebrew alphabet!). Hebrew has 22 letters, so each chapter has 22 verses bar chapter three which has 3 x 22 = 66. The third chapter is the middle or centre of the book.

So the first line of poetry (v.1) is started by 'A', v.2 by 'B,' etc., etc.

Thus v.1 of chapter 1:

"How deserted lies the city,/
once so full of people!/
How like a widow is she,/
who once was great among the nations!/
She who was queen among the provinces/
has now become a slave."

I have underscored the word "How" or "alas" because it actually starts with the letter A ('*Aleph*) in Hebrew. Here is v.2:

"Bitterly she weeps at night,/
tears are on her cheeks./
Among all her lovers/
there is no one to comfort her./
All her friends have betrayed her;/
they have become her enemies."

In this verse in the original Hebrew Jeremiah literally says: "weeping she weeps," which means, *she weeps sorely or bitterly*.

But the first word "weeping" is (*bako*), which begins with the Hebrew letter 'B' – *beyt*. The next verse begins with 'G' – the third letter in the order of the Hebrew alphabet. And the fourth verse 'D' (*Dalit*).

A… B… G… D… etc

You get the basic picture.

In this chapter we want to explore the significance of the 'A' to 'Z' journey of Lamentations. In exploring how the literary arrangement of Lamentations expresses itself as a poetic acrostic *we will draw five conclusions as to the liturgical character of expressing grief.*

We hope to suggest that the A to Z pattern points us to a *liturgical journey*; to an order of action and repetition; to a finality; to a concrete end; and to a purposeful completion.

We will begin, however, by examining a question or two

about the social shape of grief and, therefore, about its reality.

The prophet Jeremiah, the master of words who wrote this (according to Jewish tradition) intends us to see a *journey* here, travel through something very familiar, which every schoolchild knows: the journey of the alphabet from one end to the other.

Indeed, no doubt Jeremiah thought that, pedagogically, if every line traversed the elements of the alphabet, it'd be easier to remember for liturgical recital. So *mourning* (lamentation) is meant to be *something we master* – like the alphabet – something we can re-perform year by year.

It's supposed to become tacit knowledge – like the alphabet, something we 'don't have to think about' to know what to do or say, how to perform it successfully.

In other words, this liturgical Scroll is meant to *form* us, meant to create habits in our *bodies* and *souls*. We are meant to *remember* it all, line by line, and to learn to use the rhythms of our bodies and vocal chords to chant or sing it. (Words, especially lyricised, go deeper than our skin as every musician knows!)

There is a *training* involved here, just like in mastering the alphabet, which, barring something unusual (a stroke?), we never, ever forget how to recite.

We need to address two questions from what has just been

said. First, what is mourning? The second question will follow from our definition: is mourning as represented by Jeremiah *fake*? Is there no *real* emotion there?

Let's begin with the first and move to the second. Mourning, as we find it in Lamentations, is ritual action. Which means it can be repeated. Repeated action is liturgical or *ritual*, which kind of suggests it might be neither spontaneous nor "real."

Is it plastic? Pretend? We can say more in a second, but I want to discourage this thought at the outset.

Emotion in all cultures is *real*, even if the cultural bottles (I hope that metaphor helps) into which it is repeatedly poured take the same shape. In other words, I think healthy emotions engage with cultural realities and practices as we find them in historical language-using communities.

All cultures, without exception, find places to channel emotion *positively*. *Tisha b'Av* is one cultural example of this productive use of sad emotions. All feelings of pain take a certain human, social, and cultural shape, which is not plastic but can be prescribed.[xxvii]

Mourning, therefore, is habit. *Lament as practice*. It has a definite cultural shape. If this were not true, we could not hire professionals (as happens in the Bible) to do it for us:

"Therefore, thus says the Lord God of hosts, the Lord,/
'There is wailing in all the plazas,/

And in all the streets they say, 'Alas! Alas!'/
They also call the farmer to mourning/
And professional mourners to lamentation.'"
(Amos 5.16)

Sociologically, it has long been recognised, as a recent book by Psychologist Jonathan Lear in fact does,[xxviii] that mourning can be likened to a *form of play*, that mourning and play have much in common. "Soon after the Oklahoma City bombing, in 1995," writes Emily Kaplan,[xxix]

> "children in a nearby kindergarten started playing dead. Over and over, they toppled towers of blocks and lay motionless on the floor. When their teacher asked them to tell her about what was happening in their play, the students informed her that they had all been killed by terrorists."

The children were learning to process emotions about this real tragedy by finding ways to *play* through it.

Today, we recognise a fundamental connection between mourning and play.

We might think of the cultural forms grief takes as rules for *play* — rules of *the game called grief*. Pouring dust on one's head, for example, achieves no higher purpose than symbolising death and abjectness. It is a feature of the (all-too-real) pantomime of grief. Dust of the earth is merely a prop or set piece in the play.

Grief is a form of play just to the extent that it, like play, is

autotelic: it has no purpose beyond itself, beyond the joy of playing.

Mourning truly is a language of "repair," however, and in that sense has purpose, but it shares with play this important feature: it has no true purpose beyond its own embodiment and expression.

We don't *do grief* to heal. *Grief is what we do that heals us.*

We don't play in order to make the world *more just*, for instance; we play for the sheer joy of expressing our vital human powers, for life.

Mourning *as play* is a way of aligning ourselves with the reality of a tragic or painful loss, a bodily acknowledgement that the "body keeps score" and that something has shifted in the world of our embodied relations.

Lent is a kind of "play" that particularly takes place in special or "holy" time. This is not, liturgically speaking, "ordinary" time; it is literally "holy" time because it reenacts aspects of the sacred life of Jesus.

It is *one* of the imaginative shapes that Christians encourage to let mourning flourish. Mourning here might mean reliving past traumas, letting go of past sins, forgetting wrongs done or experienced, remembering the grievous loss of a loved one, or some other social trauma such as deep rejection.

Social dramas come in many shapes and sizes. Some we cause, some we suffer.

Responding to them can take a certain moral shape. I suggest, we can actually use Lent each year (Lamentations gives us scriptural permission, I believe) to pile these things up – no matter how dreadful – into an honest if foreboding heap, to look at them, but more importantly, to deal with them.

Lamentations is a *medicine*, which makes us well. But like all cures, our people and culture must agree on what is sickness and what is the road to health.

Let's move now to the second question I raised above, therefore. Does what I have said about grief's cultural shape suggest emotion isn't *real*? By no means.

But it does suggest emotion has a social and a *liturgical* role in our lives.

By liturgical I mean: a role in *our worship* and *devotion* to God. We are embodied beings whose stories have ups and downs. The meanings of these ups ands downs are socially derived. By that, I mean, we know what some hurts mean by how our community interprets them, let alone how I personally feel about them.

Tisha b'Av is mainly about one great Jewish *loss*[xxx] – the temple's destruction in 586 B.C. This was the temple built by Solomon, David's son, erected to much fanfare (1 Kings 8.54-66).

But *Tisha b'Av* as an annual "celebration" (and I hesitate to use that word but it seems fitting) becomes a rallying point for filtering all historical losses and pains, for understanding and making sense of them.

Lent says to Christians that the cross of Jesus is *this* same rallying point for us. When Jesus dies, the temple of his body is thrown down. As a rallying point for sin and suffering, the destruction of the human body of Jesus by far outweighs the loss of the Jewish temple in 586 B.C. But Jesus invites his followers into his sufferings nevertheless:

"Then Jesus told his disciples, 'If anyone would come after me, let him deny himself and take up his cross and follow me. 25 For whoever would save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for my sake will find it. 26 For what will it profit a man if he gains the whole world and forfeits his soul? Or what shall a man give in return for his soul?'" (Matthew 16.24-5)

Now, to return to our main theme in this chapter, the A to B to C to D etc. (*acrostic*) pattern of the verse structure of the first four chapters of Lamentations suggests some very interesting things about the character of our suffering and the grief and lament, which are just its literary and social manifestations, giving it voice.

What are those things and what can we learn from them?

There's at least five we can see quite quickly; so let's analyse those in order:

(1) There's A Whole Journey To Be Traversed In Grief…

Just as our alphabet runs from A to Z, so grief has a natural course.

Without all the letters of the alphabet there'd be something unnatural about our words, and so goes our grief and sorrow, too. We need every stage, every letter in the complex lexographical wasteland that is grief, pain, sorrow. *Grief is a journey, not a destination.* Pain has its own dictionary!

I personally have found that painful things that have happened in my life, whether I caused them or not, have taken me some *time* to overcome. We can't simply forgive (ourselves or others) overnight. Feelings of failure or remorse can rise up time and time again. Grief can overwhelm us in one hour after days when we thought we were 'fully ok.' *This is a journey not a destination.*

Grief is defined by the Mayo Clinic as:

> "a strong, sometimes overwhelming emotion for people, regardless of whether their sadness stems from the loss of a loved one or from a terminal diagnosis they or someone they love have received."

The Clinic adds:

> "They might find themselves feeling numb and removed from daily life, unable to carry on with regular duties while saddled with their sense of loss."

At such times, we need a regular orientation, a direction to follow. We are not in a position to think too much, so we just need something simple and familiar to follow – something as tacit as the alphabet, requiring little reflection or emotional energy.

The A-Z quality of lament, which we see artfully deployed by Jeremiah in Lamentations, can help us when grieving. We don't have to think too hard about the direction of the alphabet; we just follow our nose. And in dealing with grief it can be the same way.

So when thinking about *this* Lent, as you review your own life story and contemplate its ups and downs, f*ollow the process;* please don't overthink it. Rather, move with the rhythm of the A-Z alphabet in its order, methodically. Let it flow.

There's an orientation here. There's a natural movement. The next 40 days will get you there.

Yet equally, just as there's an orientation from start to finish – A to Z; so also:

(2) There's An Order To That Journey…

A comes before K and K before T. We must journey correctly *through* the order from A to Z to complete the course without missing, stopping, or skipping some places along the way. Otherwise, we don't know the order. In short, we can't *circumvent the process*.

When grieving for real hurts, we shouldn't let people tell us to 'just get over it!' Everything takes its own good time. Everything must be processed in order. A child who says the alphabet like this "A, B, C, Z, L, N, K," doesn't actually *know* the alphabet and is only guessing at letters.

Someone who has grieved well in life has moved in order from A-Z, has passed the test of each of the stages of grief.

The Mayo clinic advises those grieving:

> "Experts advise those grieving to realise they can't control the process and *to prepare for varying stages of grief.*"

Nothing can be missed out in the full expression of grief.

There's a third lesson, too:

(3) As There's A Beginning So There's An End To That Journey…

Grief begins somewhere and ends somewhere, just like our alphabet starts with A and ends in Z. That means *grief is not an ending but a journey.*

There is also hope for renewal and completion. The Alphabet ends with the letter 'Z' and grief too must terminate somewhere.

Jeremiah wisely says it this way in chapter three, in what is really the central citadel of his five Lamentations chapters:

Because of the Lord's great love we are not consumed,/
for his compassions never fail./
23 They are new every morning;/
great is your faithfulness./
24 I say to myself, "The Lord is my portion;/
therefore I will wait for him."
(3.22-24)

These powerful verses should become a part of your meditation.

There is always *hope* and there is an aim for full restoration of inspiration and joy. Lament as a practice relates to death, loss, and grief, but it is *full of hope* – because it is a *practice of repair.* Lament leads us somewhere.

Think of two sides of a river.

Loss – say grief over a loved one's death or my own personal sin – speaks of a moral or emotional *gap* between where reality was (the loved one and I) and where I am now, myself *alone*. I'm on the far side of things. Only a *bridge* could get me over the river (the loss, the gap).

Lament concerns *bridging* from the loss-place to the reality-space. Lament builds bridges "over troubled waters," to quote the famous Simon & Garfunkel song. So we can consider Lamentations the *language and literature not of "despair" but of "repair."*

This is a formal "religious" language that we must learn to

use if our emotional lives are to remain healthy. Familiarity with Lament is how we deal with grief and bridge over our "troubled waters."

That's what *Tisha b'Av* is doing for Jews; *that's what Lent can do for us.*

And that is our goal in grief, as we pass through its stages, to get to the end (the other side) as we can. No hurry, no pressure. Repair takes time. Every process is its own and requires its own stopping places.

But a grief not properly assuaged by the appropriate journey will in the end produce bitterness, frustration, and, alas, more suffering. The goal is never to defeat a justified grief, but to give it its place and to live with it.

Mayo thus rightly says:

> "Mourning can last for months or years. Generally, pain is tempered as time passes and as the bereaved adapts to life without a loved one, to the news of a terminal diagnosis or to the realisation that someone they love may die."

The process can last a long time or even the remainder of life. The long goal must be to do what the Jews do on *Tisha b'Av*: not to run from our pains but to embrace them and make them a complete part of one's whole truthful biography, and not only my story but *my life history as understood through the stories of Israel and Jesus.*

But fourth and following from what we have already said:

(4) There Is A Finality To The Journey …

Z is the *end* of the alphabet. Once you get there, you've done the full course. There's no more ground to cover or lessons to learn.

Grief like the alphabet is *expended in its recitation*. You can't go any further. All you can do is *rinse and repeat*. But there are no more letters to cover off.

Grief cannot be healthy if it indulges too long and becomes a settled disposition in its own right. It is a stopping post or staging point not a goal in itself.

When grief threatens to overwhelm us… when at Lent, as we look back on past choices, sometimes very poor ones, this scripture from Lamentations must be near at hand:

The Lord is good to those whose hope is in him,/
to the one who seeks him;/
26 it is good to wait quietly/
for the salvation of the Lord. (3.25-6)

There is genuine *salvation* at the end of the process. This is not a vain hope. Grief makes us wait, as we go through the full lexicon of pain, but there is a Z and we must believe we will get there.

Here's the fifth and final thing that the A-B-C-D pattern of

Lamentations suggests we should see:

Since we are waiting for salvation, we must remain hopeful and believe that:

(5) There's A Purpose To The Journey …

When personally suffering, it's all too easy to believe that *my situation* has no fruitful purpose. Suffering appears, as what it so often is, as random. Evil is more or less inexplicable because it isn't rational.

In all our troubles we must hold on to the thought that 'this, too, shall pass.' This will come to an end and at its end I will see far more clearly its true purpose in my life.

We may never quite understand why God has trusted us with the pains we have felt; they may even overwhelm us at times. Yet, in the end there is a purpose. It is hope that keeps us going when the going loses a sense of orientation.

Starting the alphabet journey at A means trying to get to Z. It's Z that gives any sense to A. Otherwise, why set out at all if you can't end *whole* again? Once you hit 'Z' you can only restart at 'A.'

So with grief, we start out and work to get to the end: that's our goal. Our purpose is ahead of us. We don't remain wallowing in grief. There's a proper course to follow and, like the alphabet itself, it ends purposively.

The alphabetic character of this journey says we have to keep moving to the end of the process. We can't stop overlong in any one place, no matter how comforting that place or memory may be to us.

We clearly see from the acrostic character of Jeremiah's poetry that *suffering is a journey not a destination* – but it does lead to a renewal of our *sense of destination*.

Suffering can't be rushed or trivialised, but the whole country of sorrow must be traversed, if it is to be incorporated into our stories and healed. But equally, we can't wallow and get bitter. Suffering is taken up into our stories in order to be redeemed not to dominate and overwhelm us.

Questions

(1) Have you ever seen any purpose to suffering? Did you ever find any yourself? Is this all just wishful thinking?

(2) Is there really an order to moving through suffering to overcoming it? Or is suffering just inherently disordered? Does Lament help us here? Do you think suffering can truly be translated into prayer? How?

(3) Share a story of suffering? What did you or the person concerned learn from it?

3

Acrostics "A-Z" II: The Journey That Is Suffering

Our study here in chapter three means that recognising the acrostic nature of Jeremiah's Lamentation poems suggests *helping our grief to find just the right language* for pain in our happy, clappy world.[xxxi]

The language of darkness and pain is quite legitimate for us. We are always tempted to treat pain as illegitimate. *We shouldn't be hurting*, we think, because others wish to move on with *their* lives.

Lamentations and Lent invalidate this whole train of thought. There is an emotional justice expressed through lament.[xxxii]

At difficult moments in *my* life – especially in my work as a pastor – I have found that talking, finding just the right words, helps. Journalling helps, too. *Use your words* is the rule.

In William Shakespeare's King Lear we hear these lines:

"The weight of this sad time we must obey,/
Speak what we feel, not what we ought to say."[xxxiii]

Therapists and counsellors understand the profound healing that can occur when we "speak what we feel, not what we ought to say." This is good advice, I think.

After a particularly hard and difficult season I had experienced in the ministry, I was regularly visiting a Spiritual Director who was helping me process and praying with and for me. Very early on in our times of meeting together, he sat next to me, put a fatherly arm around me, and asked me to pray about whatever I wanted. He was encouraging me *to find my words*.

I recall that I started to cry and shake. Tears flooded out and I felt a rush of relief – that I was now in a safe place where I could express some internalised hurts and find words for things that had gone deep into my heart.

I remember realising palpably a deep wounding I had carried concerning (what I saw as) unfairly *misjudged motives*.

People sometimes unjustly criticise us (especially in pastoral leadership) and in doing so they impugn our motives, even slandering us as to why we have acted as we have.

I had sat on many of those (perceived) injustices and painfully suppressed them. Now, however, they were given permission to flood free. Like zoo animals accidentally let loose from their cages, they were roaming in all directions and filling every street in the emotional village that was my mind at that time.

Just being freed and given permission to speak these pains helped me. I was able to find the exact words for my pain and disappointment. Hurt feelings at being misjudged were being ventilated and released, and I was able to begin the journey of forgiveness for those who had wronged me. *This is the kind of work we can do at Lent.*

In this chapter we will look at the kind of *language* we learn to use when dealing with grief; and examine how this plays out concretely in the biblical character Job's story, where his friends misjudge and misspeak the reality of his sufferings.

In essence, his friends end up telling lies about God by misdescribing the situation Job is actually in.

From there we will go on to consider the difficult problem of why God is so totally *silent* in Lamentations by suggesting that this is so because God wants to give us moral space, the room for healthy human agency to emerge where we can find our words and use our God-given voice.

Finally, we shall try to draw a connection between suffering and our future glory.

(1) The Language Of Grief

Humanly, we need to find an *appropriate* language for dealing with the depth of our own sufferings.[xxxiv] The goal is to find words that mirror theological reality, divine declaration:

"Who can speak and have it happen/

if the Lord has not decreed it?"
(Lamentations 3.37)

The biblical God *declares* what reality is, so there is really nothing *godless*, but something very human and, indeed, *good* about surfacing and expressing pain and grief if they accord with 'the way things really are' and the pain is actually real:

"And about the ninth hour Jesus cried out with a loud voice, saying, 'Eli, Eli, lema sabachthani?' that is, 'My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?'" (Matthew 27.46, ESV)

Jesus sets us free, I think, by way of his example. We are not to feel guilty about owning grief and pain nor about speaking them out.

At the moment of his crucifixion Jesus stands under the full weight of the judgement of divine justice. He became "sin" for us.

This was God's decree, so Jesus' pained cry or imploring question was in fact in line with, and humanly appropriate to, the full reality of the horror of the situation as divinely seen. Jesus became in fact divinely *God-forsaken*, so his own *cris de Coeur* from that vile cross mirrored ontological reality.

Even on the cross Jesus, the only honest man, *found a way through his pain and into truthful speech.*
Finding honest, sometimes raw language to express our own

real pain is a step in the right direction of reconnecting ourselves to moral reality. And by *moral reality*, I refer to what God has ordained or permitted.

Without "lament" language, therefore, the church is robbed of the possibility of a truth-telling witness in this vale of tears.

Suffering has led many a soul to atheism. Many, therefore, will challenge us when we endure hardship – *where is your God?* (Psalm 42.1) This *may* be your own honest question!

I am not suggesting, by the way, that finding this language is easy. As a young pastor in Canada I found myself called to a scene where a congregant had lost a loved one.

When I arrived at the home I found this distraught man sitting head in hands in the gutter on the roadside curb. Like every young theologian I wanted so much to say something profound; something to console his loss and wipe it away like food waste on the dinner plate. I felt there must have been something in my reading and training that would cover for this exact moment. Some profound word.

Alas – *Eychah*! – there wasn't. I learned that day and at that moment by how far language falls short to achieve what we hope. So … I sat down beside him, put my arm around his shoulder, and we brooded together *in a most holy silence*.

All I am suggesting here is that the A-Z acrostic pattern of Lamentations' first four chapters helps us see how important

mastery of the correct language is. Each word must be chosen – very particularly. Each artful term must be articulated in a nuanced, consecutive, and meaningful order. There is a syntax to suffering!

Jeremiah's creative, poetic genius – he is a master craftsman – suggests to me at least that this work is not easy to achieve. It has to be worked at. Skills must be gained, habits formed.

Yet despite our obvious struggles finding words and terms, God truly *is* in the midst of our pain; He is not erased by it. The sufferings of Christians do not deny the reality of God; they affirm His real nearness the moment truthful speech is unveiled:

"Is it not from the mouth of the Most High/
that both calamities and good things come?"
(Lamentations 3.38)

God is quite able to speak. So are we, too, if our agency is to mean anything at all. The ethical goal of the Christian life is truth-telling witness (see Stanley Hauerwas's many works!), to align our words and actions with God's reality.

What God speaks into being is reality for me, for us, for the whole church community. I must find my way into alignment with it and Lenten repentance is a part of that true journey.

Unfortunately, there are lots of happy-clappy forms of Christianity that leave no recognisable place for suffering or

hardship in the Christian life. (A curse on all their houses!)

The sketch of reality they draw is more carnival culture than an objective map of a world of sometimes harsh reality God summons or allows to enter into being.

In saying this, I am by no means affirming God as the proximate cause of evil. But the truth is, nothing could happen without God's *permission*, without God allowing creaturely freedom. Evil – and consequently my pain and yours – is part of all this – *sadly*.

Such 'victory' theologies (shall we call them?) tend to view pain or suffering as evidence of failure and of a loss of faith. Pain and grief can't be included in this dysfunctional, inhuman, monochrome account of God's relation to creation.

This can end up further traumatising people who are already suffering and feeling terrible, but now come to believe God is punishing them and, worse, that something is defective in their faith because they *feel* this way. Pastorally, this is disastrous, as we should learn from the Book of Job.

(2) Job

Regrettably, many of us will experience sufferings much like the sorry Old Testament figure of Job did. The inevitable question will arise for us: what happened here? *Where is God for me?*

Worse, we may have friends (fellow congregants) just like

Job's. His friends are not able to endure *the mystery of his suffering*, so they jump to unsettling conclusions about its real source. *You did something wrong, Job; it's all your fault!* That just makes the pain worse.

The first of Job's three friends, Eliphaz, acknowledges that Job has been a source of strength to others (Job 4.3-4). But then he turns and puts the blame for Job's suffering squarely on Job himself. "Think now," he says,

"who that was innocent ever perished? Or where were the upright cut off? As I have seen, those who plow iniquity and sow trouble reap the same" (Job 4.7-8).

Job's second friend, Bildad, spews forth much the same dross: *"See, God will not reject a blameless person nor take the hand of evildoers"* (Job 8.20).

Third time lucky, Job's last friend, Zophar, repeats the poorly oriented theological refrain.

"If iniquity is in your hand, put it far away, do not let wickedness reside in your tents. Surely then you will lift up your face without blemish; you will be secure, and will not fear.… Your life will be brighter than the noonday" (Job 11.14-15, 17).

Job, *you're the problem!*

Therefore, the full alphabet of grief is *necessary* if poetic form is to be given to the twin outstanding truths that (a) my God is good and loves me; (b) even though people like me *suffer*

- through what the German philosopher G.W.F. Hegel (d. 1830) once called *the slaughter-bench* of history![xxxv]

Without the *whole* alphabet, it turns out, I can't make up all the words I truly need – I lack the full vocabulary – to truly express what's going on, and to let Christ and the Holy Spirit bring my whole moral identity into alignment with God's Trinitarian goodness and my own created reality.

Suffering is assimilated faithfully when it is spoken as lament. This requires a deep formation and training in language, by which we accurately map God's whole, and wholly good, created reality. This is what "repair" looks like, and for "repair" we could also use the word redemption.

The very acrostic structure (A-B-C- etc) of Lamentations stops us from becoming Gnostics who refuse to accept either the reality of suffering and pain (like Hinduism) or the divine reality of the goodness of creation and Creator (like ancient and modern forms of Gnosticism).

This *fallen* world is not just supposed to be *endured* even if it must be artfully navigated. This is our home, even if it is at times a painful one.

Evil does not have the first or last word only the confused middle one. Grief must needs be part of our vocabulary, necessarily, but is not all defining.

Lament as practice is how we sing our way through our broken middles between Alpha and Omega in faith.

(3) Divine Silence

There is a really startling observation to be made in Lamentations. *God is silent.* Surprisingly perhaps.

Yet any word HE (The ALMIGHTY) uttered in the face of Jeremiah's lamentations and complaints might well thunder out of existence our guttural yet faithful pain-utterances. God's mighty voice would drown us out. The Lord knows this; and he is sensitive to our sufferings.

As Beau Harris and Carleen Mandolfo rightly claim,

> "Interpreting God's silence may prove as fruitful to communities of faith as a firm understanding of God's words. Against the backdrop of Lamentations' boisterous lament, God's silence speaks volumes."[xxxvi]

With grief, there is a need for *human voices* to be permitted to speak their pain. Grief must be ventilated if it is not to prepare the ground for a subterranean toxicity in our hearts.

Pain must be ejected into the air; must be translated from emotions like bleak grief, black despair, and bickering frustration, into the meaningful poetic utterance and prayers of the faithful soul, who is suffering, perhaps unjustly.

The divine silence is very powerful; more powerful than speech. It *gives room*, I suggest, for the suffering human voice to enunciate its pain, to move from A-Z and assimilate its whole course and process as he or she goes. Without that

absence of divine *logos*, I would argue, Jeremiah could not have become the virtuoso of *lament as practice*!

The bottom line: *God never drowns us out*. God only truly speaks to correct a few matters (important ones!) at the end of Job's story. In Jeremiah's Lamentations he remains utterly silent, which is why many Jewish Rabbis rejected Lamentations from the Bible.

What does all this signal?

There must be room permitted throughout the stages of grief for a genuine movement from self to God, from suffering through lament to prayer and finally to the Cross.

Our discipline and our journey each Lent is in part about this … looking at the reality of things but also gazing ahead to the cross, Easter, and resurrection from death (grief is its own kind of death).

There must be an *externalisation of pain* and its *eruption* into language so it can be thought and assimilated, and finally prayed and released.

The A-Z journey of grief allows for this. Otherwise, pain is trapped inside us like poisonous air, choking us as moral asbestos-dust on our lungs.

(4) Glory

Paul says in Romans 8.18:

"For I consider that the sufferings of this present time are not worth comparing with the glory that is to be revealed to us."

That means, we must weight all our present pain against future glory. Glory is our goal and purpose.

It is for this reason we name pain in this life as a shortcoming of glory not *its erasure*. Lament bridges pain to glory. That bridge of *lament as practice* allows glory to pass over from the next world into this one and to become a glorious liturgy and prayer.

If pain is internalised, however, and has no liturgical voice of escape, it turns into a self-destructive force. It denies itself the possibility of glory. But pain must be turned into a witness *for glory*. That's what Paul says and Lamentations performs for us.

Words matter. That's why we need our poetic craft-masters like Jeremiah.

W.C. Fields once said: "It ain't what they call you, it's what you answer to." Lamentations helps us to see that what we call pain is just a staging post on the road to glory. And glory is what we must answer to.

But lament gives us the time, breath, and all the potent,

forceful words to make this journey real not fake.

Everything in life must be rightly *named* if it is to be articulated and understood and thereby appropriated into my story - hence we need the *full alphabet* to construct a lexicon of lament worthy of the depth of real pain, human sufferung, and unassuaged grief.

That is a plausible practical possibility of why Lamentations practices the A, B, C (acrostic) method to lead us from gracelessness to glory.

Questions

(1) Can suffering be assimilated into a story and true hope of glory? How does Lamentations help us?

(2) Why does Lamentations take up the acrostic method in its poetry? How does this help us see suffering ad grief for what they are?

(3) How important is it to speak truthfully about your suffering and grief? Do the words we use change shape and form through the process of articulation? Is there any way to get round the notion that pain is just pain and suffering suffering? Or by invoking *the full alphabet* of grief, do we see it all in new light?

4

Five Stages Of Grief: Some Say There Are Five Stages To Grieving A Deep Loss

Classically, it has been taught there are five stages to handling and processing grief.[xxxvii]

I think this is just *one* way to think about grief and may not even be the best one. Nevertheless, there is something helpful in reflecting on the fact that there are *stages to grief* – five or more or even less – and in seeing how Lamentations unfolds when we keep these five classic "stages of grief" in mind.

Does Lamentations see a certain kind of pattern to grief? Or, put differently, are there perhaps "stations" to grief in the same way we represent "stations of the cross" at Easter? The thought is worth pursuing.

In this chapter we will examine the *classical five stages of grief* by seeing how they might be portrayed in Lamentations.

By no means am I arguing that Jeremiah has the five stages of grief in mind as he writes *Eychah*. This is just a thought experiment designed to see if it can help us to comprehend and process our own sorrows.

The five stages of grief classically represented are *denial, anger, bargaining, depression*, and lastly *acceptance*.

(1) First Stage Of Grief: Denial

Classically, the first stage of grief, according to Kübler-Ross, was said to be denial.

When we study Lamentations we can contrast vv.1-11 in chapter 1 with vv.12ff – which is written by a *third-person* witness (suggesting a denial or refusal to face it personally) contrasted with first person testimony, as a literary transition is made.

"How deserted lies the city," says the third-person witness (v.1), who implies … I am *uninvolved* … but this is how it all appears to me at a (safe) distance.

Now contrast v.12:

"Is it nothing to you, all you who pass by?/
Look around and see./
Is any suffering like my suffering/
that was inflicted on me,/
that the Lord brought on me/
in the day of his fierce anger?

So we have a contradictory movement from third person (observer) to first-person experiencer, invoking also a second person who also sees:

"Is it nothing to you,/
all you who pass by?"

This manner of address at least suggests a kind of emotional movement, which begins with a sense of *disembodied denial. This can't really be happening!*

Distance is created and upheld. A distance that reviews pain momentarily and at a safe distance. *I can't believe this has happened, so I won't face it!*

The wounded, grieving spirit initially floats free, hovering above the fallen city – in denial that it has experienced great tragedy in life's abrupt and tragic downfall.

Here, at least, we may find the first classic stage of grief – *denial*.

We simply say: *"It is, but it can't be!" "This can't happen to me."* Or, *"this can't really be happening."*

These are real life responses to tragedy and pain. They express our initial disorientation such as when we receive a bad medical diagnosis and we don't really believe it. We are dumbfounded.

Three Russian psychologists published a fine essay[xxxviii] in 2013 in which they noticed the obvious point that:

> "Major depression is one of the most important psychiatric disorders in the cancer population."

They go on to claim that often:

> "there are unconscious mental processes that help to minimise negative experiences."

These, they suggest, are "denial or distortion of reality and action at the subconscious level."[xxxix]

So suffering leads us very often *away from reality* and only a purposeful *return to reality* – a repair of the disorder, what we may call "redemption" – can meaningfully help us.

Denial is not wicked, however. It is perfectly understandable. When reality socks us in the jaw we are initially disoriented. We have to find our bearings again.

But all our knowledge, all our emotional cues, are social in nature. We have to get our bearings from our community. *How should I feel about this?* is the most natural question for a human to ask when bad things happen. Our responses are usually intuitive.

I have watched little children when they get hurt (say a child falls over running on asphalt). They know there is what we adults call "pain" some place in their body, their knees or elbows or both.

At first they look to their mother, especially, to her face, for cues as to what to do. Pain in the body does not immediately translate into expressed emotion. (In fact, pain is a very hard thing to define.) There is a gap.

Emotion is socially expressed and has appropriate social

forms. The first picture we see on the child's face is one of puzzlement. *How should I respond? Should I yell? Cry? Scream out?*

At this point, usually the mother is herself looking pained; she's grimacing, or speaking loudly, and running to the child. Only at this time, does the child respond with the first wails and tears of their own.

What has to be learned by all humans is the appropriate form (the social manner) of expressing feelings, including pain. What is the appropriate bodily comportment to deal with grief and pain?

Daniel Goleman in a 1995 book of the same name[xl] famously defined *emotional intelligence* as the ability to understand and manage feelings, motivate yourself in the face of discordant situations, and recognise feelings and emotional displays by other people.

Since then, *emotional intelligence* or *emotional literacy* has been defined as the ability to recognise, appraise, express, understand and regulate feelings.[xli]

So human *formation* requires of us that we learn to *socialise* emotion, but when bad things first happen we can find ourselves disoriented and somewhat in *denial*.

But we can't remain there, with that initial feeling of *denial*. We can't sit in our nay-saying, confused and disoriented. We have to begin our journey at 'A' and move through to the end

at 'Z'. Even if 'A' means – I have sinned or failed in some way. 'A' means stopping *denial* and beginning to deal with things as they really are even in their full awfulness or unbearability.

So there is naturally a:

(2) Second Stage Of Grief: Anger

The second stage involves a shift from denial to the raw emotion of anger spewing forth. We see this in Lamentations, too.

"Look, Lord, and consider:/
Whom have you ever treated like this? (2.20)

There is (not necessarily righteous) indignation in these words here from Jeremiah, as he speaks *for Jerusalem's suffering people.* How could you do this? Or, more strongly, *How dare you do this?*

Confusion and denial have turned to a sputtering anger. The cauldron of frustration boils over! Each of us has probably felt like this toward God at some point or other, as life takes its various (sometimes negative) twists and turns.

Lent is a great opportunity to assess whether we are carrying any unprocessed anger or frustration – or impatience – especially towards God.

It is God, after all, who allows this boiling-pot episode. It is part of his grace to us, mere sinners. Lamentations allows us

to simmer away for a while.

But we can't remain here either, *in anger*, and in hurt, because, as one wise person once put it, "all bitterness starts out as hurt."

Feelings of anger and betrayal can quickly fester into bitterness. Lament – which as we have been saying is the language of *repair* – doesn't allow for this. It keeps us moving forward through the process of grief, from A to B, to C, etc.

In the journal *Psychology Today*, I once read this important advice about why anger can be deadly dangerous:

> "For anger—and its first cousin, resentment—is what we're all likely to experience whenever we conclude that another has seriously abused us. Left to fester, that righteous anger eventually becomes the corrosive ulcer that is bitterness."

Beyond anger there is a third stage to grief:

(3) Third Stage Of Grief: Bargaining (Ch 3)

After anger, people sometimes try to bargain their way out of their pain.

If you go to Lamentations 3, you will see an example of this at work:

"Let him sit alone in silence,/
for the Lord has laid it on him./

Let him bury his face in the dust—/
there may yet be hope./
Let him offer his cheek to one who would strike him,/
and let him be filled with disgrace." (3.28-30)

The prophet of God basically blames Jewish immorality and idolatry for the tragedy of Jerusalem's destruction, which is what the 9th of *Av* is about.

In doing so he begins to negotiate a bargain with God: "Let him offer his cheek to one who would strike him…" *Here's the deal, God…*

But this isn't getting to the heart of the reality; it is only staving off the realisation that things *really have fallen out badly* and this cannot be made the subject of a lesser bargain. It must be embraced and lived with. Jerusalem's terrifying destruction is absolutely real; the divine judgement therein expressed cannot be bargained away.

Yet there is a fascinating outburst in Lamentations 3 in which the believer, as it were, also *accuses* God of being the enemy — like a lion lying in ambush to destroy his victim.

The prophet comes close to losing his faith ("I thought my strength and hope in the Lord had perished," he says) before the memory of God's past kindnesses restores itself — barely.

We will all be tempted to brokering deals with God when bad stuff happens, which is another way the language of doubt makes assertions about *over just how much of my life*

Christ is permitted to be Lord. The key is to recognise the *immaturity* of my response and to move on.

There is a another:

(4) Fourth Stage Of Grief: Depression (Ch 4)

In vv.17-18 of chapter four we see a new phase of the journey – the dark night of depression when all hope seems lost.

"Moreover, our eyes failed,/
looking in vain for help;/
from our towers we watched/
for a nation that could not save us./
People stalked us at every step,/
so we could not walk in our streets./
Our end was near, our days were numbered,/
for our end had come."

The heavy depressive tone of this lament tells you where Jeremiah thinks things are really at. It's the *end*. Everything has come crashing down. Grief has fully enveloped him with the dark, brooding vapour of despair and doubt. *Do we even have a future?* For, as he says, "our end had come."

Despair is the true enemy of faith. Because despair is devoid of hope.[xlii] Faith is utterly realistic; despair is not.

The black cloud of despair is just as unreal as denial but in the opposite direction.

The point of *Tisha b'Av* for Jews (and Lent can be this for Christians) is to mourn our pains, failures, and losses but without granting them the final word over our lives.

The cross is God's final word over all stories and lives. The *end* of every human story is settled by God's definitive story in the cross. The cross says *no* to every sin and wrong, but it also says *yes* to every sinner, every human failure.

In the cross there is not just God's judgement – God's righteous *No* against broken humanity – but God's empowering *Yes* and *Amen* is also said to us in Christ.

"All of God's promises have their yes in him. That is why we say Amen through him to the glory of God." (2 Corinthians 1.20, CEB)

Of course, nothing is ever as bleak as it first appears. The cancer diagnosis may originate a depression, but it can also end with successful treatment and full healing.

While we're suffering, however, we feel "stalked" and hunted at every turn. Night terrors may trail us, along with the black dog of mental affliction.

But that is not the last word.

It's natural to feel in grief that the end may have come. Depression takes over. All the lights go out and all imaginable hope seems lost. The future – and *going on* – no longer seems realistic.

But there is also a final:

(5) Fifth Stage Of Grief: Acceptance (Ch 5)

The fifth stage is reached, however, with these hope-filled words from the final lament in chapter five:

"You, Lord, reign forever;/
your throne endures from generation to generation."
(5.19)

It turns out what we thought was *the end* was just a sign of God's sovereignty in motion. What seemed the finality of depression proved to be a mere moment in the ultimacy of God's Kingdom Reign. Gracelessness and suffering has become glory as Paul said it would in Romans 8.18.

But there will always remain tensions while suffering goes on. On the tensions: see the very next verse (5.20):

"Why do you always forget us?/
Why do you forsake us so long?"

Grief, as I have motioned, all throughout these Lent studies – as Lamentations in its very structure suggests – is *a journey*.

Whether we think of this as an A-Z alphabet experience or a five-stages 'thing' is not the most important observation to make. In short, it matters little whether we see and agree there is a formal journey from denial to anger to bargaining to despair to acceptance.

It really only matters that we see grief as *a journey, mourning as a way of travel* that is not to be avoided, but to be embraced.

Questions

(1) Have you ever felt or witnessed the five phases or some of them? Are these real stages?

(2) Can you see other examples of the stages in the words of Lamentations?

(3) Do you gain hope from putting your sufferings in the light of Lamentations?

(4) Do you feel today God is really master of all that is happening to you?

5

The Centrality Of Church & Confession In Lamentations

Ben Franklin once said: "Justice will not be served until those who are unaffected are as outraged as those who are." These are poignant words as we take a look at our own complicity in sin and evil.

Christians believe in the practice of confession of sin. It is a common practice for believers and has been since the ancient church, but even moreso after the year 1215 when annual (oracular) confession became a standard element of Catholic piety.

St. Thomas Aquinas, for example, writing in his famous *Summa* of theology (1272/3 C.E.), addresses confession in his treatment of the *sacraments*, here particularly of *penance*. For a medieval Catholic like Aquinas, the sacraments including penance are treated as *means* whereby Christ's saving grace (the grace of charity) is mediated bodily and spiritually to Christian believers. Aquinas writes:

> "the proximate matter of this sacrament consists in the acts of the penitent [person], the matter of which acts are the sins over which he grieves, which he confesses, and for which he satisfies."[xliii]

Confession may have a particular *medieval* form, but it nonetheless has deep biblical roots. The First Letter of St

John says:

"If we claim to be without sin, we deceive ourselves and the truth is not in us. 9 If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just and will forgive us our sins and purify us from all unrighteousness. 10 If we claim we have not sinned, we make him out to be a liar and his word is not in us." (1 John 1.8-10)

James 5.16 admonishes:

"…confess your sins to each other and pray for each other so that you may be healed. The prayer of a righteous person is powerful and effective."

Apart from its medieval Catholic and biblical bases, the Anglican prayerbook (the *Book of Common Prayer*) offers the following prayed confession:

Almighty and most merciful Father,
we have erred, and strayed from thy ways like lost sheep.
We have followed too much the devices and desires
of our own hearts.
We have offended against thy holy laws.
We have left undone those things
which we ought to have done;
and we have done those things
which we ought not to have done;
and there is no health in us.
But thou, O Lord, have mercy upon us, miserable offenders.
Spare thou them, O God, which confess their faults.

Restore thou them that are penitent;
according to thy promises declared unto mankind
in Christ Jesu our Lord.
And grant, O most merciful Father, for his sake,
that we may hereafter live a godly, righteous, and sober life,
to the glory of thy holy name.
Amen.

Confession is a *reality* of the Christian life, because sin is equally a reality of this life. Confession names sin – not just wicked deeds, but also our moral shortcomings, what we "have left undone, those things which we ought to have done" but didn't.

Lamentations addresses itself to the confronting reality of human wrongdoing, for which confession is not optional but a necessity. Confession is not just a form of truth-telling; it is a form of *agreement-making*.

There is a particular shape to human moral reality and confession respects this shape. Confession binds us to reality in the truth of things as they are. Confession is one of the practices by which repair happens in the human lifeworld.

In this chapter, there are two important issues to address: First, there is the *matter of complacency* about social injustice (leaving undone what ought to be done). Here, the message is: Don't be *the* "passer by" we see in chapter 1.12!

When people are suffering, either comfort them or speak up at least! Complicity in social reality leads us to confession.

The second matter is the issue of *personal confession* for harms done and therefore, of what role confession ought to play in the healthy human life.

The first might be considered a more general confession of sin, while the second is much more personal and specific.

Finally, too, we will conclude by saying a few words about how the modern self tends to view the practice of confession.

The lesson here for us is that the doleful "lament" in Jeremiah's *Lamentations* encourages the church to *confess* its sins and its complicity in the world's evils. Rather than seeing the sufferings of others "objectively" and at a safe distance, we are invited ("subjectively") to see our complicity in a shared world made painful by many reckless evils.

Finally, as a third item, I will say a few words about confession in this modern world we live in amidst the modern psychological type, the caste of person this present liberal world most commonly engenders.

(1) Confession For Complicity In Evil

Confession concerns public truth-telling, which might be considered to belong to the prophetic witness of the church. Here, we are are required to see ourselves as *complicit* with the injuries victims sustain. We are enjoined to hear their raised cries even as God does:

"For the vineyard of the LORD of hosts is the house of Israel

And the men of Judah His delightful plant. Thus He looked for justice, but behold, bloodshed; For righteousness, but behold, a cry of distress." (Isaiah 5.7)

God expects to *see justice* when he looks upon the earth. And this is especially true when he examines Israel's deeds. The Psalmist thus says:

"For the LORD loves the just and will not forsake his faithful ones. Wrongdoers will be completely destroyed; the offspring of the wicked will perish." (Psalm 37.28)

The victim experiencing suffering is beautifully portrayed by Jeremiah. In doing so, he raises the spectre of human complacency about moral and social evils.

"Is it nothing to you, all you who pass by?/
Look around and see./
Is any suffering like my suffering…" (1.12)

If we wish to maintain some kind of moral grip upon reality, Jeremiah gives some really excellent and sage advice: "Look around and see…"

Open your eyes!

It's possible to look without *seeing*, isn't it?

When others suffer, we may feel some sympathy but hey, it isn't happening to *us*! Nor are we *guilty* of anything. Unless we see all of life as interconnected, in which case disinter-

ested "passers by" are a type of moral parasites and not real contributors!

The term "passers by" could almost signal *indifference*. The Hebrew phrase *kol <ovrey-derekh* presents an image of the Levite passing to the other side of a road upon seeing a Jewish neighbour lying in a pool of blood (see Luke 10.25-9). It's an image of studied indifference to harm and wrong and not just because we have become hard hearted.

In truth, seeing vast amounts of suffering – as we do in the modern world – probably does render us emotionally jaded. It's sad, *but we don't really want to get involved*.

Lent, however, gives us a season when we can, at the very least, "look around and see." What *will* we see when we look around? That we live in a world full of unjust suffering, for starters.

Consider the Dalit Jogoni girls in India![xliv] Young Indian women/girls plucked out of their caste at a young age and then married, in a dark ritual ceremony, to the local false god, so that they can go on to ritual abuse at the hands of local priests, only finally to be discarded into the dustbin of men's sexual pleasure as the village prostitute, likely to catch AIDS or an STD, and to die very young. Here is a most concrete example of obvious *social evil*.

When we confess our sins, we admit complicity in *all* the world entails, including what we ourselves have never done.

In the first place, we are asked to "look around" and to remember victims:

"People have heard my groaning,/
but there is no one to comfort me." (1.21)

No doubt the *my* and the *me* overblows its pain and minimises its own wrong (that too is human nature); but when we hear about real, substantive evils in the world – like human trafficking, child exploitation, the prisoner inhumanly teated in prison, the trashing of the planet – what is our response: *I have not committed those sins! But our fellow Westerners have!*

We hear about the groaning of *others*, but if we ourselves are really listening, then why does Jeremiah insist there

"is no one [there] to comfort me" (1.21)?

We can look without seeing and listen without hearing. This too is sin.

(2) Our Own Sins

Lent also begs us each year to take a good hard look *at ourselves* and our own actions.

Jeremiah sums it up in the central chapter of Lamentations, chapter three. There he gives a wonderful summary of the Spirit of Lent:

"Let us examine our ways and test them,/
and let us return to the Lord."
(Lamentations 3.40)

When walking in forests or mountains, sometimes we have to see that there is no path ahead of us. Rather than trying to forge a way ahead into a trackless land, we are sometimes best to turn around and go back and take a fresh path from the exact place where we started to take the original one that proved hopeless.

Some years ago I recall hearing about a youth offender programme in one of the Australian capital cities. It involved young men who had become involved in crime, but who were given a chance to repent and turn around, to bypass the youth justice system.

The key and critical issue was that these young people had to acknowledge and own up to where they had gone astray, where they had headed off down the wrong way. This was usually as simple as an episode of 'tagging' (graffiti). But the offender had to confess the first wrong thing they had done. They had to go right back to *the beginning of a path* in order to take up a wholly new direction.

The Gospel summons us to engagement with the evils of the world to overcome them, and it *demands* that this truthful work begins in my own heart and story – with the practice of confessing our sins if not to our priest or minister, then at least to trusted confidants or spiritual advisers. We especially must learn to confess to those whom we have hurt.[xlv]

The practice of confession is done best in personal community.

Dietrich Bonhoeffer, pacifist German pastor and martyr to the Nazis, developed a system of confession amongst the young ordinands he trained for the Confessing Church in Nazi Germany. Here is something he wrote in his little community manual – *Life Together:*

> "In confession occurs the breakthrough of the Cross. The root of all sin is pride, *superbia*. I want to be my own law, I have a right to my self, my hatred and my desires, my life and my death. The mind and flesh of man are set on fire by pride; for it is precisely in his wickedness that man wants to be as God. Confession in the presence of a brother is the profoundest kind of humiliation. It hurts, it cuts a man down, it is a dreadful blow to pride...In the deep mental and physical pain of humiliation before a brother - which means, before God - we experience the Cross of Jesus as our rescue and salvation. The old man dies, but it is God who has conquered him. Now we share in the resurrection of Christ and eternal life."

Bonhoeffer in that same worked, in one of the greatest theological diagnoses of sin and the need for personal confession, added:

> "In confession the break-through to community takes place. Sin demands to have a man by himself. It withdraws him from the community. The more isolated a person is, the more destructive will be the power of sin over him, and the more deeply he becomes involved in it, the more disastrous is his isolation. Sin wants to remain unknown. It shuns the light. In the darkness of the unexpressed it poisons the whole being of a person."

Jeremiah thus advises quite strikingly in chapter three of Lamentations:

"Let us lift up our hearts and our hands/
to God in heaven, and say:/
'We have sinned and rebelled/
and you have not forgiven.'"
(3.41-2)

Chapter three is in fact the *central hinge* upon which the two roughly equal two-chapter halves of Lamentations swings.

The structure looks something like this:

A(1) A'(5)
B(2) B'(4)
C(3)

'C' here is chapter three, the central hinge of the 'V' shaped literary structure. And *this* chapter (three) is where the most hope is expressed by Jeremiah in Lamentations.

Hope is the center of everything. It is our anchor.[xlvi] Confession, I want to suggest, is what breathes new hope back into *hopeless* situations.[xlvii]

"For no one is cast off/
by the Lord forever."
(3.31)

Right from the start in chapter one, Jeremiah has associated

his mourning and lament with the catastrophic punishment for Judah and Jerusalem's sins:

"This is why I weep/
and my eyes overflow with tears."
(1.15b-16a)

What I see brings grief to my soul…
(3.51)

"Why should the living complain/
when punished for their sins?"
(3.39)

Jeremiah often speaks in the first-person narrating the story of Judah's losses *as his own*. He associates this mourning with sins committed by the people of God.

"Jerusalem has sinned greatly/
and so has become unclean."
(1.8a)

And he uses his own first-person agency to speak as the people in lament for sins committed and punished:

"My sins have been bound into a yoke;/
by his hands they were woven together./
They have been hung on my neck,/
and the Lord has sapped my strength."
(1.14)

Episodic confession occurs throughout:

"The Lord is righteous,/
yet I rebelled against his command."
(1.18)

"…for I have been most rebellious." (1.20b)

The visions of your prophets/
were false and worthless;/
they did not expose your sin/
to ward off your captivity./
The prophecies they gave you/
were false and misleading.
(2.14)

"The crown has fallen from our head./
Woe to us, for we have sinned!"
(5.16)

If we are to remain healthy spiritually and emotionally, the formative *practice* of Christian confession, I suggest, must be returned to our lives, for confession involves truth-telling witness and this is what makes us *safe* for community with others.

Confession is a recognisable human *practice*, as Jeremiah shows us in Lamentations. It has form and shape, sociologically. Moral philosopher Alasdair MacIntyre has helpfully defined a *practice* in this way:

> "By a practice I am going to mean any coherent and complex form of socially established cooperative human activity through which goods internal to that form of activity are realised in the course of trying to achieve those standards of excellence which are appropriate to, and partially definitive of, that form of activity, with the result that human powers to achieve excellence, and human conceptions of the ends and goods involved, are systematically extended."[xlvii]

That's quite a mouthful(!), but if we pull it apart a little bit, we see it is a *sociological reality*, a part and parcel of human society and human culture: "socially established cooperative human activity".

Equally, it is an *activity with standards*, which is another way of saying, it has a shape by which we can measure it. We can know whether people have mastered this cultural form or not.

Further, and finally, it belongs to a sphere of human activity in which *excellence is pursued and the good for human beings is realised.*

Summarising MacIntyre's real point in my own terms – if MacIntyre were speaking of confession – is that *we can get better at confession and also better through it.*

Consider how confession continues to play a role in modern life. First-person confession, for example, still does in our law courts where it is considered "Queen of the evidences" at trial.[xlix]

Confession is about *telling the truth*, which is the only genuine path to healing, but it is equally about learning to explain ourselves to ourselves and to the others whom we wrong and harm, especially God.

Confession, as I have experienced it in ecclesial life, is an experiment, if not always a manifestation, of the virtue of *hope*. The person who owns up to anything does so seeking reconciliation, to mitigate real social damage done.

To act like this – in a moment of courageous truth-telling, which can only be considered experimental (for no one can guarantee how the 'other' will respond) – is to breathe *hope* into a world frosted into paralysis by loveless sin, a world *informed* by the twin icy powers of sin and death.

"…my soul is downcast within me./
21 Yet this I call to mind/
and therefore I have hope:"
(3.20b-1)

Hope is a special Christian virtue (see 1 Corinthians 13.13; Romans 5.5). It is God-given, God-empowered, and God-directed. Whoever expresses hope is reaching out toward God, straining after the Saviour who offers us hope.

The tremendous Easter scene of the thieves on their crosses beside Jesus sums up the virtue of hope alongside its opposing vice, despair:

"One of the criminals who hung there hurled insults at him:

> *'Aren't you the Messiah? Save yourself and us!'*
> *40 But the other criminal rebuked him. 'Don't you fear God,' he said, 'since you are under the same sentence? 41 We are punished justly, for we are getting what our deeds deserve. But this man has done nothing wrong.'"*
> *(Luke 23.39-41)*

We are getting what our deeds deserve! The one thief hurls invective. The other confesses his wrongdoing and the justice of his sentence. The latter expresses hope; the former is bitter with a voice clouded by despair.

The thief with hope looks to repair:

> *"Then he said, 'Jesus, remember me when you come into your kingdom.'" (23.42)*

Jesus meets his hope with divine promise:

> *"Jesus answered him, 'Truly I tell you, today you will be with me in paradise.'" (23.43)*

Confession is not just a manifestation of hope it is equally also *a manifestation of courage*. The great medieval Catholic theologian St. Thomas Aquinas understood that courage is the *form of all the virtues*, for to practice any virtue consistently takes a firmness of character that comes with courage.[1]

To be ruthlessly honest with oneself and others requires unmixed courage, especially when telling the truth is difficult. Of all the virtues, courage is the one that is often particularly

associated with difficult action such as confession. Those are brave who are tough, strong, and determined; this marks us as courageous.

Beyond being hopeful and courageous, *confession is also storytelling.* Inevitably, we cannot confess without explaining; and meaning-making means story-telling. Actions require contextual homes in stories. *True actions require true stories.*

We tell stories to put things *in order* — to find an 'A' to 'Z' of action, a grammar for what we do. We tell stories to make what otherwise appears random and chaotic, meaningful and navigable.

As our minds try to make sense of our pains and losses, we succumb to the moral need to tell our story, to confess. This is as true for victims as it is for perpetrators. We do this to make sense of everything that befalls us.

In grief, this is the road by which we process and ventilate all the bitter emotion, all the overwhelming feelings of hopelessness, dread, fear, and terror. And it is the pathway also *in confession.*

> "Man is the storytelling animal, the only creature on earth that told itself stories to understand what kind of creature it was. The story was his birthright, and nobody could take it away." *(*Salman Rushdie*, Joseph Anton: A Memoir)*

Finally, we must say a little about:

(3) The Modern Self And Confession

There is a danger here in 'confessing', however, which we must address. The modern self is not the ancient self, not the self of Jeremiah's Lamentations. Not by a long shot!

Differently formed, the modern Western self is peculiarly self-expressive and emotivist. (This is in fact a reflex and a modern hold-over/survival of our 'Catholic' past and the medieval practice of oracular confession we have described above.)

Having lost a sense of external truths – an 'order to things' (what used to be called metaphysics) – which sustain our lives, we are cast back nakedly upon the inner self to provide coherence and meaning.

Confession was an ecclesial practice, which had a home in the total reality of the Christian life within a *formed* Christian society.

Today, in Western culture, *the act of confession* has become deeply entwined with our self-interpretation of the truth of our own narcissistic self-identity, and rather answers the question: *Who am I?* Against this contemporary moral therapeutism, the older notion of confession instead asked: *What have I done? How do I stand with regards to reality and others, my community, not least God?*

Thus, in late modernity we do not immediately conceive of confession as truth-telling.

Peter Brooks, for example, suggests:

> "Confession is never direct, simple, straightforward, but rather a discourse whose relation to the truth takes the shape of a tangent."

The type of self that modern humans have become is what moral philosopher Charles Taylor has called the *expressivist self.* Thus, Brooks writes that in place of religion, psychoanalysis

> "offers a secular version of religious confession: it insists on the work of patient and analyst—comparable to confessant and confessor—toward the discovery of the most hidden truths about selfhood."[lii]

Christian imagery of confession also concerns healing, but not in the therapeutic sense:

"Confess your faults one to another, and pray one for another, that ye may be healed." (James 5.16)

Oscar Wilde expressed the modern sense quite aptly when he argued: "It is the confession, not the priest, that gives us absolution."

In *The Limits of Autobiography: Trauma and Testimony*,[liii] Leigh Gilmore looks at the emerging popularity of the published *testimonial memoir* and its relation to trauma culture. Gilmore suggests that:

> "the literary market has proved a shaping force. Although it is unclear whether the market has led or followed, market demand currently encourages marketing practices such as subtitling an author's first book 'a memoir' when in previous years it might have been classified as [a work of] fiction."[liv]

Gilmore points out that the *market demand* for memoir has forced the mislabelling of what is rather fictional writing, as if it were a true memoir, in order to create titilation and to sell more books.

In short, modern autobiography, especially the 'tell all' kind, is an experiment in self-expression not a hopeful journey into repairing moral community with God and others.[lv] It is rather a way to give body to the depths of the restless, rootless liberal self in search of a truth it must forge for itself.

This is very different from the ancient Christian discipline of confession, and has nothing to do with *lament as practice*.

In summary, Lamentations encourages us to see our own complicity in the sins of the world and counsels us not to be a passerby. Second, it encourages us at Lent to examine ourselves and to confess our sins to God or a trusted guide (a minister or priest or friend) to repair what must be repaired in our moral journey.

Finally, Lent reminds us that confession is a not a vehicle for self-expression so much as a journey into repair of self and moral community.

Questions

(1) What are some social evils you know of?

(2) How can the church confess these and help overcome these?

(3) What is it like to be a "passer by"? (Discuss) What is it like to be the sufferer and to watch "passers by"?

(4) What is the church's social role? Concretely, what is an *adequate* ecclesial and personal response to human trafficking of young girls?

6 Theodicy And The right To Complain

All is not right with the world and life is not fair. If you live long enough you discover this. *These are the best of times, these are the worst of times. Life wasn't meant to be easy. Often punishments don't fit the crime.* These are the platitudes of our theme of suffering and lament.

The theme is obvious as we hear Lamentations because Jerusalem complains that she has been treated harsher than Sodom:

"The punishment of my people/
is greater than that of Sodom,/
which was overthrown in a moment/
without a hand turned to help her."
(4.6)

This seems unfair; but life is not fair. Therefore, the world aches. The world is full of pain:

"The hearts of the people/
cry out to the Lord./
You walls of Daughter Zion,/
let your tears flow like a river/
day and night;/
give yourself no relief,/
your eyes no rest." (2.18)

This chapter explores the problem of theodicy – the challenge of God's justice – through the lens of the Scroll of Lamentations.

In confession (chapter five) we spoke of our justice toward God and moral reality; now we ask about God's justice toward us.

We begin by reprising the suffering of *Tisha b'Av*, and then we examine what theodicy is. Finally we turn to asking about Lamentations as *literature of complaint*.

Throughout, we want to see that God is *just* – even though we *suffer* – and that Lamentations gives us guidance, specifically when we consider God's silence, on how to process our complaint as a genuine form of spiritual expression.

Lent, I want to suggest, is a great gift of space, a 40-day time to address the ways we have suffered at the hands of others.

(1) Reprising Tisha b'Av

Tisha b'Av, upon which Lamentations is read aloud in the synagogues of the world by Orthodox Jews, is the *saddest* day on the Jewish calendar.

Jews fast, deprive themselves, and pray. As we have seen, it strongly resembles, in some ways, our Christian Lent disciplines. It is for Jews the culmination of a special Three Weeks, a period of time during which the children of Israel mark and remember the most momentous of events for

them: the destruction of the Holy Temple in Jerusalem. Jeremiah retells how terrible the day was:

"Dead bodies are scattered everywhere, like piles of manure on the fields, like grain cut and left behind by the reapers, grain that no one gathers. This is what the LORD has told me to say." (Jeremiah 9.22)

The Psalmist in Psalm 74.6 explains the wanton vandalism of the Babylonian soldiers:

"They smashed all the carved paneling with their axes and hatchets."

The historical record reads like this:

"On the seventh day of the fifth month of the nineteenth year of King Nebuchadnezzar of Babylonia, Nebuzaradan, adviser to the king and commander of his army, entered Jerusalem. 9 He burned down the Temple, the palace, and the houses of all the important people in Jerusalem, 10 and his soldiers tore down the city walls. 11 Then Nebuzaradan took away to Babylonia the people who were left in the city, the remaining skilled workers, and those who had deserted to the Babylonians. 12 But he left in Judah some of the poorest people, who owned no property, and put them to work in the vineyards and fields." (2 Kings 25.8-12)

What appears odd is that this same *destruction* happened not once but twice. Once under the Babylonians in 586 B.C. (as described above) and once under the Romans in 70 C.E.

Even odder, other terrible events are brought into the frame of the two temples' destructions.

The ancient Jewish temple that Jesus and the Apostles would have known is currently a mosque – the Jewish temple has never been rebuilt. If the Jews needed a solemn and permanent reminder of their pain and guilt for sin, they only have to look at the sacred Mount in Jerusalem, at Zion, and see the Dome of the Rock, the *Al Aqsa* Mosque.

As has been said, the Jewish people also associate other dreadful events in their history with this date. It's as if they pile up like broken stones all their pains in one place; and then they return to the same rubble pile to *celebrate* them each year. Most of us want to forget our troubles … the Jews bother to remember them in *the context of their faith.*

Most of the big pains in our lives could be likened to the destruction of the temple in Jerusalem. Their consequences carry forward.

Even after we have processed them and repented of what was involved, Lent can be a great time for *a reminder tune-up* – a spiritual grease and oil change, a reminiscence of what went wrong in the past. From the efforts we make to remember (even the bad in life), fresh life can grow. New motivation can be found. Restoration can be renewed again.

As I have said already, life doesn't just address our failures; bad things also happen to us, evils that others commit. There is *unjust* suffering.

To that theme of unjust pain expressed through tears we can add the observation that God compounds our pain (*maybe*) by *never speaking* in Lamentations. God offers no judgement, but certainly *no comfort*.

I shall have more to say about this in a moment, but let's consider the question of suffering in relation to God's character – which we call *theodicy*.

What is theodicy?

(2) Theodicy

The question of *theodicy* comes into the frame with Lamentations.

Frederick Buechner has rightly said that:

> "THEODICY IS THE BRANCH OF THEOLOGY that asks the question: If God is just, why do terrible things happen to wonderful people? The Bible's best answer is the book of Job."

Theodicy is a word meaning "God's justice" (from *theos* = God and *dike* meaning justice) and so theodicy is a question about *how God is being fair* when He creates creatures and puts them in a world where they suffer – since He has the power to right things.

Theodicy worries about God's actions in the light of God's (supposed) goodness. How can God be both good and permit suffering? That is the question put in its most classical form.

Typically, the classical question is invariably (wrongly) answered in these ways:

(a) God is not fully good (*in extremis* = God is the Devil)

(b) God is not all powerful (He'd like to but can't solve all this)

Lamentations provides some important, if not fully satisfying (depending on one's view) solutions. Here are three.

- *In Lamentations God authorises complaint.*
- *In Lamentations God's silence authorises and legitimises human frustration.*
- *In Lamentations God lets us question God to, and about, God.*

(3) Complaint

Lamentations is heavy with *complaint*, thick with it. It is literature of complaint; that's what lament really is. As such, it encourages us to complain.

"The Lord is like an enemy;/
he has swallowed up Israel."
….

"He has multiplied mourning and lamentation/
for Daughter Judah." (2.5)

To be the Lord is to be the covenant-keeping God of Israel.

Yet here, God is *complained of* as becoming their enemy, the source of their pain and frustration, if not anger.

God apparently allows these anxious complaints. He doesn't reject them or speak over them to quell them. Humans can *dislike* what goes on in the world and still retain faith. They can even speak *against* what God has permitted and still hold fast to faith. God is not afraid of human lament.

Second, the fact that God's voice *isn't* heard at all in Lamentations (God doesn't say anything and is never quoted) is very important. God justifies *our voices.* He vindicates us by letting us speak. Our stories matter to God, including our suffering.

By God's *silence* we are deliberately robbed of a God's-eye perspective, which we have in other biblical contexts.

I suggest this is very important. If God spoke it would erase all our meanings. Our interpretations of how things are would come crashing to the ground by the utterance of the mighty (and truthful) Word of God. God is by far too kind for that.

Therefore, God's silence authorises and legitimises human frustration. God is fine with our *nay-saying.* We are allowed to see hardship just as it is for us. Our pain is not minimised or trivialised by the fact God is so much larger than us and His almighty perspective higher than ours. God's silence means we don't have to feel small or petty when we complain. We are allowed to process in our own good time.

Finally, in Lamentations God lets us question God *to*, and *about*, God. This is incredible really. This means that God can be Lord over both good and ill (He can be just), yet we are allowed to voice our displeasure with his just judgements.

The essence of our walk with God is relational not masterly. God lets us be His fully frail yet absolutely and completely loved creatures to the end. We are not asked to be more than human, but spiritual in our full humanity.

We mere humans, from our limited and partial standpoints, cannot see clearly the full extent of God's justice, so our vision, being foreshortened, we come up with what is less than just and indeed usually harmful.

English author J.R.R. Tolkien summed this up well in his masterful *Lord of the Rings* when Frodo wanted to see the vile creature Gollum deservedly punished for his wickedness and malice:

> "Deserves it! I daresay he does. Many that live deserve death. And some that die deserve life. Can you give it to them? Then do not be too eager to deal out death in judgement. For even the very wise cannot see all ends." (J.R.R. Tolkien, *The Fellowship of the Ring*)

But God does see all ends. For God is more than *very wise*. God is *wisdom* itself. That's the point.

Yet the Lord never robs us of the right to see only partially and be frustrated by this as mere creatures. We're allowed

to get angry, grumble, and complain and, in doing so, pass through the full country of grief on our way to a bettered wholeness.

So in the end Lamentations does not solve the problem of God's justice (theodicy). It dwells with it and shows us how God honours our pain by His love – and how He encourages us, even by His empowering silence, to modes of righteous complaint.

And that in itself is its own *kind of* answer to the problem of pain.

Questions

(1) What is theodicy?

(2) How do you reconcile God's goodness with the bad stuff of life (e.g. cancer)?

(3) How does Lamentations help you?

(4) Does it bother you God never speaks in Lamentations? What meaning do you take from this?

Conclusion

Life is a faith journey not just of profound joy but of wounding pains and grievous sufferings and losses. It could not be otherwise for any people marked by their loves, as all peoples are.

St. Augustine once wisely said: "A people is an assemblage of reasonable beings bound together by a common agreement as to the objects of their love." (*On the City of God* 19.24)

To love anything is to risk losing something, unless the object of love, like God Himself, is eternal and can never be extinguished or destroyed. In this life, we will suffer losses.

What can we do with these losses?

This book has diagnosed our suffering plight and recommended a course of medicine at Lent, as a season for revisiting grief and pain and anguish, to remind ourselves both how to overcome and how to go on, but also how to remember just how far we have already come in this faith-challenging peregrination of life.

Our task led us through the virtuoso performance the prophet Jeremiah undertook in the Book of Lamentations, and we made him our master in learning to speak *lament as practice.* Jeremiah has been to us a master-of-craft, especially in the skills of poetic embodiment. Jeremiah has helped us in the hunt for our words when suffering.

Primarily we have learned about lament as it forms us and expresses our present formation of faith through suffering. Lament we have looked at through the Jewish lens of the Scroll of Lamentations with its lament poetics – Jeremiah's secret *magnum opus*.

We have also examined how the Jewish people use this ancient Scroll. This was examined in chapter one, where it was said that the Jewish worshipping communities of the world take up the reading of Lamentations during one of their five important religious "feasts," *Tisha b'Av*, the Ninth of Av, a 'celebration' marked by a solemn preparation with fasting, with its locus of orientation the many and great calamities and losses the Jewish people have experienced on this date throughout their long peregrination through this present darkened world.

This ambit has revealed the many diverse practices of Judaism itself showing us just how suitable Lamentations is for use by Christians at Lent.

However, it would be quite wrong to restrict its use to the season of Lent. Lamentations, as I hope you have seen in this book, provides a form of gracious help for all those seasons in which our lives are blighted by pain or grief.

Chapters two and three set out from the observation that there is a certain structure to the composition of verses and chapters in Lamentations, the Hebrew alphabetic acrostic.

Lamentations, we saw, is a set of poetic acrostics hymned

by a master of his storied craft – each line beginning with consecutive letters of the Hebrew alphabet. Words adroitly chosen to embody raw human feeling.

Chapter two explored this special acrostic character of the Hebrew poetry, revealing insights about the true nature of human suffering and the grief and lament which are just its literary and social manifestations, while chapter three displayed the importance of the use of a learned language to express grief, examining this through the life of Job in particular and also in relation to the divine silence (God's avoidance of words) so striking in Lamentations.

Focus on alphabetic letters, and therefore on the necessary formation of a lexicography of grief, was shown to be part of a healthy grieving process through the many difficulties of life.

Chapter four was offered as something of a thought experiment identifying links between the classical "five stages of grief" and the emotional landscape Jeremiah explores in his Lamentations poetry.

It did not present Elizabeth Kübler-Ross's 1969 theory of the so-called "five stages to grief" as psychologically correct, but rather aimed to show what help we can get when we think through grief by means of actively joining our grief stages to a close reading of Lamentations.

Chapter five took up the practice of confession – a central focus of Lent – and a necessary feature, as I argued, of the

truthful Christian life. Sin causes so much of what we grieve for. Sin needs to be processed and fully and frankly engaged; confession and repentance are the practices which can help us here.

The final chapter wanted to address the matter of understanding human suffering in relation to the goodness of God, the theodicy problem, adapting material mined from Jeremiah's words in Lamentations.

I asked: *Why does God allow us to suffer?* How do we preserve this suffering and grief in our stories and persevere through it? There are many cases in which life seems very unfair. The last chapter argued from Jeremiah's Lamentations for the importance of truthful speech toward God, even if rough hewn – of finding the correct language of pious complaint.

Of course, that righteous *language* is lament language – and this book has had as its main goal to observe Jeremiah the master of words at his faithful work, and to encourage you to master this language; to take up the challenge of Lent and *lament as practice*.

* * * * *

I am struck as I write, that another war is ongoing in the Middle East, that October 7th, 2023 was a sad, painful day for modern Jews.

On October 7th (*Tishrei* 22, the year 5784 in the Hebrew Calendar), the people of Israel, Jesus Christ's Jewish family, his flesh and blood, was violently attacked on a Sabbath Day, across the Gaza-Israel border. 1200 innocents were violently slain.

The moral outrages committed were incomprehensible. Following that infamous month, Jews across the planet have since been stalked and threatened – from university libraries to airports in far flung places.

Human thought and feeling is woefully inadequate to the full magnitude of these shocking events. It was possible to believe quite comfortably that this type of action belonged to Nazi Germany or to some other time or place in the dark, remote past of a now civilised humanity. But no! Here we stand on the threshold of the killing of Jewish innocents and the unleashing of the dogs of war.

All this savagery and brutality reminds me afresh of why the Jews celebrate *Tisha' B'Av*, why they remember and group up all their painful memories and sufferings. It reminds us that the temple which no longer stands is still a bone of contention, a rock of offence.

And the great darkness and sickness these savage events show to exist in the twilight of the human heart only reaffirm the need to repent and to find faith beyond the need to make war. (It speaks to me of why only *lament as practice* is adequate to our healing.)

It also reminds us why Jesus had to die at Easter several thousand years ago. It shouts to us that Lent can offer a growth Season to remember the darkness that lies in all of us – but, even more importantly, what Jesus did to overcome it *for us*.

In the *Gulag Archipelago,* the Russian dissident author Solzhenitsyn described our plight – which he had seen for himself in the Soviet camps. "The line separating good and evil," he remarks:

> "passes not through states, nor between classes, nor between political parties either – but right through every human heart – and through all human hearts. This line shifts. Inside us, it oscillates with the years. And even within hearts overwhelmed by evil, one small bridgehead of good is retained."

It is for truths like that discovered by Alexsandr Solzhenitsyn, one he found in his own reading of another master of words, the Russian Novelist Dostoyevsky[lvi] no doubt, that Jesus Christ came.

It is why we take seriously the condition of our hearts, each Lenten Season. It is why we pray for the "peace of Jerusalem" (Psalm 122.6). It is why the Jews cry out – 'Next year, in

Jerusalem.' It is why the great Isaiah shouted out his eschatological hope:

"They shall not hurt nor destroy in all My holy mountain, For the earth shall be full of the knowledge of the LORD As the waters cover the sea. And in that day there shall be a Root of Jesse, Who shall stand as a banner to the people; For the Gentiles shall seek Him, And His resting place shall be glorious." (Isaiah 11.9-10, KJV)

At the end, we pray peace across the earth, the end of suffering which requires of us our *lament as practice*, to the degree that this is in our power, and the grace and mercy of Jesus Christ and his gentile Christian followers over not only the precious flesh and blood of Jesus (the blessed Jewish people) but also upon Mohammed's spiritual children, too.

"And he will judge between the nations, and will decide concerning many peoples; and they shall beat their swords into plowshares, and their spears into pruning-hooks; nation shall not lift up sword against nation, neither shall they learn war any more." (Isaiah 2.4, AMP)

Even so, come, Lord Jesus!

Summer 2024
Auckland, NZ

Afterword

"The limits of my language mean the limits of my world" — so said the great philosopher of language Ludwig Wittgenstein.

This book has ultimately invited us into *growing our vocabulary* so that we might grow our perception and our world of moral experience.

Jeremiah, the master craftsman, has been our guide to a bigger, more capacious world and has taught us that liturgically using pain-filled language can be deeply healing for our souls. *Lament is practice* that heals us.

The great scholar of linguistics Benjamin Lee Whorf once said, "Language shapes the way we think, and determines what we can think about."

When we change the words we use, we literally start to see and inhabit a different world.

Whorf also claimed: "Language is not simply a reporting device for experience but a defining framework for it."

When we learn new language – when we are formed into its use – our experiences of reality likewise morph into new forms. Through *lament as practice* we are trying to rise above our present sense of how things are.

When we learn to use our words ritually, we become a people embodying the truthful story that makes full sense of the ritual we practice.

To live truthfully into the full Gospel story is our only hope toward our own human flourishing and that of all around us.

Appendix I:
Lament As Practice

Here are some suggestions for using Lamentations at Lent or any other time as a tool for formation in *lament as practice:*

1. *Congregationally*, read aloud J*eremiah's Lamentations in a setting of silence and holy meditation. Let the power and force of Jeremiah's words strike the ear.*

2. *Personally*, make a list of *all the most grievous and damaging hurts you have been through in life. Write a set of honest questions: which of these items on this list have been fully processed and overcome? Which haven't?*

3. *Take 40 days* and read the book "*cover to cover" every day trying to hear its doleful sighs and troubled outbursts as one's own.*

4. *Journal for 40 days* as you *read aloud the poetry of Lamentations making observations about pain in general and your own griefs and pains in particular.*

5. *Make a list* of all those, including God, *to whom you believe your own confession is owed. From whom do you need to receive forgiveness? Whom do you need to forgive? Pray the Lord's Prayer over your lists every day for 40 days.*

6. *Construct your own acrostics* over 40 days. *There are 26 letters in the English alphabet not 22 as in the Hebrew. So*

construct an acrostic where all 26 of your opening lines begin with a consecutive letter from 'A' to 'Z'. Construct your own "lexicon" of grief and get help from existing dictionaries and lists of synonyms and antonyms as you try to expand your own range of vacabulary in explain to yourself what your sufferings have been like.

7. *If you are into the 'Blues,'* play some of your favourites (try Freddy King's Someday after a While!) *as you sit and meditate on Lamentations. Do this for 40 days trying always to be ruthlessly honest with God about how your life has truly gone, how you feel about particular episodes. Remember always to end your times with a prayer full of gratitude and hope, by reminding yourself* "I can do all things through Christ who strengthens me."

Appendix II:
Confessions

Confessions And Pathways For Lament: The Six Weeks Of Lent

1- *For Christian antisemitism* - the voice of the Jew in the book

2- *For Christian complicity in war* - the crusades against Islam

3- *For being the passer-by* when women suffer

4- *For children suffering* (human trafficking/abortion)

5- *For the terrible blight of terrorism* and extremism in the world

6- *For Economic Injustice, inequality, poverty, disease*

Any form of evil can be the subject of church or personal lament.

Endnotes

[i] C.S. Lewis, *A Grief Observed*, Introduction by Madeleine L'Engle. (San Francisco, CA: HarperOne:, 2015.)

[ii] The Gutians (known as *Guti*) were a West Asiatic people who possibly settled near the Zagros Mountains in North Iraq in a region referred to as *Gutium* from whence they threatened ancient Sumer and Akkad.

[iii] Ancient peoples had feelings just like us moderns, but not being modern, liberal, "expressive" selves, they did not display emotion in exactly the same ways we do. Modern pain is mostly treated less publicly and more personally and is highly therapeutised, unless that pain is being used to *manipulate* others in a media setting. Consider the many famous public figures who use the media to communicate confessions and 'pain' to hungry audiences eager to share in these emotional bonfires of the vanities.

[iv] Notice how Mark handles the apocalyptic unveiling of the "transfigured" Jesus in Mark 9.3: "His clothes became dazzling white, whiter than anyone in the world could bleach them."

[v] In some important senses, grief can be brought into the realm of PTSD, of the fight/flight/freeze dynamic that shuts down the human agent's practical reasoning skills and puts the human body on an auto-loop. With PTSD traumatic memories interfere with the practical reasoning skills of agents, and clarity of judgement disappears into a morass where new situations are treated as repeat episodes of painful past events. What goes understandably missing with PTSD is an adequate account of reality.

[vi] Almsgiving relates to charitable or merciful giving and acts of generosity.

[vii] The traditional liturgical colour for Lent is purple.

[viii] *Tisha b'Av* is one of five annual, solemn religious festivals. The significance and meaning of this special Holy time for Judaism will be unpacked fully in chapter one.

[ix] To be precise, the first four poems (chapters) are acrostics – that is, they make use of lines that begin consecutively with words starting with each of the 22 letters of the Hebrew alphabet, one after the other, in alphabetical order. Chapter three, however, does this three verses at a time, which makes for 66 total verses. Chapter five, by contrast, breaks the pattern of formal continuity – there is no discernible pattern to the initial letter of the lines – yet it remains in sync and is continuous with what precedes by obeying *the rule of* 22, which is the exact number of letters in the Hebrew alphabet.

There are 13 acrostic poems in the Hebrew Bible: the first four chapters of Lamentations we are looking at, then one in Proverbs, and a total of in the Psalms, Psalms 9-10, 25, 34, 37, 111-112, 119, and, finally, 145.

[x] Because feelings of grief can be oceanic and bottomless, the consecutive character of the alphabet represents containment and orderliness.

[xi] Lexicography is about how we compile dictionaries full of useful words!

[xii] Worryingly for readers concerned about the theodicy problem, God's judgement is such a focus of attention that He appears to show no deep sense of compassion or mercy – traditional theological hallmarks of Israel's God – in Lamentations (a fact concerning which the Rabbis of Judaism will later try to correct by mitigating the apparent divine heartlessness). Quite the opposite, the prophet

makes ongoing bitter complaint with the words: God "had no compassion", and this recurs as a refrain throughout the central section of chapters 2- 3 (see, e.g., 2.2, 17, 21; & 3.43).

[xiii] Born in 1889 in Vienna, Ludwig Wittgenstein was a modern philosopher of language who died in 1951. He argued against the possibility of a *private language* in his famous 1953 book *Philosophical Investigations*, at §243: "The words of this language are to refer to what can be known only to the speaker; to his immediate, private, sensations. So another cannot understand the language." Natural languages are cultural products, shared things.

[xiv] Lent is a period of practice where Christians exercise forms of spiritual discipline. The Greek term *askesis* (ἄσκησις) means discipline, asceticism, self-enforced sacrifice and suffering. Its verbal form covers a range of action concepts such as to exercise physically, to strive, or to contend. In its Classical form, originally it took in notions of working and shaping raw materials; later its focus was on human training, practice, exercise, or discipline. It eventually took in the practical self-care of the cultivation of virtue: the exercise and art of refraining from vice and practicing virtue (the Greek term "virtue" *aretē*, ἀρετή, meaning "excellence", could also originally refer to 'athletic excellence'). For Christians, the cultivation of the moral self requires discipline and training – what we would otherwise call Christian formation. Lent concerns the hard labour and discipline of asceticism. When Christians fast and pray and give at Lent, they are practicing the discipline of *askesis*.

[xv] Easter each year recapitulates the events of Jesus' life, death, and resurrection. Easter worship reenacts the events of Jesus' denouement. In this Christians participate; this is in part what makes Easter holy or ritual time.

[xvi] By "liturgical" I refer to the shared, worshipping life of Jewish

communities.

[xvii] It is self enforced because we actively choose to step out of the light and back into darkness for a period, to re-enact the gloom of sin and suffering. In Lamentations 3.2, likewise, Jeremiah speaks of himself thus:
"He has driven me away/
and made me walk in darkness rather than light."

And again in v.6:
"He has made me dwell in darkness/
like those long dead."

[xviii] Ascetical theology refers to a theological posture grounded in forms of *askesis*, asceticism. *Askesis* separates, cuts us off from normal life, for instance, when we fast, abstaining from shared meals.

xix The literary phenomenon of ancient city lament is clearly eminently social. Peoples were identified by their cities which were basically states. Therefore, often such laments will have the city itself anthropomorphically "cry" and lament over its own devastation. See, for e.g., in Nili Samet, *The Lamentation over the Destruction of Ur* (University Park, PA: Eisenbrauns, 2014) p. 57:

> "O city, the wailing is bitter, the wailing raised by you!...
> O brickwork of Ur, the wailing is bitter, the wailing raised by you!..
> O shrine, Nippur, O city (of Nippur), the wailing is bitter, the wailing raised by you!
> O brickwork of (the) Ekur (temple), the wailing is bitter, the wailing raised by you!...
> O brickwork of (the city of) Isin, the wailing is bitter, the wailing raised by you!...
> O brickwork of Uruk land, the wailing is bitter, the wailing

raised by you!
O brickwork of (the city of Eridu), the wailing is bitter, the wailing raised by you!...
O city, though your walls rise high, your land has perished from you!"

We can compare what Jeremiah says:

"The hearts of the people/
cry out to the Lord./
You walls of Daughter Zion,/
let your tears flow like a river/
day and night;
give yourself no relief,/
your eyes no rest."
(2.17)

The city itself is encouraged to cry along with its hurting people!

[xx] Maps are a very 'modern' phenomenon, not really appropriate to an ancient scroll. I find *justification* for the metaphor of the 'map', however, in Lamentations 1.4, which analyzes the human conditions on Judah's usually much-travelled roads to Jerusalem: "The *roads* to Zion mourn,/ for no one comes to her appointed festivals." The people have been murdered or kidnapped; only the roads are left to mourn – a wan poetic anthropomorphism. Death and destruction have robbed the thoroughfares of their usual pilgrims. The concept of a "sadness map" is suggested by Jeremiah's poetic words: "The roads to Zion mourn". The Google maps of dirgery, shall we say?! Jeremiah uses the Hebrew construct phrase where *darkêy*, the bound noun, is plural, and suggests not just roads but "ways" or even "paths" of Zion, the Mountain of God/ Temple worship in Jerusalem. These terms point out structured *grounds* that are more easily travelled because our fellow travellers

have trod them before us, humanising them and making them thus more easily and safely traversable: they are "pathways" forged by human life skills! In terms of grief and pain, in our admittedly highly therapeutic age(!), perhaps we could steal the term "processes", (path)ways of "processing." So, for example, Colin Murray Parkes, *Bereavement, Fourth Edition: Studies of Grief in Adult Life* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 2010), suggests four phases in the grief *process*. 1. NUMBNESS where emotions are frozen; 2. PINING where there is desire to bring back the lost; 3. DEPRESSION as a morbid preoccupation with loss; and finally, 4. RECOVERY: the healthy development of a renewed identify. It strikes me that Parkes has his eye on well trampled, and so humanly made, paths.

[xxi] The 30-day month of *Av* corresponds to the July/August period in our calendar.

[xxii] "June 17, 1242, is the day that, at the orders of both the pope and the French king, all the known existing copies of the Talmud in Paris were burned. The process that led to the setting of the bonfire, in which it is said that 24 wagons piled with copies of the multi-volume work of Hebrew law and lore, took place over several years." See David B. Green, "This Day in Jewish History, 1242: France Burns All Known Copies of the Talmud," Ha-Aretz (June 17, 2013): *https://www.haaretz.com/jewish/2013-06-17/ty-article/.premium/1242-all-talmuds-in-paris-are-burned/0000017f-f8e7-ddde-abff-fce75cc60000*; accessed on 8/8/23.

[xxiii] The entrance of poets and poetry, songwriters and lyrics into any continuum of human life – if they have any success and are found 'believable' – suggests, I think, that the community they serve is, at that moment in its history, searching for new language and new forms of thought to explain an experience that is outside their normal, everyday reality. This is the service Jeremiah has given to Israel in the period after 586 BC. He gave them 'eyes to see'

(and so to understand) through ritual language to chant. These are the great social and political gifts of songwriters and lyricists. Consider the song by the Temptations and followed by singer Edwin Starr at the very height of America's Vietnam Conflict questioning *War – What is it Good For?* Or again, Dylan's *The Times, They are A-Changin'*, which reflected the 60's cultural revolution and the War and thus of the creative, poetic ferment itself within stormy times:

Come writers and critics/
Who prophesize with your pen/
And keep your eyes wide/
The chance won't come again/
And don't speak too soon/
For the wheel's still in spin/
And there's no tellin' who/
That it's namin'/
For the loser now/
Will be later to win/
For the times they are a-changin'//

Dylan, the master poet, uses "writers and critics" and follows them with the verbs "prophesize", "speak", "tellin'", and "namin'", which all relay the chief tasks of our poets, even religious poet-prophets like Jeremiah!

[xxiv] There is another side to all this pride. St. Augustine in the *Confessions* sees the central point of pride – the root of sin – in excessive and arrogant complacency. Pride has its medicine in humility as self-knowledge, which includes these four principles: creatureliness, sinfulness, confession, and grace.

[xxv] At Lamentations 3.15 Jeremiah speaks of the fruit of sin which makes one feel unwell:

"He has filled me with bitter herbs/
and given me gall to drink."

[xxvi] Tacit knowledge is embodied knowledge, deeper than the skin. It is not to be confused with mere head knowledge. Riding a bike produces a form of tacit knowledge, knowing how to do something.

[xxvii] Amongst the Lakota or Sioux Indians in North America, for instance, during times of mourning, grief is expressed through crying, singing, wailing, cutting of hair and even reaching the extreme of lacerating one's body. These are "social" performances, not false but real expressions of grief. They take a "social" shape, however, because they belong to the symbol system of Lakota meanings grounded in their distinctive way of life and dependent upon available material implements (stone knives, say).

[xxviii] Jonathan Lear, *Imagining the End: Mourning and Ethical Life* (Cambridge, MA: The Belknap Press, 2022): p.13: "…mourning and play are deeply intertwined." Lear is reporting there on the psychological studies in children of Donald Winnicott.

[xxix] See Emily Kaplan, "How Children Process Grief and Loss Through Play," *Edutopia* (June 19, 2020); https://www.edutopia.org/article/how-children-process-grief-and-loss-through-play/ (accessed 15/8/2023).

[xxx] Lear, *Ibid*., describes practices of mourning as being centered upon loss.

[xxxi] Lamentations 5 is not an acrostic poem but a classic lament. Indeed, this concluding chapter is not a poem. It is a genuine formal lament, a kind of prayer — a *cris de coeur* for Israel's restoration.

"Joy is gone from our hearts;/
our dancing has turned to mourning."
(5.15)

"You, Lord, reign forever;/
your throne endures from generation to generation."
(5.19)

"Restore us to yourself, Lord, that we may return;/
renew our days as of old"
(5.21)

Lamentations 5 is more a call for God to "remember", which is how v.1 initiates the lament — and this is a formal *covenantal* term, invoking the community as bound to the Covenant Lord. This notion of begging for God to "remember" his people is entirely covenantal, for example God speaks in Leviticus 26.42:

"then I will remember my covenant with Jacob, and I will remember my covenant with Isaac and my covenant with Abraham, and I will remember the land."

And Exodus 2.24:

"And God heard their groaning, and God remembered his covenant with Abraham, with Isaac, and with Jacob."

And also Psalm 106.5:

"For their sake he remembered his covenant, and relented according to the abundance of his steadfast love."

[xxxii] Consider Lamentations 3.20:

"I well remember them [my afflictions],/
and my soul is downcast within me."

That is really the Lenten Spirit put very succinctly, and it is said right before the greatest (and the central!) expression of hope in the book.

[xxxiii] *King Lear* Act 5, Sc.3: Speaking from his heart, Edgar, who had disguised himself as a beggar, offers some hope after all the tragedy and heartbreak. Lamenting the state of the kingdom, he advocates for everyone to move forward with honesty, openness, and without deception. He promotes transparency when he becomes king, leaving behind us what we think we ought to say, and voicing what we truly feel.

[xxxiv] Gershom Scholem, "On Lament and Lamentation," trans. from German Lina Barouch and Paula Schwebel, *Jewish Studies Quarterly*, Vol.21 (2014): 4–12 (at p.7), insightfully observes of lament language that it is "precisely the stage at which each language suffers death in a truly tragic sense, in that this language expresses nothing, absolutely nothing positive… Language in the state of lament destroys itself, and the language of lament is itself, for that very reason, the language of destruction." Finding the right language to use, however, when dealing with grief, is part of the pathway to healing.

[xxxv] Hegel's philosophy was its own kind of modern theodicy. See G.W.F. Hegel, *Lectures of the Philosophy of History*, Complete and Unabridged, Newly Translated by Ruben Alvarado (New York, NY: WoodBridge Publishers, 2011): §24: "In short we retreat into the selfishness that stands on the quiet shore, and thence enjoy in safety the distant spectacle of 'wrecks confusedly hurled.' But even regarding History as the slaughter-bench at which the happiness of peoples, the wisdom of States, and the virtue of individuals have

been victimised — the question involuntarily arises — to what principle, to what final aim these enormous sacrifices have been offered."

[xxxvi] "The Silent God in Lamentations," *Interpretation: A Journal of Bible and Theology*, Vol.67. Iss.2.

[xxxvii] See the work of the Swiss-American psychiatrist Elisabeth Kübler-Ross in her 1969 book *On Death and Dying* (New York: Routledge, 1969).

Ekaterina Stepanchuka, Anatoly Zhirkova, and Anastasia Yakovleva, "The Coping Strategies, Psychological Defense Mechanisms and Emotional Response to the Disease in Russian Patients with Chronic Leukemia," *Procedia - Social and Behavioral Sciences* Vol.86 (2013): 248-255, at p.249.

[xxxix] *Idem*.

[xl] *Emotional Intelligence: Why It Can Matter More Than IQ* (New York: Random House Publishing, 2005)

[xli] Mayer & Salovey, 1997, in Weare, 2000. Cited in Ressa Sorin, "Understanding children's feelings: Emotional literacy in early childhood," *Research in Practice Series*, Vol. 11, Number 4 (2004): 1-18, at p.1.

[xlii] Rabbi Jonathan Sacks, the now deceased former Chief Rabbi of the U.K., once said in one of his video messages: "Hope rebuilds the ruins of Jerusalem. The Jewish people kept hope alive and hope kept the Jewish people alive. That is the message of *Tisha B'Av*." With the theme of hope in mind, Napoleon Boneparte the French Dictator and military commander (subject of a recently released movie, too!) is reputed to have visited a Jewish village in Europe and witnessed the people mourning on *Tisha b'Av* and asked its

meaning, seeking to know if Jews had practiced this sadness for 2,000 years. Upon hearing that they did, he (allegedly) said: "A nation that cries and fasts for over 2,000 years for their land and Temple will surely be rewarded with their Temple."

[xliii] *Summa Theologiae* III, *q*.84, *a*.2, *sed contra*.

[xliv] See, for example, Ankur Shingal, "The Devadasi System: Temple Prostitution in India," *UCLA Women's Law Journal*, Vol.22.107 (2015): 107-23; Nidhi Sadana Sabharwal & Wandana Sonalkar, 'Dalit Women in India at the Crossroads of Gender, Class, and Caste," *Global Justice: Theory Practice Rhetoric*, Vol.8, No.1 (2015): 44-73.

[xlv] See Howard Zehr, *The Little Book of Restorative Justice* (New York, N.Y.: Good Books, 2014); Christopher Marshall, *Beyond Retribution: A New Testament Vision for Justice, Crime and Punishment*, Studies in Peace and Scripture (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans Publishing, 2001).

[xlvi] See Hebrews 6.19: "We have this hope *as an anchor* for the soul, firm and secure. It enters the inner sanctuary behind the curtain." [*Italics* mine.]

[xlvii] See elsewhere in Lamentations expressions of hope, for e.g., also at 4.22:
"Your punishment will end, Daughter Zion;/
he will not prolong your exile."

[xlviii] Alasdair MacIntyre, *After Virtue*, 2nd ed. (Notre Dame IN: Notre Dame University Press, 1997), p. 187.

[xlix] See Peter Brooks, *Troubling Confessions: Speaking Guilt in Law and Literature* (Chicago, IL; University of Chicago Press, 2001).

[l] Thus St. Thomas Aquinas says that "fortitude of soul must be that which binds the will firmly to the good of reason in face of the greatest evils." Of the cardinal (moral) virtues, St. Thomas Aquinas declares that courage is the necessary condition of every virtue as it provides the strength of will needed to exercise any virtue consistently. Courage is the willingness to do what is right despite obstacles, frustrations, and fear. A common denominator in all people of moral action is courage. Following Aristotle, Aquinas argues that courage is not the absence of fear. Rather, it is the ability to overcome fear. It is the strength of character to persevere in doing the right things despite being afraid.

[li] *Ibid*., p. 51.

[lii] *Ibid*., p. 9.

[liii] *The Limits of Autobiography: Trauma and Testimony*, 2nd Edition (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 2023). This book originally published in 2011 has been a seminal text in the field of Trauma Studies.

[liv] *Ibid*.

[lv] The person who has taught me most about confession is the great medieval Catholic theologian Thomas Aquinas, who treated penance both as a sacrament and as a character virtue. As a virtue of human character it belongs to a greater human excellence – that of *justice*. Justice is that habit in our souls by which we *pay what we owe to others*. In the case of penance, when I confess and express my contrition and make a just restitution for what I have done, I restore relationships by reconnecting them and myself to reality and truth. When we confess we align ourselves with God as true judge of our actions. Aquinas believed the human will was not confirmed in its choices till death; forgiveness was always available

in this life because of the benefits of the passion of Jesus. Confession is redemptive. Because confession engages my will, according to Aquinas, and my will is that which pursues the good in life, I feel justified in saying that confession leads me back to that reality which has its ground in Trinitarian love. Nothing could be further from Aquinas's virtue-oriented account of the moral life than the titillating, tell-all, so-called "memoirs" of the lives of our modern, 'secular,' expressivist "saints," which have no connection to justice nor reality and are simply designed to make the author "feel good," and to gain them 'eye-balls' and 'click throughs' as much as earthly riches.

[lvi] In his *The Brothers Karamazov*, for example, Dostoevsky made a study of human evil and the refusal to love as the following quote shows: "'I must make an admission,' Ivan began. 'I never could understand how it's possible to love one's neighbours. In my opinion, it is precisely one's neighbours that one cannot possibly love. Perhaps if they weren't so nigh ... I read sometime, somewhere about "John the Merciful" (some saint) that when a hungry and frozen passerby came to him and asked to be made warm, he lay down with him in bed, embraced him, and began breathing into his mouth, which was foul and festering with some terrible disease. I'm convinced that he did it with the strain of a lie, out of love enforced by duty, out of self-imposed penance. If we're to come to love a man, the man himself should stay hidden, because as soon as he shows his face – love vanishes.'

"'Well, I don't know it yet, and I cannot understand it, nor can a numberless multitude of other people along with me. The question is whether this comes from bad qualities in people, or is inherent in their nature. In my opinion, Christ's love for people is in its kind a miracle impossible on earth. True, he was God. But we are not gods. Let's say that I, for example, am capable of profound suffering, but another man will never be able to know the degree of my

suffering, because he is another and not me, and besides, a man is rarely willing to acknowledge someone else as a sufferer (as if it were a kind of distinction). And why won't he acknowledge it, do you think? Because I, for example, have a bad smell, or a foolish face, or once stepped on his foot. Besides, there is suffering and suffering: some benefactor of mine may still allow a humiliating suffering, which humiliates me –hunger, for example; but a slightly higher suffering – for an idea, for example – no, that he will not allow, save perhaps on rare occasions, because he will look at me and suddenly see that my face is not at all the kind of face that, he fancies, a man should have who suffers, for example, for such and such an idea. And so he at once deprives me of his benefactions, and not even from the wickedness of his heart.'"

תינעתה

Lament ought to be a part of every life because everybody suffers and suffering means loss.

At Lent each year Christians take time to reflect on life and its losses and so work toward a bettered wholeness in every form of their discipleship.

This book offers six brief but practical chapters on themes related to human suffering through inspiration from the Old Testament book of Jeremiah's Lamentations.

Jeremiah's Lamentations show us the "weeping" prophet in his full possibility as a poet of human sorrow and remorse. It helpfully charts a course for us to deal with grief and take seriously the world's and our own pain and suffering at Lent.