

I once attended a church service in a town I was visiting. I can't remember the passage, although Jeremiah 29:11 seems likely. It might've been around the time of the Global Financial Crisis. And the preacher told the church that they should be visibly different to the world around them. That the fact that they had God on their side should visibly effect how the people of their community saw them.

And his example was that when they go to the shops the world ought to be amazed that they're paying with savings when the world is having to dive into debt by paying on credit.

And two things stuck with me from that moment. Least importantly, that's not how eftpos works. You can be paying on credit and still basically using your savings.

More importantly, he started so close to a significant Biblical truth, but ended up so far from the mark.

Now we're on week three of the book of Lamentations today, and we're going to see that our experience amidst struggles should cause us to be visibly different in this world, but not in the way that that preacher said. Rather:

Our experience of gospel hope in struggles enables us to lead others to gospel hope.

Today we're in our final of three weeks in the book of Lamentations, a book about struggle, pain and hope.

In the first two chapters of Lamentations we found the author in the midst of a catastrophic struggle. He sits in the dust and rubble of destroyed Jerusalem with a remnant of the people starving around him, suffering in slavery, living in desperation. And he had a tension to deal with: God is on the one hand the only hope, the only possible comforter for the suffering city, but on the other hand God is clearly the just, wrathful judge of the city. And so his struggle comes down to this question: who is God to us? Is he our wrathful judge or our tender comforter? (And remember from previous weeks, God's wrath isn't like our angry lashing out. God's wrath is always synonymous with perfect justice).

In chapter 3, where we were last week, the struggle turned personal, and in the midst of his personal struggle Jeremiah found hope. Because he saw the nature of true hope: true hope is not just that the Lord would deliver them, true hope is the Lord. The Lord was, and is, the only thing the author can hope in that won't be challenged or taken away. So he cried out in hope "the Lord is my portion" says my soul "therefore I will hope in him". And, you know, we didn't say it this explicitly last week, but he finds there a perhaps unexpected answer to the question of the book. In his desperate search for a comforter the author has reached a crucial realisation: God is only the comforter if God is the comfort. God would only give hope if that hope was God. And so the author places his hope in the person of God, in having God as his portion. And he found in the latter part of chapter three that this hope made a world of difference to his experience of the suffering he was going through. Because his hope was never broken.

And as we reach chapter 4 today, it's tempting to think that he backslides a bit. That his certainty of hope evaporates in the face of the challenges around him. But a close reading of the text reveals something else is going on here. In chapters 4 & 5 we've moved into something else altogether.

What's peculiar about these two chapters, what makes them easy to look at as a backslide, is that their themes and content aren't new, especially in chapter 4.

Chapter 4, quite specifically echoes the reflections of chapters 1&2 on the destruction of the city.

Open up the book, Lamentations chapter 4, there should be a Bible in the seat in front of you, and have a look with me.

Look at 4:4. He mourns the famine in the city, and says:

*The tongue of the nursing infant sticks
to the roof of its mouth for thirst;
the children beg for food,*

but no one gives to them.

And in verse 10 he writes:

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

Horrible truths. But now jump back to chapter 2. The last words of verse 11 are:

*because infants and babies faint
in the streets of the city.*

And in verse 19 & 20 he writes:

*Lift your hands to him
for the lives of your children,
who faint for hunger
at the head of every street.”*

Look, O LORD, and see!

With whom have you dealt thus?

*Should women eat the fruit of their womb,
the children of their tender care?*

So he's echoing thoughts from the earlier chapters.

He also echoes the strong thought from the first chapters that it is the wrath of God that has done this. In 4:11 he writes “the Lord gave full vent to his wrath”. Several times just in chapter 1 he pointed out that it was the Lord who, in anger, was afflicting the people. Chapter 2 basically **just** says that.

And chapter 5, to a large extent echoes the cries for God to look and see the destruction of the city and act in 1:9, 11, 20; 2:20.

You could be forgiven if, after a brief read of Lamentations, you came away thinking it was shaped something like this:

Chapter 1: the author struggles with the destruction of the city.

Chapter 2: the author struggles with God's action in destroying the city

Chapter 3: the author finds personal hope in the person of God.

Chapter 4: but he becomes overwhelmed again by the suffering of the city.

Chapter 5: and finally he continues to struggle with the destruction of the city, finishing with a small and hopeless call for God to act.

That's actually basically how I felt like this book went on my first recent readthrough. One chapter of hope in the middle, with two chapters of despair on either side.

Well, as we've seen these last couple of weeks, those first three chapters are pretty accurate. The author makes that movement from dark struggle to the light of hope in the person of God.

But in chapter 4, he doesn't backslide into being overwhelmed but actually moves on to do something very different.

In Chapter 4: the author leads the people through the struggle he's been walking through.

Let me explain.

It's true to say that the author moves back into the struggle in this chapter. He talks about all of the same themes as chapters 1-2. But whilst the big words stay the same, like "famine, destruction, princes, bones, gold", the little words change. And to read the Bible well you need to understand the little words. Particularly in this case because they show you who the author is speaking with and to.

You might remember that we saw a change of perspective back in chapter 3. About halfway through, the author stops talking about God and starts talking to God. He stops saying “he has done this and he has done that” and begins saying “you have done this and you have done that”. And that perspective change was so significant, because it indicated the move for the author from **struggling on his own** through what God has done to **struggling with God** through what God has done, in hope.

In chapter 4 the author *does* go back to the struggle and the pain, just like in chapters 1-2, presenting the suffering and it’s cause, that the city has suffered justly under God’s wrath for sin. But look carefully: for the first 16 verses it doesn’t seem like he’s talking to anyone, but then he suddenly starts speaking like this: (note the pronouns)

“Our eyes failed, ever watching for help;

In our watching we watched, for a nation which could not save”

Compare that, say, to the language we saw in chapter 2, in 2:3 he wrote:

Lam. 2:3 He has cut down in fierce anger

all the might of Israel;

he has withdrawn from them his right hand

in the face of the enemy;

Do you see it? Before chapter 4, the word “our” has appeared 4 times in this book, and the word “we” has appeared only once in reference to the people, because the author has been speaking **about** the city and God, **about** himself and his experience of God’s action, or to God.

But now, in chapters 4-5, he uses “our”, and “we”, and “us” all over the place. He speaks **collectively**, *with* the city, and do you see how that changes what we see happening here!

YES he's walking back through the same struggles, but now he's walking other people through them! He's leading them down the same road he has walked! So chapter 4 isn't Jeremiah falling back into despair, although there is clearly still pain for him here.

But he is letting his experience of the struggle guide him in walking others through the suffering.

In 4:1-13 he leads the people through the struggle he experienced and the conclusion he reached in chapter 1-2: this unbelievable struggle is from God! Read a few of these verses with me:

In 4:9 he writes:

*Happier were the victims of the sword
than the victims of hunger,
who wasted away, pierced
by lack of the fruits of the field.*

In verse 10 he acknowledges:

*The LORD gave full vent to his wrath;
he poured out his hot anger,
and he kindled a fire in Zion
that consumed its foundations.*

In verse 13-22 he leads them to see their sin as the just reason for God's action.

Read 4:13, he writes:

*This was for the sins of her prophets
and the iniquities of her priests,
who shed in the midst of her
the blood of the righteous.*

Even the priests, the ones who should have been the most righteous, were murderers.

He ends the section by reminding them of God's just consistency in punishing other nations as well.

So do you see, chapter 4 is Jeremiah leading the people through the bad news that he's already struggled through: we are sinners who justly sit under the wrath of God.

And in Chapter 5: he leads the people, through repentance, toward the hope he has experienced.

And in chapter 5, the perspective changes again, slightly but significantly. Read verse 1 with me:

*"Remember, O Lord, what has befallen us;
Look, and see our disgrace"*

He keeps speaking collectively, using "our" and "us", he keeps leading the people. But now he's speaking *to GOD!* He is leading people in prayer.

Specifically, he leads them through two sections of prayer.

By far the largest is from 1-18, where he brings their suffering before God and acknowledges their sin. Read verse 16 with me:

"the crown has fallen from our head;

*Woe to us, for **we have sinned!***

For this our heart has become sick,

For these things our eyes have grown dim,

For mount Zion which lies desolate;

Jackals prowl over it.”

Our crown has fallen, our rule is destroyed, because of one thing: our sin. Because we turned from you, you uncrowned us.

But then in vv19-21 he prayerfully leads them towards the only hope he knows. God. Read verse 19 with me:

But you, O LORD, (you) reign forever;

your throne endures to all generations.

Do you see the beauty of this line after what it follows. In 16-18 he acknowledged, we have lost our rule and our crown because of our sin.

But we have hope, because our God still reigns! Read on:

Why do you forget us forever,

why do you forsake us for so many days?

Restore us to yourself, O LORD, that we may be restored!

Renew our days as of old—

As he comes toward the end of the chapter, the prophet acknowledges: only you can restore us God. We can't bring ourselves back to you, only you can do it.

And finally the book ends, rather disturbingly, in uncertainty.

The final verse flows from the one we just read:

Restore us to yourself, O LORD, that we may be restored!

Renew our days as of old—

unless you have utterly rejected us,

and you remain exceedingly angry with us.

In the end, although he leads the people toward the only possible hope, he can't say if God will restore the people, if he will bring them back to him. We're not going to dwell on that, but I should say: there is certainty of restoration, in the eternal sense, for those who have been saved by faith in Jesus.

So, do we see what's happened in these two chapters? The author has walked the people through the struggle and the suffering, and toward gospel hope; toward God.

And vitally he's done that on the basis of his own struggle and his own experience of hope.

Can you see that the author's experience of the struggle in chapters 1&2, informs how he walks others through the same thing in chapter 4.

And even more importantly, his experience of hope in the person of God in chapter 3 causes him to lead others toward the same hope in chapter 5.

Out of his own experience of hope in the midst of struggle he is able to lead others toward hope in the midst of struggle.

Now do you see that's a powerful principle. It's one, actually, that Paul applies to us all. Look with me at 2 Corinthians 1 (3-4) when he says:

(read it from the Bible)

Notice those words there, (little words again).

(God) comforts us in all our affliction, so that

What? What's the purpose of God comforting us in our pain and suffering? So that we might be comfortable? So that we might not struggle?

No.

(God) comforts us in all our affliction, so that we might be able to comfort those who are in any affliction, (with what?) with the comfort with which we ourselves are comforted by God.

OUR EXPERIENCE OF GOSPEL HOPE ENABLES US TO LEAD OTHERS TO GOSPEL HOPE.

Now the general application of this seems pretty straight forward, right? Our experience of eternal hope in the face of eternal affliction enables us to share that hope with others who are facing the same fate.

As Christians, followers of Christ, we are people who have experienced the joyful hope that comes with knowing that the eternal condemnation of our sins has been removed, the wrath of God against you which would have lasted all of eternity has been poured out on Jesus Christ at the cross, and now your only hope, the gospel centre of your life is that the God who loves you so much is with you, and one day you will be with him forever.

And having experienced that move from condemnation to hope, we can and should lead others toward that hope as well. When people are faced with the failures of their hopes, we should hold out to them our eternal and unfading hope: God.

But I think often we miss the innumerable instances in our lives where that can happen. In the level of our day-to-day struggles we are faced with the opportunity to experience gospel hope, and therefore to give gospel hope.

In our everyday struggles we are faced with the choice: do we seek our hope in the gospel, or do we look elsewhere for hope?

You see the gospel, the good news of hope in God through the work and person of Jesus, is not *just* good for giving hope in the face of final judgement. We have a whole of life gospel which can offer solid hope in the midst of our struggles here and now.

In a sense that's what we've seen Jeremiah doing. He isn't facing the final judgement, although he may have struggled to believe it at times, but he finds hope in God for *this* struggle. And through that he is enabled to lead others to hope.

And when we walk through our life struggles and find gospel hope there, then we are able to speak the gospel of hope into other's struggles too.

The flipside being that when we walk through our life struggles and we reach out for *other* hopes there, if we just remain in hopelessness there, we damage our ability to speak gospel hope into the lives of others.

You see in every struggle in life we have a choice: we can either hope in Christ, or we can seek hope elsewhere. And what we're seeing today is that our experience of that struggle has ramifications for our ability to share the gospel into others struggles.

Let me give you a couple of examples of life struggles where this can prove true. Although really, it's relevant to any struggle. But I want to labour this, a bit more than usual, because I really want you to see that there is practical, every day truth here that is transformative to Christian living.

So, situation number one: "The work struggle"

Suppose your boss doesn't appreciate you, you think you deserve a promotion but consistently he or she picks others over you. And you struggle with that.

Option number 1: you answer that struggle with bitterness.

You offer yourself the immediate truth: I do deserve that promotion.

And because I deserve it, I'm going to do whatever I can to get it.

And I'm right not to be satisfied until I do have it because it's what I deserve.

Regardless of how that turns out for you, two months later you go to coffee with a friend, and they say to you "man, I really resent my work. My boss doesn't appreciate me, I deserve to move up but I don't, sometimes I just want to quit".

How will you respond? I can tell you how, you'll speak from your own experience, from the places you've sought hope in the same situation.

"I relate to your situation and that's terrible, you do deserve to be promoted, I wish you could tell your boss what a jerk he is. Don't quit, keep working hard to get that raise".

Now how could that have looked different?

Option number 2: What if in your struggle you had found comfort in the gospel, in the truths of who God is and what he has done that blow your work situation out of the water.

You want what you deserve? You remind yourself that the gospel truth is that a promotion isn't what you deserve. Hell is.

But talk about a promotion! At the great cost of his Son, God has promoted you from dead sinner to son/daughter of the Most High God.

You want approval? Your heavenly father looks on you and sees the perfection of his own Son and approves of you, even though you don't deserve it.

When you catch up for coffee with your friend, how do you respond now?

Well, maybe if they're a Christian you remind them of those gospel truths. You encourage them to persevere for the sake of the gospel, so that their boss and colleagues might see something of the grace of God in how their hope is sustained in this hard situation. You remind them of the reality of their situation and the weight of grace that has been shown to them. You encourage them to repent, turn from the false hopes they'd placed in their workplace, just like God taught you to do, and turn to your one true hope.

Or if they're not a Christian, then you are in a position to say: "you know I struggled through the same thing. And I could only find hope in one place. I could only get through it and stop wasting my life on being ruled by my boss's approval by knowing Jesus. Knowing the truth of who he is, and what he's done for me. Knowing that I've received so much in him. I had to acknowledge that I was pursuing something less satisfying and important than Him, and put my hope back in him. He's what you need too, He's the only meaningful solution I can offer."

What was an opportunity to offer unhelpful sympathetic complaint has become an opportunity for gospel hope to shine, because you experienced it first.

Situation number 2: the marriage struggle.

Here's one that, judging by Craig and Dave's year to date is becoming relevant or is about to become relevant to a bunch of people.

Suppose you've just gotten married. And maybe it's in your first month or maybe it's a year down the line you start arguing with your spouse.

You start arguing. Sometimes it's loud. Sometimes you get so angry that they just won't see reason, or they won't love you the way they should.

Option number 1: Your response to that is that one of you becomes the dominant arguer. If it's the husband, then maybe the wife's submission becomes more like subservience. You keep your head down because he gets so mad. Or if it's the wife, then maybe the husband just gives up on leading and instead just harbours bitterness over his wife's poor choices.

A few years later when the new married couple comes to you for advice in the same struggle, how will you respond?

Either "Oh man, you need to do whatever it takes to show her that you're the leader now" or

"you gotta keep your head down. Women are crazy man, and you need to learn that a happy house only happens if you learn to follow the boss lady". Or

“he’s going to blow up at some point, just go along with it and stay quiet. He’s your boss now.” Or

“He’s never going to lead well. Trust me, you need to pick up the reins or no one will”.

Option number 2: Now option number 2 isn’t hypothetical. This was us, we argued heaps in our first few years of marriage. But what pulled us through that was remembering the grace God had shown us.

He didn’t just think he was in the right like we did, God **WAS** in the right, and he could have crushed us, he could have come down and said “look at your sin! Look how wrong you are! You’re so stupid. You’re so deserving of my wrath”.

But he didn’t, and there we found hope in the midst of friction in our marriage. Christ died in sacrificial love for his bride the church, and showed us what the love of a husband is. The church submits to him because he has loved and won us.

That blew our pride in arguing out of the water, and gradually made us more gracious with each other.

A few years later some friends came to us and said they were shocked.

They’d been married a year and had just had their first proper argument. They didn’t know what to do. Were they not compatible? How would their marriage survive this?

Out of the gospel hope we’d found in our struggle we were able to speak grace into their situation. We were able to lovingly build them up in the gospel. We were able to gently direct them away from the idols of a perfect spouse and toward the true God who is perfect in love toward us, and shows us how to love even when it hurts or it doesn’t seem fair.

And this is relevant to every struggle. Sickness. Depression. Loss. Poverty. Every struggle we have is an opportunity to find the grace of God anew in the gospel. To do what we said last week, engage the struggle with the gospel.

But more than that, engaging our struggles with the gospel and experiencing its truth enables us to speak gospel hope into other people's struggles, to save the lost and to build up the church.

We have an all of life gospel. Good news for every part of your life and every struggle in your life. And as such, as Christians, we can walk through those struggles finding hope in the gospel, and on those grounds, we can speak the gospel into the lives of others.

Home Group Questions

When we read Lamentations 4 & 5 it is tempting to think of them as a backslide for Jeremiah. Chapters 4 and 5 echo many words, themes and ideas from the earlier chapters, especially the intense suffering of chapters 1-2, often quite specifically. In chapter 3 he sees hope, but in chapter 4 the struggle rears up again and the hope seems overwhelmed.

But that's not what happens here. If we note the pronouns in these chapters we see that for almost the first time the author is speaking collectively. He is speaking *with* the people, and in chapter 5 he is speaking with the people to God.

General Questions:

1. **How does the collective language of these two chapters change how we see what is happening here?**
2. I say that it is "*almost* the first time" he's spoken collectively, because the author did briefly speak collectively in 3:40-48, in contrast to the rest of chapter 3 which is quite personal. **Read those verses now and consider, how do they relate to chapters 4 & 5? How do these verses (particularly 3:40-42) look forward to what happens in the latter chapters?**
3. As we've noted, chapter 4 echoes a lot of the despair and struggle of the earlier chapters (read 4:10-11, 13). Why do you think this is? What is the author doing?
4. **Read 5:16-19. What is the false hope they have lost? What hope is he leading the people in praying for?** (note the contrast between the uncrowned people, 5:16, and the God who reigns forever, 5:19)
5. Considering all that, what do you think is happening in these chapters? How would you summarise the purpose of each one?
6. How would you summarise the relationship between these two chapters, where Jeremiah leads people through struggle toward hope, and the first 3 chapters of the book?

Application Questions:

It seems that in Jeremiah's unique situation he found that his experience of gospel hope in the face of current struggles enabled him to lead others through their struggles toward the same hope. Here we find a powerful principle for our own lives: our experience of gospel hope enables us to lead others to gospel hope. (Read 2 Cor 1:3-11. Consider the relationship between receiving and giving comfort. What is Paul's comfort?)

Last week we asked what struggles you are facing right now, in what ways you were able to speak the gospel hope of the person of God into them, and what false hopes (false gospels) you tend to run to when you struggle? Now we can take these questions the next step:

1. **What struggles are you exposed to in other people's lives?** (Both Christian and non-Christian.)
2. **How can you gently and lovingly speak gospel truth into those struggles?** (colleagues? Children? Family? Friends?) **How has your experience of gospel hope equipped you to give it to others?**

OK, it's time to stop asking questions and practice. We can talk and talk and talk about this. We can nod our heads and agree that speaking the gospel we have experienced in our own struggles into others' struggles is good, Godly and necessary. But the reality is that most of us probably aren't very good at it. Most of us haven't practiced speaking gospel hope into everyday struggles. So now, **take the rest of your time together for members of the group to share what they're struggling with. Then allow other members of your group to practice sharing the hope of the gospel into your situation.** This may be better done in small groups of 3-4 rather than the whole group together. It may also be better to split into single gender groups. (note to leaders: please, I know our tendency could be to skip this part. It could be awkward, it might be a struggle. Please don't skip it. It will almost certainly be an awkward struggle. That's because we're not good at this vital part of living out our faith. Embrace the struggle and allow people to take the awkward baby steps of learning to lovingly speak the gospel into each other's

struggles. If it looks like you're not going to get time for this on the night, cut out other questions. This is vital stuff that we need to start learning).

I'd encourage you to do this activity again on a regular basis in your small group. Practice the raw honesty of sharing your struggles with each other, and the growing experience of sharing the love of Christ with each other by shining gospel hope into each other's situations. Paul offers us one way to grow up into the likeness of Christ: "speaking the truth in love" (Ephesians 4:15). And he is quite clear, the truth is the gospel, "the truth is in Jesus" (Ephesians 4:21). Please help your groups and yourselves to grow in this vital community activity of sharing gospel truth into each other's lives.