

## **Welcome**

When I was 17, I stole my own car.

I drove this hilariously awesome 81 Chevy Carpis Classic. Two tone brown. Bench seats in the front and back. It was a beast. Only had about 300 miles on it when I got it because my Mom bought it from a little old lady who had bought it new and only drove it to the grocery store.

I was a junior in high school, and I had gotten grounded for some reason. I don't remember why now, but I'm 100% sure it was legitimate. The grounding was that I was not allowed to drive my car. Which meant I had to ride the bus to school.

17-year-old me did not find this acceptable. So I waited for my mom to leave for work, and I took my car out anyway. My mom didn't find out until she got home from work that night and my car was gone.

She was understandably mad.

I say understandably because it's pretty obvious that I was in the wrong here. My Mom bought me the car. I still lived in her house. And I broke her rules (to do whatever I had done to get grounded).

But you probably won't be surprised to learn that I didn't see it that way. I was enraged. All that grew from a sense of entitlement - it didn't matter where the car had come from; it was MINE. I deserved it. Why? Irrelevant. I DESERVED it, and I raged when my mom took it away from me as a punishment.

We're going to talk today about entitlement and privilege. We're going to talk about how often we take God's good gifts for granted and why that's the path toward spiritual death. And we're going to look at how God intervenes to save us from that pain - even when it feels like punishment.

## **Message**

We're in a series right now called Good Grief. It's about how we respond to tragedy in our lives. We have been talking about how lament moves us from orientation to disorientation to reorientation. We begin in a state of orientation - we just go about our lives, our beliefs and assumptions intact. But then something happens - tragedy strikes. A relationship ends. Someone gets sick. A natural disaster strikes. Life gets turned upside down. We're disoriented.

Disorientation is uncomfortable. Our culture teaches us to medicate or avoid the discomfort of disorientation. But it's in the place of disorientation we have the chance to grow. Because in our lament, we are crying out to God. We're insisting that this isn't right - we're not meant to live in a world of suffering and pain. And we're seeing in this series that it is specifically this movement of lament, this sitting in the pain of the disorientation that helps us reorient - to see where we were wrong, to see where we need to stand up to address injustice, to repent of sin.

The life on the *other* side of lament is better. We find better life, deeper wholeness than we had previously imagined. But only if we push *through* the process of lamenting. We'll never get there if we medicate or avoid.

[Scripture Slide 1] Our guide in the journey of Lament is the book of Lamentations. Turn with me to Lamentations 4. The book was written after the Exile, which is how we refer to the event where the Babylonian Empire conquered the nation of Judah. They destroyed the capital city of Jerusalem, slaughtered hundreds, destroyed God's Temple and forcibly deported the city's elite - the priests and government.

The Babylonians left behind a smoldering ruin. Famine, disease and destitution were all there was available for the citizens who were left behind. They had no infrastructure, no leadership, no one to help them pray.

Except the prophet Jeremiah.

Jeremiah had lived in Jerusalem before the Exile. As the Babylonian armies made their way toward Jerusalem, Jeremiah warned the city's elite not to try to make alliances with the surrounding nations. He warned again and again that what they needed was to return to faith in God, that if they persisted in putting their trust in other nations rather than God, they would be conquered and destroyed.

Jerusalem didn't listen, and Jeremiah's predictions came true.

And now, as the city grieves, as they process what happened and why, Jeremiah is with them, among them, grieving with them, shaping their grief into lament. We've seen there are two primary actors in this poem. The first is the prophet, who in the poem acts as the friend of the griever. In this poem, the prophet is not the one grieving. He's the one with the griever. The griever is the second actor. In Lamentations, she is a woman, who is a personification of Jerusalem - so really the whole people of God.

In Lamentations 1, we listened as the woman grieved. We saw that lament requires an honest appraisal of where we are - that rather than rush to fix or explain or avoid, we have to sit with our grief. Then we sat with God's anger in Lamentations 2. We explored God's anger as a manifestation of God's love, and saw that God's punishment is discipline designed to break us free from the grip of the idols we give ourselves to. Last week, in Lamentations 3, we watched as the Prophet refused to spiritualize or trivialize the suffering of the people. Instead, he chose to enter into the pain and grief, to embrace their disorientation as his own.

Today, we'll be in Lamentations 4. In this chapter, we see both the prophet and the woman coming to terms with the cause of their devastation - and it was their own idolatry. As we read through this poem, listen to the number of different aspects of their culture that have been laid to waste by Babylon. Let's read beginning in verse 1:

How the gold has lost its luster!  
Even the finest gold has become dull.  
The sacred gemstones  
lie scattered in the streets!

See how the precious children of Jerusalem,  
worth their weight in fine gold,  
are now treated like pots of clay  
made by a common potter...

The people who once ate the richest foods  
now beg in the streets for anything they can get.  
Those who once wore the finest clothes  
now search the garbage dumps for food...

Our princes once glowed with health—  
brighter than snow, whiter than milk.  
Their faces were as ruddy as rubies,  
their appearance like fine jewels.

But now their faces are blacker than soot.  
No one recognizes them in the streets.  
Their skin sticks to their bones;  
it is as dry and hard as wood...

But now the anger of the LORD is satisfied.  
His fierce anger has been poured out.  
He started a fire in Jerusalem  
that burned the city to its foundations...

Yet it happened because of the sins of her prophets  
and the sins of her priests,  
who defiled the city  
by shedding innocent blood.

The LORD himself has scattered them,  
and he no longer helps them.  
People show no respect for the priests  
and no longer honor the leaders.

We looked in vain for our allies  
to come and save us,

but we were looking to nations  
that could not help us. -- Lamentations 4:1-17

Lamentations 4 is a confession. It's a recognition that the people of God had looked to a number of places to be their source of life - wealth, children and the legacy of family, the pleasures of a life of luxury (like gourmet foods), their political rulers, their religious elites, their political allies. But all of these have been stripped away. *God* stripped them away, leaving Israel naked and alone.

Much like when we read Lamentations 2, we struggle to see how this can be *good* news, how a God of love could allow his people to be destroyed. But the nature of the things the people lament is a clue in itself: these are the very things that distract us from God, the very things that comprise our life of sin.

Thomas Merton, one of the most important religious figures in the 20th century described a life of sin as a false, shadow self:

EVERY one of us is shadowed by an illusory person: a false self. This is the man that I want myself to be but who cannot exist, because God does not know anything about him. And to be unknown of God is altogether too much privacy. My false and private self is the one who wants to exist outside the reach of God's will and God's love—outside of reality and outside of life. And such a self cannot help but be an illusion. We are not very good at recognizing illusions, least of all the ones we cherish about ourselves—the ones we are born with and which feed the roots of sin. For most of the people in the world, there is no greater subjective reality than this false self of theirs, which cannot exist. A life devoted to the cult of this shadow is what is called a life of sin. All sin starts from the assumption that my false self, the self that exists only in my own egocentric desires, is the fundamental reality of life to which everything else in the universe is ordered. Thus I use up my life in the desire for pleasures and the thirst for experiences, for power, honor, knowledge and love, to clothe this false self and construct its nothingness into something objectively real. And I wind experiences around myself and cover myself with pleasures and glory like bandages in order to make myself perceptible to myself and to the world, as if I were an invisible body that could only become visible when something visible covered its surface. But there is no substance under the things with which I am clothed. I am hollow, and my structure of pleasures and ambitions has no foundation. I am objectified in them. But they are all destined by their very contingency to be destroyed. And when they are gone there will be nothing left of me but my own nakedness and emptiness and hollowness, to tell me that I am my own mistake. -- Thomas Merton, *New Seeds of Contemplation*

We clothe our false self with pleasure, power, honor, love - all the things the people of Jerusalem lament losing. And these things keep us from being who God created us to be. They lead us to a life of sin, a life that will ultimately be destroyed. When we believe that these things define us, make us who we are, we give ourselves over to idolatry. We lie to ourselves, to God, to each other.

We are not defined by our paychecks, by the size of our homes or the model of our cars. Our value is not measured in the value of our things.

We are not defined by our politics, by which candidate we backed or the promises our leaders make us. No political leader can give us the life God calls us to.

We are not defined by our families or how busy we are. Full schedules don't make for full lives.

We are not defined by how holy our pastors are, or the books we read or the music we listen to. Religion isn't the same as holiness.

We are not defined by success or beauty or how we rate compared to our neighbors or Facebook friends.

As Merton observed, we get caught up in these things. We all pick our poison and then pretend it's making us better, more whole, more visible to the world. It's our way of saying, "Look at me!" or feeling in control or feeling safe and secure.

But these things are all created. They're contingent. They owe their existence to the same God who created us. And that means they're not able to bear the weight of our lives, our hopes and dreams. They can't give us what they promise. And if we persist in giving ourselves to them, it will end badly for us.

The Bible calls this idolatry - worshipping false gods, making these other things into that which orients our lives. God warns us against this over and over in the Scriptures. And Lamentations shows us what happens if we will not heed God's warnings: God will strip these things away from us.

What feels like a punishment is also like a sneak preview. Because all these things are temporary, by stripping them away, God shows us what we will be without them.

A life of idolatry leaves us, as the prophet and the woman lament, alone with an empty life.

My job is to be a pastor. That job description is just about as nebulous as 'parent' or 'spouse' or 'friend'. How many of you have a similar job descriptions - just 'get the job done'?

That's dangerous because there's always more to do. Always someone else to visit or counsel. Always another sermon or bible study to work on. Always more time to spend in my own study. Always someone else to meet.

I know you don't have to be a pastor to feel that sense. That you're never done. That there's always more to do. That if you work just a little harder... people will like you. Or you'll finally be in charge. Or you'll have enough to feel secure.

But you know as well as I do that it's *never* enough. That's the false promise of idols. Thinking and feeling that way are a sure sign we've fallen into the trap of idolatry, that we're focused on our false, shadow self instead of on the true self that is in God.

Riffing on Merton's observation, author Ian Cron insists that we are always living in our shadow self unless we allow ourselves simply to be seen by God.

Because when God looks at us, God sees us the way a mother sees her newborn child. She's not judging, not condemning, not doing anything but loving, beholding, enjoying.

We must strip all that away from us so that God can simply behold us. Or rest assured, God will strip it away for us. God loves us too much to allow us to persist forever in our false beliefs.

Idolatry ends in pain and suffering every time. Because every idol is a finite created thing that cannot stand in the place of our eternal creator. If we persist in idolatry, persist in wrapping our shadow selves in all the myriad things our culture tells us will make us whole, we will destroy ourselves.

Instead, we can choose to die to our false self, to sit in God's beholding, loving gaze and be. We can begin with God and allow everything else - our vocation, our relationships, our identity, flow from that place of truth and unconditional love.

This is the reorientation Lamentation promises, the reorientation that leads ultimately to the life on the other side of pain. Where we learn how to be engaged in our world, in our families, in politics, in religion, without letting them control us. Because our worth, our power, our security come not from the things of this world, but from God and God alone.

### **Communion + Examen**

[Communion Slide] God sees us and demonstrates his love for us.

1. When in the last week did I sit in God's loving gaze?
2. How in the last week did I try to make my shadow self visible?
3. How in the next week will I try to make my shadow self visible?
4. How can I choose to be seen by God this week?

### **Assignment + Blessing**

What would it look like if you were not bound up in all those things that control you? What would your relationships look like if you weren't trying to protect, to arrange, to impress?

Practice meditation to practice sitting in God's love. Use Psalm 139:23-24 this week as a prayer for 5-10 minutes.

Search me, O God, and know my heart;

test me and know my anxious thoughts.  
Point out anything in me that offends you,  
and lead me along the path of everlasting life. -- Psalm 139:23-24