

Rev. Dr. Niveen Sarras  
Lamentation 3  
July 1, 2018

Greeting to you in the name of God our Father, and Jesus Christ our Savior, and the Holy Spirit our Sanctifier.

In November 2015, I presented an academic paper on the book of Lamentations at the Society of Biblical Literature in Atlanta, Georgia. I compared the suffering of daughter Zion with the plight of the Syrian and Iraqi women at the hand of the Islamic State of Syria and Iraq. I also argued that the book teaches us that daughter Zion needs her community to move on and to survive her trauma.

I led a bible study on this subject at our church. I asked those who attended if ever read this book. The answer was no because we usually do not read it. The book of Lamentations empathizes with our suffering as individuals and community. The book asks questions about pain and suffering in this world. It can help us to express our pain and agony when we are speechless.

Let me explain to you the context of this book and on what occasion Jews and Christians read it. The book is composed of five poems describe the suffering of the Jews at the hand of the Babylonians. Daughter Zion is the personification of the city of Jerusalem. The Babylonians came against Jerusalem and laid siege to it. People suffered hunger. The Jews read the book of Lamentations on “the ninth of Av [August], the traditional day of mourning in the Jewish calendar, which commemorates the fall of both Solomon’s and the Second Temple as well as other catastrophes in Jewish history, such as the expulsion of the Jews from Spain in 1492 and

the Chmielnitzki massacres in Poland and the Ukrainian in 1648.”<sup>1</sup> Christians read portions of Lamentations during the Holy Week. Lamentations can speak to any generation mourning and grieving the destruction of their society and tradition. It communicates with those who are trying to find meaning in their suffering in life and their faith in God

This book talks about the nature of suffering and God’s role in that suffering. The poet employs the language of rape, torture, hunger, humiliation, and killing. There are horrifying images like describing women eating their children 4:10 because hunger was widespread.

The hands of compassionate women  
have boiled their own children;  
they became their food  
in the destruction of my people.

The problem with this book lies in divine violence. God afflicts daughter Zion because of her sins (1:5). God appears to be stranger and far away. God is angry and vengeful. The poet ascribes the horrors and calamity directly to God as we read in Lamentation 3:1-4.

I am one who has seen affliction  
under the rod of God’s wrath;  
**2** he has driven and brought me  
into darkness without any light;  
**3** against me alone he turns his hand,  
again and again, all day long.  
**4** He has made my flesh and my skin waste away,  
and broken my bones;

We modern believers might disagree with the theology of the book of Lamentations. Whether we agree, I am not going to defend God or explain the origin of pain. Instead, I am going to preach

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<sup>1</sup> Marvin A. Sweeney, *Reading the Hebrew Bible after the Shoah: Engaging Holocaust Theology* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2008), 182.

on how to face tragedies and suffering in everyday life, and what you need to do when hopelessness seems complete, or when you cry in agony with daughter Zion saying (3:18).

“Gone is my glory,  
and all that I had hoped for from the LORD.”

Our passage today provides us with important ideas for living with the agonies of life.

“Lamentations negotiates catastrophic loss for which there are no adequate words.”<sup>2</sup> I am sure that some of us experienced extreme suffering and you could not find words to express your feelings. Lamentations help you to express your wounded feelings.

Chapter 1 and 2 in the book of Lamentations talk about extreme pain and suffering of daughter Zion. She laments and appeals to God to rescue her from her enemies and to stop her suffering. She is interrupted by a voice of another person called in Hebrew *Geber* “strong man” in chapter 3. He spoke words of comfort, hope and reassurance. Verses 22 and 23 are central and important for our spiritual life. The two Hebrew words *Hased* and *Rahum* “steadfast love and mercy” are two characteristics of God. God’s love and mercies are new every day. They never end. We have a unique chance with God every day. “The word “mercy” is based on the Hebrew word for “womb.” “When the poets reached for a word to best describe the astonishing mercy of God, they fastened on a woman's womb, imagining God's love to be like that unique love shared by a woman for her child.”<sup>3</sup> When you face a tragedy or suffering, the poet of Lamentations encourages you to hold on the womb of love—God.

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<sup>2</sup> **Robert Hoch** “Commentary on Lamentations 3:22-33,” July, 2018.  
[https://www.workingpreacher.org/preaching.aspx?commentary\\_id=372](https://www.workingpreacher.org/preaching.aspx?commentary_id=372)

<sup>3</sup> John Holbert, “Commentary on Lamentations 3:22-33,” June 2009.  
[https://www.workingpreacher.org/preaching.aspx?commentary\\_id=332](https://www.workingpreacher.org/preaching.aspx?commentary_id=332)

Lamentation is not insignificant. Do not undermine your wounded feelings. Do not listen to anyone who says to you. It is okay. It will pass. Just believe. Your pain is real especially when you face tragedy. Scholar Fred Gaiser explains correctly how the poet understands the relationship between suffering and faith in God.

Faith here will not entail believing the unbelievable out of sheer cussed individual perseverance; it will be holding on to the gift once given, despite whatever present realities call it into question. As for the poet in Lamentations, such faith will require the creedal and communal memory of what God has done, calling that work into the present through prayer and proclamation. If it takes a village to raise a child, it will certainly take a congregation to support or restore my faith -- to recite it to me in the creed, to proclaim it to me in the sermon, to sing it to me in the liturgy and hymns.<sup>4</sup>

Daughter Zion was comforted by her community who came together to comfort her in chapter 4. They helped her to come to terms with her suffering.

Lamentations 4:22 Revised Standard Version (RSV)

<sup>22</sup>The punishment of your iniquity, O daughter of Zion, is accomplished,  
he will keep you in exile no longer;

We need each other when any one of us experience tragedy or go through intense pain. We need to remind each other of Jesus' faithfulness /steadfast love and mercy. We need to remind each other that God is faithful to us and Jesus is walking with us in our suffering. He cries with you, and he smiles at you to show you his steadfast love and womb of love.

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<sup>4</sup> Fred Gaiser, "Commentary on Lamentations 3:22-33," July 2018.  
[https://www.workingpreacher.org/preaching.aspx?commentary\\_id=1302](https://www.workingpreacher.org/preaching.aspx?commentary_id=1302)

Just think with each new day, God gives you the chance to experience God's faithfulness and womb of love. God's mercy endures forever and ever. Apostle Paul says to Timothy in his second letter that "if we are faithless, he remains faithful—for he cannot deny himself" (2:13). Trust in these words my friends and may our Lord Jesus Christ help us to be there for one another and to carry each other burden.