

PREFACE

I was out of town on a study break when I picked up a voicemail with the terrible news. A couple in our church had lost their son in a tragic accident.

Over the days that followed, it was my privilege to walk with Greg and Pam in their sorrow. One evening, when my wife, Karen, and I were visiting in their home, I made a rather tentative suggestion. “I don’t know if this would be of any interest to you,” I said, “but there are other couples in our church who have endured the loss of a child. If you think it would be helpful, Karen and I would be glad to see if we could gather a small group.”

I remember how hesitant I felt. “No pressure,” I said. “It’s just an idea. Perhaps you’d like to think about it over the weekend.” The response took me by surprise. “I don’t need the weekend to think about *that*,” Pam said. “That’s something I’d *absolutely* want to do.” When Greg agreed, we began to talk about people who might be invited. It was the last Friday in November, and we were talking about getting a group together the following Wednesday, and then meeting each week until Christmas.

Arriving home that evening, I was sure that the group would be helpful but was apprehensive about making the calls. Would anyone be free

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to come at such short notice? For that matter, would anyone *want* to come, especially so near to Christmas?

One of my fears in extending the invitation was that I might cause further grief, especially for the friends whose loss was many years ago. I was open and candid about this when making the invitation.

"I hesitated before inviting you to join this group," I said to Leslie, whose son Kenny had died 18 years previously. "I don't want you to feel under any pressure, and I wouldn't want this to set you back." I now feel rather foolish about having said that. None of the people I called were being reminded of their loss by my invitation. Their loss is always with them.

To my surprise, everyone we invited wanted to come. Some rearranged their calendars. And five days after making the calls, they were all seated in our front room.

On that first night, each member of the group told their story. Our hearts were quickly bonded together as one reached out to another across the room with love and understanding. It soon became clear that God had brought us together and that He was at work among us in a very special way.

In the weeks that followed, we structured our conversations around the book of Lamentations. I had begun studying this often neglected part of the Bible with a view to preaching it the following year. Its main themes of tears, talk, guilt, grievance, hope, and healing opened up the areas in which we most needed help.

God has given us an entire book of the Bible that shows us how to navigate the valley of grief, sorrow, and loss. Yet in nearly 40 years as a

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pastor, I had never preached through this book. *Why not?* I had begun to wonder, especially since Lamentations speaks to a painful reality that sooner or later every person will experience.

Our weeks in that small group deepened my understanding of the journey through grief and my conviction that Lamentations is God's gift for those who grieve. Some months later, I preached a short series of sermons on Lamentations at our church. Rarely in my years as a pastor have I seen the Scriptures affect so many people as deeply as I did during these weeks. People connected with the book of Lamentations as they heard its message of pain, sorrow, comfort, and hope. Every week several people asked if I would consider writing this up as a book.

I pondered this for some time and then asked the members of our group if they would like to share what we had experienced together. Everyone agreed. Some of their stories and many of their insights are related in this book. To each of these remarkable people, I extend my heartfelt gratitude.

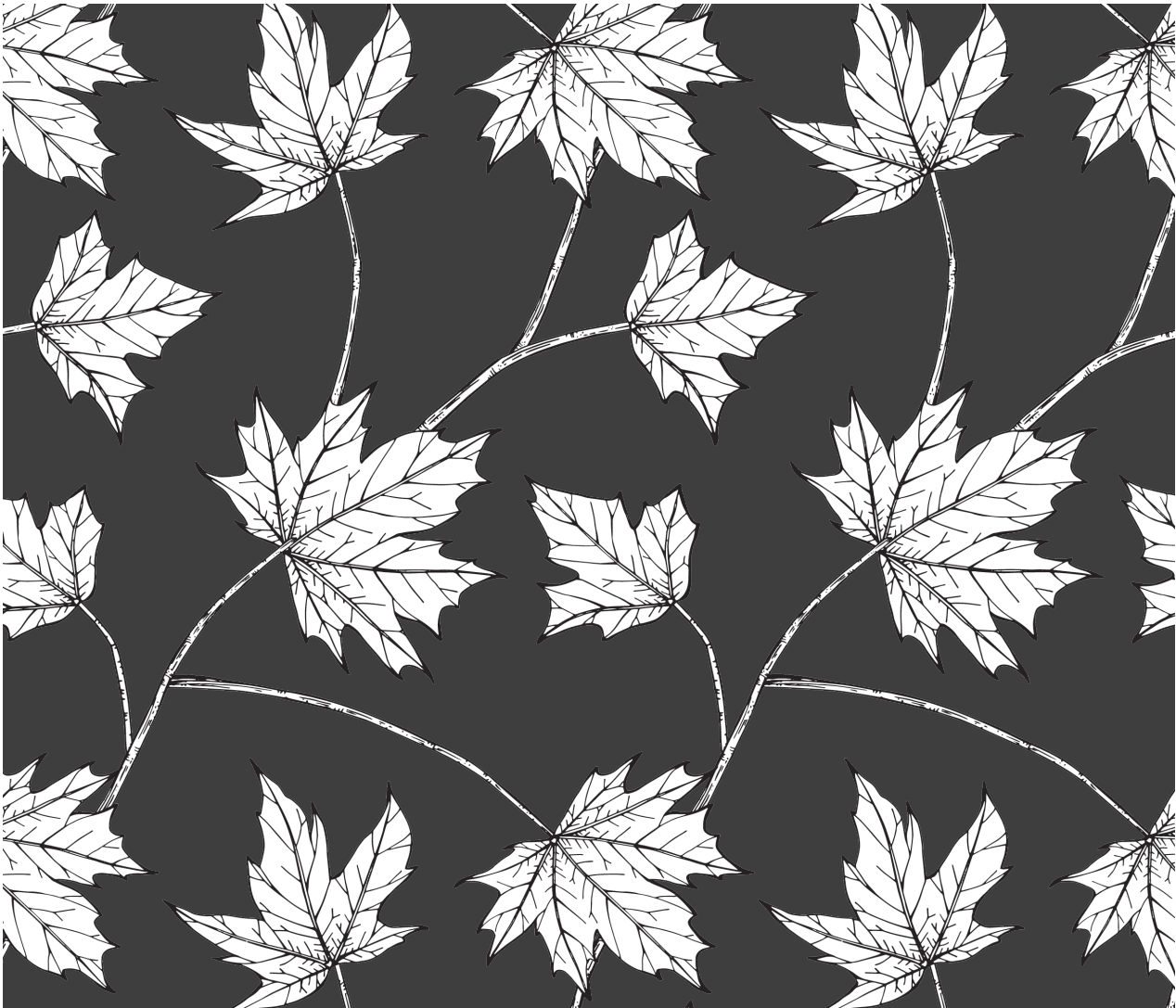
My prayer for you as you read this book is first that you will gain a better understanding of what it means to grieve and to hope. Christians grieve and hope *at the same time*. We hope while we grieve and we grieve while we hope. People sometimes say, "I don't think I ever grieved properly." If that is your experience, Lamentations, together with the stories in this book, will show you what it looks like to grieve and how to do so with hope.

I also hope you will consider gathering a small group to talk about grief using this book as a basis for discussion. The model our group followed

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was simple. On the first night, each person in the group shared their story. Then on the evenings that followed, we reflected on the main themes of Lamentations that are taken up in the six chapters of this book. This pattern is easy to follow, and you will find that the questions for reflection and discussion at the end of each chapter will guide your conversations.

Most of all, I hope and pray that when you walk the painful path of sorrow, you will meet with Jesus Christ. The Savior knows what it is to walk sorrow's path, and He is well acquainted with grief. When you pass through the valley of sorrow and loss, you are in a place where Christ can be found. And any path on which you come closer to Him will be blessed, even if it is a path you would never have chosen to walk.



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Lyle and Sue's Story

Lyle and Sue enjoyed having their son home for Christmas, and they were looking forward to what the New Year would bring as John opened a new chapter of his life.

John had enlisted in the army where he served as a combat engineer. After training, he was deployed in Korea and having completed his service, he had returned home to pursue a degree at Harper College in Palatine, Illinois.

Sue recalls John assembling some drawers and shelves she had bought for his room. "When he was done, he went out with his friends. But before he left, he came up behind me, grabbed me round the shoulders, and said, 'I love you Mom.'"

"Well ditto, John. I love you too," Sue said. She didn't know it at the time, but this was her last sweet memory of her son.

The following day was much like any other until late in the afternoon. Sue had been substitute teaching, and when she returned home she noticed a car parked in the road, which was unusual on a dead-end street.

"When I got into the house, I heard a frantic pounding on the door," she said. "I looked through a window and saw a man peering in at me."

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“Open up,” he said, “I need to talk to you!”

When Sue opened the door, the man identified himself as a police officer.

“Your son has been involved in an accident,” he said. “You need to get to the hospital.”

“Well, is my son okay?” Sue asked.

“Ma’am, you just need to get to the hospital,” the officer replied.

Sue tried to call her husband, Lyle, but she couldn’t get hold of him at the school where he was teaching. So, she went across to her neighbor’s house.

“John has been in an accident and I need to get to the hospital right away,” Sue said. “Please look out for Lyle and tell him where I am.”

The neighbor could see that Sue was shaking as she spoke. “You can’t drive,” she said. “I won’t let you drive! Get in the car and I’ll take you.” Sue remembers arriving at the hospital, but she has very little memory of what happened after that.

Lyle had been supervising an after-school club that afternoon, and he arrived home later than usual. “When I drove into our street, a neighbor flagged me down and told me that John had been in an accident and that I needed to go to the hospital,” Lyle said.

When he arrived, a chaplain broke the news that he and Sue had dreaded. Their son was dead.

John had been riding with friends as they made their way toward Harper College for a class. Another student driving in the opposite direction

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had hit the curb, lost control of his truck, and swerved into the path of the car in which John was traveling. It was a head-on collision, and the three students in the car lost their lives.

Sue has very little memory of the two weeks that followed the accident. She calls this “holy amnesia,” and regards these gaps in her memory as a gift from God. “I went around in a stupor,” she said, “and all I know of these days is what other people have told me.”

Sue was in shock. She kept repeating the same questions over and over again: “Where am I? Why am I here? Did something happen?” In these early days, she would wake up in the night and ask Lyle, “Is there something wrong?”

“Oh, yes,” Lyle would reply, “something is *very* wrong.”

“What frightened me most,” Lyle said, “was what was happening to her, so I decided that we should see a counselor.”

“I fought him every inch of the way on that one,” Sue said.

“Why, are we going to see a counselor?” she demanded.

“Because I am worried about you,” Lyle replied.

Neither Lyle nor Sue can remember much of what the counselor said, but they both recall what was written on the wall in his office: *The only way out is through.*

*“The only way out
is through.”*



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They also recall the wise words that the counselor gave to Lyle: “Let her see you grieve.” That sentence stayed with both of them, but it wasn’t easy for Lyle. “The only times I cried were in the middle of the night,” he said. “I would get up and go into John’s room, and when I was there alone, I would break down in tears.”

“Men and women grieve in different ways,” Sue said. “I don’t think men feel the need to talk as women do, and they don’t like to show their emotions.”

Lyle agreed. “If something has impacted me deeply, and I try to verbalize it to someone else, I find it hard to get the words out,” he said.

Two weeks after the accident, the InterVarsity group on the Harper College campus held a memorial service for the three students who had died in the accident. Sue wanted to speak about John’s spiritual journey at the service, and she asked Lyle what he thought.

“That’s fine if you want to do it,” Lyle said. “I’m not saying a word, but I will go up and stand beside you.”

The memorial service proved helpful to Sue. “For the first two weeks it was as if I was asleep,” she said, “but after the service it seemed as if I woke up again.”

*“At first I couldn’t cry,
but when I started, I
couldn’t stop!”*



Waking up meant facing the intense pain from which Sue had been shielded during her days in the twilight. “I was numb

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during these first two weeks. There was pain there for sure, but I really don't remember feeling very much at all. But when I woke up, the pain was awful," she said. "At first I couldn't cry, but when I started, I couldn't stop!"

THE STORY BEHIND LAMENTATIONS

The grieving people in Lamentations couldn't stop crying either. They had endured five disasters, one on top of the other.

First, enemies laid siege to their city: "In the ninth year of his reign... Nebuchadnezzar king of Babylon came with all his army against Jerusalem, and laid siege to it" (Jeremiah 52:4).

Second, with no supplies entering the city, food soon became scarce, and the struggle for survival became increasingly desperate: "All her people groan as they search for bread" (Lamentations 1:11).

Starving people can only hold out for a limited time. And so, third, the city of Jerusalem fell: "Her people fell into the hand of the foe" (Lamentations 1:7).

Fourth, when the walls of Jerusalem were breached, the invading army occupied the city and God's people found themselves under the heel of a brutal oppressor: "Her foes have become the head" (Lamentations 1:5).

And fifth, the temple where God's presence had come down was completely destroyed: "The holy stones lie scattered at the head of every street" (Lamentations 4:1).

WHERE WAS GOD IN ALL OF THIS?

Lamentations is a lament—a long, loud, and agonized cry—ascending to God from people who endured unspeakable loss. Many of these people had lost children. The youngest would have been the first to die of starvation during the siege of the city. And when the city fell, those who had older children endured the pain of seeing their sons and daughters marched off into exile, knowing that they would never see them again: “Her children have gone away, captives before the foe” (Lamentations 1:5).

In addition to the loss of their children, the survivors in Jerusalem had suffered the trauma of horrendous atrocities. Some were abused: “Women are raped in Zion, young women in the towns of Judah” (Lamentations 5:11). Others were enslaved: “Young men are compelled to grind at the mill, and boys stagger under loads of wood” (Lamentations 5:13).

Homes that were once filled with music, love, and laughter were destroyed, and God’s people were reduced to scratching a living in the ruins and rubble of their once glorious city: “The joy of our hearts has ceased, our dancing has been turned to mourning” (Lamentations 5:15).

Jeremiah had the unenviable task of being God’s mouthpiece at this desperate time. Picture him walking through the rubble of the once great city of God, as the smoke rises from the ashes. The city that once bustled with people now seems like a ghost town. “How lonely sits the city that was full of people,” he says. “She weeps bitterly in the night, with tears on her cheeks” (Lamentations 1:1–2).

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A RELEASE VALVE FOR YOUR PAIN

Lamentations is a book soaked in tears:

For these things I weep; my eyes flow with tears; for a comforter is far from me. (Lamentations 1:16)

My eyes are spent with weeping. (Lamentations 2:11)

My eyes flow with rivers of tears because of the destruction of the daughter of my people. (Lamentations 3:48)

My eyes will flow without ceasing, without respite, until the LORD from heaven looks down and sees. (Lamentations 3:49-50)

Notice that these references to tears don't dry up after the first chapter. They continue throughout the book, so don't be surprised if your tears continue too.

Tears are the shuddering of the body at the pain of the soul. They are a gift from God, because they act as a release valve for your pain. So let your tears flow and don't hold them back.

"Tears are the shuddering of the body at the pain of the soul."



One of the unnerving things about tears is that you never know when they are going to come next. They come at unexpected times. One member of our group reminded us of the hymn that says, "When sorrows like sea billows roll."¹

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“Sorrow comes in waves,” she said, “and a new wave can be set off by a sight, a sound, or a smell.” She then described a time when a fragrance reminded her of the smell of her son’s hair, and another wave of grief came crashing over her. No one could have known the cause of her sudden and unexpected distress.

Another member of our group told us that people often said to her, “I don’t know what to say to you because I don’t want to make you cry.” Her answer was simple, “If you make me cry, you are only taking me to a place where I already live most of the time.”

Sometimes the tears just won’t come. When Sue told us that she had been in a state of shock and that she couldn’t cry for days, other members of the group identified with her experience. One said that she had felt guilty because she wasn’t crying. *Why did the tears not come?* she wondered.

The shock of a sudden loss can freeze your senses so that you don’t feel what you would expect to feel. Lamentations reflects this experience: “He has left me stunned, faint all the day long” (Lamentations 1:13). A person who is stunned has no feeling, and this numbness is often part of shock, especially in the early days of bereavement.

You can’t force tears, but when they come, don’t hold them back! God says, “Let tears stream down like a torrent day and night! Give yourself no rest, your eyes no respite!... Pour out your heart like water before the presence of the Lord” (Lamentations 2:18–19).

ARE TEARS A SIGN OF WEAKNESS?

God gave you tear ducts for a reason, and no Christian should ever be ashamed of his or her tears.

The tears in Lamentations were produced by the Spirit of God. This book is Scripture, and “all Scripture is breathed out by

*“God gave you tear ducts
for a reason.”*



God” (2 Timothy 3:16). The tears welling up in the eyes of Jeremiah as he walked through the ruins of Jerusalem were more than the effect of his pain. They were the work of the Spirit of God within him. The tears of Lamentations came directly from the throne of God.

But sometimes the feeling persists that tears are a sign of weakness. A woman in our congregation wrote to me expressing what I suspect is the feeling of many:

I was eager to hear this series on grief because we’ve gone through loss. I’ve had two miscarriages and I have only shared this with those close to me. I felt that I had to hold things together and that if I didn’t I would not be a faithful Christian. So it was good to hear that it’s okay to cry and to know what Scripture says about our tears.

If you feel that tears are a sign of weakness, remember that Jesus wept. The Apostle John records the story of the visit of Jesus to Martha and Mary, the sisters of Lazarus with whom Jesus was especially close. Lazarus had died, and, a few days after the funeral, Jesus arrived in

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Bethany where Martha and Mary were grieving the loss of their dearly loved brother.

When Jesus saw Mary weeping, He was deeply moved in His spirit, and when He came to the tomb where Lazarus was buried, “Jesus wept” (John 11:35).

Why did Jesus weep? Certainly not because Jesus had lost hope. Our Lord knew that the day of resurrection had come for Lazarus. In just a few minutes, Christ would raise him from the dead. Jesus told Martha, “Your brother will rise again” (John 11:23).

But notice that Jesus did *not* say, “Your brother will rise again, so don’t grieve.” Jesus says, “I am the resurrection and the life” (John 11:25), but He still weeps with those who weep (John 11:35).

Never make the mistake of thinking that weeping means you are failing to believe adequately in the resurrection. Jesus had tears rolling down His face over the death of a dearly loved friend. He wept over death even though He knew that for Lazarus resurrection was only moments away!

PEOPLE GRIEVE IN DIFFERENT WAYS

Many years have passed since that awful day when Lyle and Sue’s lives were forever changed by the devastating news of the sudden loss of their son. Their loss placed an enormous strain on them and on their marriage, but by the grace of God, they have emerged with a stronger faith and a deeper love.

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Like many other couples, Lyle and Sue have different strengths. Lyle is quiet, steady, and rock solid. Sue is intense, insightful, and articulate. God knew what He was doing when He brought them together, and through their sorrow, they have come to a deeper appreciation of each other's strengths.

Looking back, Sue sees the strength and stability that Lyle displayed while she was "asleep." "He made all the calls. He did whatever needed to be done," she said.

In our group we spoke at length about the strain that grief places on a marriage. Lyle and Sue's insight that men and women often grieve in different ways resonated around the room. No one was surprised that Lyle had difficulty with the wise words of the counselor, who told him to let his wife see him grieve. Nor were any of us surprised that Sue had misread her husband's lack of tears and mistakenly assumed that he was not grieving.

Leslie, whose story we will hear in chapter 3, gave us the help and insight we all needed on this point. She and her husband, Ken, also faced difficulties because of their very different ways of handling grief.

"It's true," Leslie said. "Men and women grieve differently and I struggled with this. But I came to see that my husband was the only other person on the planet who loved our son like I did and was a part of him as I was. We were bound together in our grief, and however different our ways of coping, he was one with me in it as no one else could ever be."

THE POWER OF THANKSGIVING

Looking back on the early days of her sorrow, Sue recalls the sense of falling into a dark pit. She felt that she was sinking. How could she get out?

“Part of the journey of healing for me came through thanking God for the smallest gifts in my life,” Sue said. “I thanked Him that the sky was blue and that the sun was shining. If a bird was singing, I would thank Him that at least the bird could sing. And every time I gave thanks, it felt as if I was taking a tiny step towards climbing out of that awful pit.”

Sue made extensive use of the Scriptures, especially of the Psalms, in her journey through grief. They gave her words when she had none and helped her to pray, asking God for what He had promised. She also formed the helpful habit of putting her name into verses of Scripture as she read them, applying what God had said to her own situation. Reading the first two verses of Psalm 40, she would say:

Sue waited patiently for the LORD;
He inclined to Sue and heard her cry.
He drew Sue up from the pit of destruction,
out of the miry bog,
And set Sue’s feet upon a rock,
making her steps secure.

“The Psalms put words to what I was feeling,” she said. “They gave me permission to feel these things, and they helped to guide my thoughts and my emotions.”

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Sue was especially helped by David's prayer, "Put my tears in your bottle. Are they not in your book?" (Psalm 56:8). This marvelous verse reminded her that the tears of believers are

"The Psalms put words to what I was feeling."



precious to God. Not one of them is ever forgotten. Every tear you have ever shed is captured by your heavenly Father, and God wants you to know that all the pain you have ever experienced is completely known to Him. Other people will only see a small part of your sorrow, but none of it is hidden from the Lord.

One day Christ will wipe away all tears from your eyes (Revelation 21:4). That is a staggering promise, and right now, you may wonder if it is even possible. Wiping away all tears is something that only God Himself could do. But He has said that He will do it. Literally, God says He will wipe all tears "out of" your eyes, as if in the resurrection body God would take away not only your tears but also the source of them. Tear ducts will no longer be needed when the springs of sorrow are gone.

That day has not yet come. And until it does there will be tears. But God has given you a Savior who knows what it is to weep. Our Lord was a man of sorrows, and He was well acquainted with grief (Isaiah 53:3). Christ plumbed the depths of sorrow when He suffered on the cross, and no one is more ready or more able to walk with you through the valley of sorrow and loss than Jesus Christ. So don't be afraid to let your tears flow. Christ will dry them in His own time.