

## **“The Hope in the Middle”**

by Greg Smith-Young (Elora-Bethany Pastoral Charge)

*A reflection for an All-Saints' Memorial Service*

Lamentations 3:19-33

November 4, 2018

---

Read the Scripture by clicking [here](#).

---

Our Bible is a collection of books. Most of them are Jewish books. The Book of Lamentations is Jewish. It was written in Hebrew. In Hebrew, Lamentations starts with this word: “*Eicha!*” *Eicha* means “how.” Lamentations is the “Book of How!”<sup>1</sup>

“How” can be a question, the sort cried toward silent heavens. “*How?*” It demands an answer. Do we wait? “*How?*”

Or, “how” can be an exclamation. “*How beautiful! How sad! How terrible!*” This is how Lamentations begins.

*How lonely sits the city!  
She was once full with people!  
She was great among nations!  
She has become like a widow. . . .*

How lonely . . . like a widow. How emptied, like any of us when we grieve.

### II

Lamentations, this “Book of How,” was born from a specific place, in a certain time. It was not about one person’s death, but thousands. It grieved for a whole city: Jerusalem, the holy city of God, crushed to rubble. It grieved for a whole people: Israel, the holy people of God, broken and banished.

It grieved God! God’s holy Temple, toppled and ground down. God’s precious presence, where had it gone? God’s abiding love . . . what had become of it? What good is it, when all this can happen?

How terrible this is! How could you, God?

If you were here last week, we’re now about a decade after the story we looked at then. That time the city surrendered, many were exiled, punishment was exacted, but life went on. This time, however, the empire of Babylon has come back and left nothing undestroyed.

---

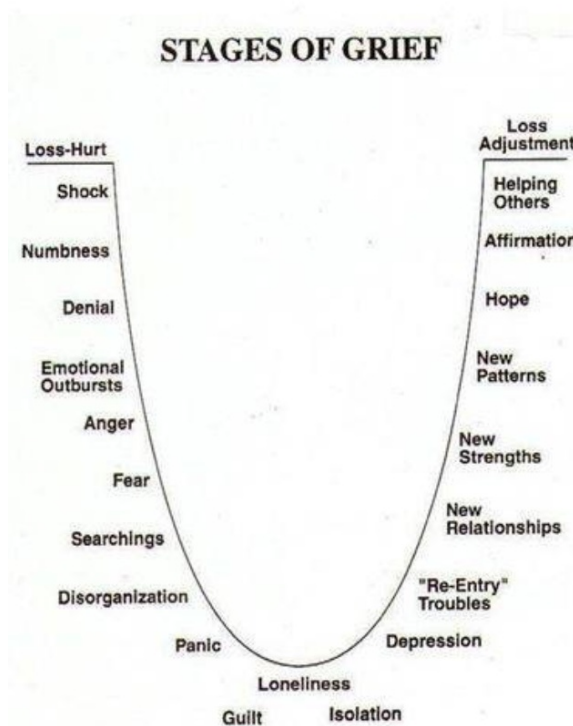
<sup>1</sup> *Megillat Eicha*. Megillat means “scroll.” Shawn Aster, “Lamentations” an article on the website [My Jewish Learning](http://www.myjewishlearning.com/article/lamentations). [www.myjewishlearning.com/article/lamentations](http://www.myjewishlearning.com/article/lamentations). Accessed November 1, 2018.

Lamentations is about that. It is a God-sanctioned, crying-out-to-God response of grief. It has given words to Jews ever since, for they have had too many times to grieve.<sup>2</sup> It can give us words too, for by God's grace, because of Jesus we have been grafted into God's People.<sup>3</sup>

God continues to give us this blessed cry of "How!" because we need to grieve our particular losses, and we need God's help.

### III

You might have heard of the "stages of grief." They started off with five of them: denial, anger, bargaining, depression and acceptance.<sup>4</sup>



Of course, that's far too simplistic. So they've added many more: shock, numbness, denial, emotional outbursts, anger, fear, searchings, disorganization, panic, guilt, loneliness. Then, coming up from the bottom: isolation, depression, "re-entry" troubles, new relationships, new strengths, new patterns, hope, affirmation, and helping others.<sup>5</sup>

This might be helpful for you.

<sup>2</sup> From Shawn Aster's article: "Lamentations has for millennia served as the archetype of the Jewish response to national calamity (of which we have had several). It is read in synagogue on the fast-day of Tisha B'Av, the ninth day of the Hebrew month Av, which commemorates the anniversary of the destruction of the Temple. It is followed in the synagogue service by the reading of other lamentations, or *kinot*, composed throughout the centuries by rabbis and poets 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.). These *kinot* follow the literary model of Lamentations in many ways, and many of them begin with the word that opens Lamentations, 'Eicha...'"

<sup>3</sup> See Romans 11.

<sup>4</sup> [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/K%C3%BCbler-Ross\\_model](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/K%C3%BCbler-Ross_model)

<sup>5</sup> I found this on a chart posted on Facebook. So it must be true.

This is my grief journey:



Like this, the Book of Lamentations does not follow a predictable pattern.<sup>6</sup> We don't start off trudging in despair and end up skipping along picking flowers. It does not work that way. You know.

Many of us find Psalm 23 comforting: "The Lord is my Shepherd, I shall not want. . . ." But in the middle of it, when you're walking through the valley of the shadow of death, the Shepherd might not seem so close. It might feel like the Shepherd has taken off. Or is leading you into the pit of hell! When you are there, crying out to God is intense. It's raw.

This does not sound like a pious picture of God. But the Bible says otherwise. God's word, spoken and written through God's servants, is not afraid of this. God gives words for us to use with God, when grief has emptied us.<sup>7</sup> Like Lamentations, this "Book of How!"

<sup>6</sup> Lamentations contains five poems, each corresponding to a chapter. Poems 1-4 are acrostics, with each line or group of lines starting with a consecutive letter of the Hebrew alphabet. However, this pattern does not seem to correspond to the content of the poems.

<sup>7</sup> From the [Catholic Sensibility](#) blog: "There is a very honest and healthy grief in Lamentations. The author does not propose any easy answers. No "things will be okay." No "this too shall pass." Just raw grief and lament. The first sixteen verses of this chapter get pretty intense. When you read that God has led the "everyman" into darkness not light, has turned his hand against, besieged and encircled with poverty, etc., one gets the idea that a twisted version of Psalm 23 is the inspiration here. The image of God is not pretty, and the believer is not afraid to utter it."

IV

In the middle . . . in the middle of Lamentations, chapter 3 . . . in the middle of the grief . . . comes this:

*This I call to mind — therefore, I have hope!*

Something is remembered, something that gives hope. It's not a gambler's hope. This hope does not say, "This time, I'll strike it rich. Next time, things will turn out better. Some time, I'll beat the house." No, this hope is not delusional like that. It's hope, but not an optimist's hope either. This hope does not say, "Things will get better. Turn your lemons into lemonade!" No, this hope is not rose-coloured like that.

This hope is rugged and tough. It needs to be! It is, because it does not stand on our strength or the world's circumstances.

From Lamentations:

*Certainly the faithful love of the Lord never ends.  
Certainly God's compassion is not finished!*

Our hope stands on God's "faithful love." God is unbreakably devoted to God's promise, to us.<sup>8</sup> God keeps God's covenant with us. Not because we have done the right things or kept the right attitude. Only because of God: God's truthfulness, God's unchanging devotion, God's love. That's why, in the middle of such destruction as lay before Lamentations, we can still hear this assurance of hope. Despair and devastation cannot wipe out God's unbreakable devotion! So I have hope!

Our hope stands on God's "compassion." The Hebrew word here means a mother's womb.<sup>9</sup> What a wonderful picture, what John Holbert calls "the unbreakable and active womb-love of God." From a mother's womb, new life is born. But through pain. God is with us, sharing in our suffering, and birthing something new. So I have hope!

---

<https://catholicsensibility.wordpress.com/2012/02/28/funeral-lectionary-lamentations-317-26/>. Accessed November 1, 2018. Unfortunately, I could not figure out who wrote this particular post.

<sup>8</sup> The Hebrew word is *hesed*. I got the phrase "unbreakable devotion to the promise" from John C. Holbert, "Commentary on Lamentations 3:22-33," WorkingPreacher.org, [www.workingpreacher.org/preaching.aspx?commentary\\_id=332](http://www.workingpreacher.org/preaching.aspx?commentary_id=332), Accessed November 2, 2017.

<sup>9</sup> The word for compassion, *rahmim*, derives from *rehem*.

V

Something wakes me up. We're together, doing something ordinary, though it makes no sense. Then light cracks the darkened dawn. Clearness comes through sleepy eyes. Realization. Sadness. Emptiness again. They are not here. They are gone. The dream closes, ending its beautiful interruption, and my nightmare returns.

Mourning in the morning, another day after the day before. Is it getting better? Yes. No. I don't know. Remember those scribbled-over stages of grief.

Each morning comes upon us with ferocious regularity.

From Lamentations, again:

*Certainly the faithful love of the Lord never ends.  
Certainly God's compassion is not finished!*

*They are renewed every morning.  
Great is Your faithfulness.*

The Holy One, who was before the beginning, and who will be after the end . . . God is with you in the waking of every morning, with an endless supply sufficient for that day. God's faithful, promise-keeping, sticking-with-you love is more than sufficient for that day. God's compassionate, from the womb-birthing new life never runs out.

So in the middle of Lamentations can come this conclusion:

*The Lord is my portion!  
Therefore, I will wait for God.*

It's in the middle. Our grieving goes on. Our crying-out continues.

*How! How?*

Still . . . we wait . . . hope . . . with God. Amen.