

Lamentations 3:19-26
Feilding Baptist
16.11.25

Call to Worship

Welcome to worship with Feilding Baptist Church!

A responsive reading from 1 Chronicles, I read the black, then you read the blue italics.

1 Chronicles 29:10-13 (NKJV)
David's Praise to God

"Blessed are You, Lord God of Israel, our Father, forever and ever.

*Yours, O Lord, is the greatness,
The power and the glory,
The victory and the majesty;
For all that is in heaven and in earth is Yours;
Yours is the kingdom, O Lord,
And You are exalted as head over all.*

Both riches and honour come from You,
And You reign over all.
In Your hand is power and might;
In Your hand it is to make great
And to give strength to all.

*"Now therefore, our God,
We thank You
And praise Your glorious name.*

Father God, thank you for your greatness, your power and your glory. Thank you for your love and concern for us. Thank you for your mercy and grace, for sending Jesus, for sending the Holy Spirit. We indeed do have reason to thank and praise Your glorious name. Loving God, we ask for your blessing on this time and this space, in the name of Jesus we pray, Amen.

Message -What matters most?

Lamentations is a challenge to faith, because it reveals that we are not excluded from suffering, and in that sometimes God is silent when we're most desperate. Yet, we have hope, because the Bible tells us, and we believe, in a God who is loving not callous, faithful not forgetful, compassionate, and full of mercy and grace.

When we think of the 12 Statutory Holidays in New Zealand; New Years, Anniversary, Waitangi, Easter, ANZAC, KB, Matariki, Labour Day, Christmas, which do you think is the most looked forward to? Which one do people most look forward to? At this time of the year it's easy to say Christmas. But a month ago, people were very much looking forward to a long weekend, and having the Monday of Labour Day off. And fair enough, it had been three months since the last stat day, which was Matariki.

In Christchurch all the tradies were really looking forward to a day off and a three day Labour weekend. In Hanmer Springs the businesses were really looking forward to three days of high income. But, this year, on the Thursday before Labour Weekend, with accommodation booked out, a massive storm blew through Hanmer, (and then Southland). 200 km/h winds wreaked havoc on trees, fences, road signs, pivot

irrigators, and most importantly, electricity supplies. It was a real hurricane. And we happened to be there to experience it.

It was nothing new, I well remember the 1st August 1975 storm in Ashburton, that was just as damaging.

In Hanmer all the access roads were closed, Hanmer was isolated. Labour Weekend was effectively over.

Now, it was interesting how people responded. The Hanmer Four Square were prepared with a \$70 000 generator. They stayed open, cooking pies and pizzas, much to the relief of those who couldn't leave. The hot pools couldn't open with the amount of debris to be cleaned up. But on Friday, they had cleaned it up, and with their generator, they opened. Even the hydrosleds and cafe were open! And they went a step further. The usual entry price is \$40 per person. With a captive market, who needed something to do, and somewhere to shower, what did the pool do? They changed the entry price to, guess, \$5 per person! I guess they figured they'd recoup the other \$35 at the café! It was a much appreciated, a surprising generosity.

But, there were still thousands of people who had been looking forward to Labour Weekend, with bookings, who had their plans and profits wrecked. How were they feeling? How do we handle our storm days?

Look at the last twelve weeks; John, Jean, Marilyn have been in hospital. How do we cope when life is turned upside down?

What does the Bible have to say about this, about suffering? Does the Bible say to just toughen up, get over it? Does the Bible say to forget or ignore your suffering, to just focus on God? Strangely, the Bible talks about suffering as a feature of life, something we should expect, and something we have to live with. The lament Psalms show this, and indeed, the book of Lamentations, a whole book of the Bible on suffering, grieving, lament.

But Lamentations goes an uncomfortable step further. While reminding us that we will suffer, that we will not be kept from suffering, Lamentations reminds us that sometimes in these times, God stays silent.

Maybe this is why one scholar (Chris Wright) wonders if the book of Lamentations is the most ignored book of the Bible? Or perhaps it's simply because it is dreadfully hard to find, tucked away between Jeremiah and Ezekiel, and only five chapters long.

So what is going on? What is the context? It's 609BC Josiah, the last good king of Judah was killed. He had been trying to prevent the Egyptians coming from the south to help Assyria in the north. Briefly Egypt ruled and made Jehoiakim king of Judah. But after the Assyrian empire collapsed, Babylon rose to power. And for 70 years, they were unstoppable. Four years later, in 605BC, they cleaned out the Egyptians from Judah. Keeping Babylon happy from then on was essential. Submission made for a quiet life. Rebellion just got squashed.

Jeremiah was the prophet at the time. He repeatedly warned the king and people of Judah (and Jerusalem) that the combination of their unrepented sins of social oppression, of idolatry, and seeking alliances against Babylon, would end badly.

But the political leaders refused to listen to Jeremiah, they branded him a traitor, and with violence and imprisonment tried to shut him up. King Jehoiakim even burnt the scrolls containing 23 years worth of Jeremiah's preaching. Chris Wright labels this as 'a breath taking act of blatant defiance' against the word of God (Wright, 24).

Eight years later, 597BC, the Babylonians had had enough of King Jehoiakim's disloyalty, which led to his death. His son Jehoiachin became king, and surrendered to the Babylonians, a wise thing to do, sparing Jerusalem of total devastation.

The Babylonians made Zedekiah king. For ten years he ran with the foxes and hunted with the hounds. In the end his refusal to fully submit to Babylon, his open rebellion, brought Nebuchadnezzar and the Babylonian army back to Judah to finish it off. Towns and villages were destroyed, and Jerusalem was besieged. This siege lasted for eighteen months, coming to an end in 587BC. The horror of this is portrayed in 2 Chronicles 36, 2 Kings 25, and Jeremiah 52. And Lamentations. Food had run out, starvation, death, disease was rampant. The people were exported to Babylon, a 1000 mile walk. King Zedekiah's sons were killed in front of him before he was blinded and taken to Babylon as well.

Jerusalem was systematically destroyed and burned. Solomon's 400 year old temple was defiled, looted and burnt. All that was left was death, ruins, rubble, and dust. And a few people, including Jeremiah, that Babylonians left as caretakers.

Is this the most traumatic moment in the whole history of the Old Testament? There is massive human suffering, physical and emotional, along with the humiliation of national pride. It is out of this unspeakable pain, that Lamentations speaks.

Lamentations 1:1-12 (NIV - UK)

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.
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.
3 After affliction and harsh labour,
Judah has gone into exile.
She dwells among the nations;
she finds no resting place.

All who pursue her have overtaken her
in the midst of her distress.

9b 'Look, Lord, on my affliction,
for the enemy has triumphed.'
10 The enemy laid hands
on all her treasures;
she saw pagan nations
enter her sanctuary -
those you had forbidden
to enter your assembly.
11 All her people groan
as they search for bread;
they barter their treasures for food
to keep themselves alive.
'Look, Lord, and consider,
for I am despised.'

The siege was so long and so effective, that things in the city became unimaginably bad, people even killed their own children for food.

Lamentations 2:20

20 'Look, Lord, and consider:
whom have you ever treated like this?
Should women eat their offspring,
the children they have cared for?
Should priest and prophet be killed
in the sanctuary of the Lord?

Now, the last thing I want you to think is that I'm saying, just compare your problems to that! They're nothing! Just toughen up! No! This is a feeling book of the Bible. This is for us to relate to when we are feeling overwhelmed, when we feel that there is nothing left, no one to turn to. This book of Lamentations is for those who are facing the finality of cancer, the devastation of bankruptcy, for victims of hoaxes and scams, or those coming to terms with the destruction of fire, flood, earthquakes. Any challenge of life.

These five chapters of Lamentations have pain upon pain. Where is God in the midst of all this? Well, Israel lived by memory and hope. They remembered that back in Egypt, when they were caught in slavery,

God did remember, God did hear their cries. And so they lived in hope, of when God would act again. Why? Because they depended on the character of God.

Odd numbers are helpful, because there has to be a centre. Five chapters, what's in the centre, chapter three. God is still silent, suffering continues, but look at what we find in the middle of chapter three;

Lamentations 3:19-26 (NIV - UK)

19 I remember my affliction and my wandering,
the bitterness and the gall.
20 I well remember them,
and my soul is downcast within me.
21 Yet this I call to mind
and therefore I have hope:
22 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.'
25 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.

Did you recognise some words? Great is thy faithfulness! Isn't that what we sang at the top of the service? This is where those words come from - Lamentations! We've sung them hundreds of times, but who knew the context in which these words were written? Profound pain and the silence of God.

But here in these verses, we are called to remember, v20, the character of God; love (v22), compassion (v22), faithfulness (v23). As the Israelite people did.

Oh, but note v21, this is a choice to remember, 'Yet this I call to mind...' There is a determination here. There is a determination in not allowing evil, darkness, the devil, to have victory, to keep God as God even though the wheels are falling off. Choosing to remember not only God, but the character of God. A deliberate, teeth gritting decision to remember. I WILL think about this.

Though God might be silent, the character of God surely is never changing. Such hope here, no, such trust.

So where does this leave us? We must not read Lamentations without the rest of the Bible. Ah, but equally, we should not read the rest of the Bible without Lamentations (Wright, 47).

Let's remember the whole biblical story;

1. creation, where God declared all was good. Let's remember
2. the fall of humanity into rebellion and sin, where suffering, pain, and tears began. Let's remember
3. God's promise to Abraham and God's faithfulness in the covenantal journey with Old Testament Israel. Let's remember the hope of the Messiah, of the
4. the gospel events of the birth, life, teaching, death, resurrection and ascension of Jesus. Let's remember
5. the outpouring of the Spirit and the ongoing mission of God's people in the Messiah to the ends of the earth. Let's remember
6. the return of Jesus, the final judgement and new creation that is to come.

We can have much hope as we wait. And that takes us back to Lamentations chapter three, see v24. In the bad times, I will wait for God. Wow! In the pain of silence from God, I will wait. For, see v26, it is good to wait quietly for the salvation of the Lord.

So to conclude. Lamentations is a challenge to faith, because it reveals that we are not excluded from suffering. And, in that suffering sometimes God is silent when we're most desperate. Yet, we have hope, because the Bible tells us, and we believe, in a God who is loving not callous, faithful not forgetful, compassionate, and full of mercy and grace.

Let's pray

Father God, you know what we are lamenting, what we're despairing over, so we pray for patience, for comfort, compassion, love. Thank you for your positive character, for your good plan for us, and for the earth. Thank you for the time to come when we will be free of suffering, and we will know your presence always. Father, please give us confidence in our faith, as we journey into this week. Amen.

Benediction

Numbers 6:24-26 New International Version - UK

24 ““The Lord bless you

and keep you;

25 the Lord make his face shine on you

and be gracious to you;

26 the Lord turn his face towards you

and give you peace.””