

FIVE SMOOTH STONES – The Book of Lamentations

The Five Smooth Stones - 1 Samuel 17 – David goes to fight Goliath

³⁸ Then Saul dressed David in his own tunic. He put a coat of armor on him and a bronze helmet on his head. ³⁹ David fastened on his sword over the tunic and tried walking around, because he was not used to them.

“I cannot go in these,” he said to Saul, “because I am not used to them.” So he took them off. ⁴⁰ Then he took his staff in his hand, **chose five smooth stones from the stream**, put them in the pouch of his shepherd’s bag and, with his sling in his hand, approached the Philistine.

Resources:

Peterson, Eugene. *Five Smooth Stones for Pastoral Work*. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1992.

Shay, Jonathan. *Achilles in Vietnam: Combat trauma and the undoing of character*. Simon and Schuster, 2010.

The Books (Megilloth)

*The appropriateness of the Megilloth as documents for pastoral work is suggested by their use in Judaism, where we find that they are assigned readings at five of Israel's annual acts of worship. At these festivals God's people gathered from all the villages of Palestine and from across the roads of the diaspora **to remember who they were, to find the motivation and direction for continuing their lives of praise and obedience and faith, to orient their lives in the words and acts of God.** Which is to say, they came to worship. . . . Each reading had the effect of nourishing one aspect of the life of the people who were committed to live in covenant with their God. The scrolls were the applied wisdom of the pastoral office to a people who had come together to pay attention to their life together with God. Song of Songs was read at Passover, Ruth at Pentecost, Lamentations on the Ninth of Ab, Ecclesiastes at Tabernacles, and Esther at Purim. (Peterson, p. 14-15)*

Peterson describes each of these as follows:

Song of Songs - *The pastoral work of Prayer-Directing (learning how to love and pray in the context of salvation)*

Ruth - *The pastoral work of Story-Making (developing an identity as a person of faith in the context of God's covenant)*

Lamentations - *The pastoral work of Pain-Sharing (dealing with suffering in the context of redemptive judgment)*

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Ecclesiastes - The pastoral work of Nay-Saying (unmasking religious illusion and pious fraud in the context of providential blessing)

Esther - The pastoral work of Community-Building (becoming a celebrative community of faith in the environment of the world's hostility)

The book of Lamentations - The pastoral work of Pain-Sharing (dealing with suffering in the context of redemptive judgment)

*The biblical revelation neither explains nor eliminates suffering. It shows, rather, **God entering into the life of suffering humanity, accepting and sharing the suffering.** Scripture is not a lecture from God, pointing the finger at unfortunate sufferers and saying, "I told you so: here and here and here is where you went wrong; now you are paying for it." Nor is it a program from God providing, step by step, for the gradual elimination of suffering in a series of five-year plans (or, on a grander scale, dispensations). There is no progress from more to less suffering from Egyptian bondage to wilderness wandering, to kingless anarchy, to Assyrian siege, to Babylonian captivity, to Roman crucifixion, to Neronian / Domitian holocaust. The suffering is there, and **where the sufferer is, God is.** Surely he has borne our griefs and carried our sorrows. (Isaiah 53:4)*

The Text

Chapter 1 – A narrator describes what he sees of Jerusalem after her destruction by the Babylonians. Beginning in verse 11, Jerusalem herself describes her pitiable state

Chapter 2 – The narrator attributes Jerusalem's destruction to the Lord, but he is no longer objective – he begins to feel sympathy for Jerusalem's situation. Beginning in verse 20, he calls the Lord to attend to the consequences of His wrath.

Chapter 3 – The narrator describes his own suffering, along with Jerusalem's. He admits it has all been at the hand of God, but for good reason – the people have rejected His love. Beginning in verse 21, he comforts himself and others with a description of the Lord's faithful compassion in the midst of their suffering.

Chapter 4 – The narrator describes in more detail the suffering of the people in Jerusalem. He's a little more relaxed emotionally after chapter 3, and can observe the people's situation a bit more objectively.

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Chapter 5 – *The fifth chapter is a prayer: there have been prayers earlier which have intruded into the lament, but they have not been sustained. . . . It departs in three ways from the previous laments:*

*It is shorter - only twenty-two lines this time;
it is not strictly an acrostic, the a,b,c sequence being dropped . . . ;
And it leaves off the emotionally charged kinah (dirge-like) meter for the smoother, balanced three/three beat of ordinary prayer (Peterson, p. 121-122)*

The Context - Tisha B'av

<https://youtu.be/vAoSODDghE8>

The Form

Each of the first four chapters is in the form of an **acrostic** - each verse begins with each successive letter of the Hebrew alphabet. (Chapter 5 is not an acrostic, but it has 22 verses, to echo the 22 letters in the Hebrew alphabet).

Each of the verses in chapters 1 & 2 have three lines; each of the verses in chapters 3 & 4 have two lines; each of the verses in chapter 5 have one line.

Chapter 3 is three times as long as the others (66 verses).

In such ways does the acrostic function:

- **It organizes grief**, patiently going over the ground, step by step, insisting on the significance of each detail of suffering.
- **The pain is labeled** - defined and objectified.
- Arranged in the acrostic structure the **suffering no longer obsesses**, no longer controls.
- The rough rhythm of the *kinah* (dirge) meter expressing the inner anarchy is **patiently arranged in an order** that becomes a work of art.

*The acrostic form of Lamentations demonstrates a pastoral style that **develops detailed sympathy** and at the same time **insists on a termination**. (Peterson, p. 122)*

Exercise / Homework: Write four Alphabet/Acrostic prayers:

1. A prayer of praise / thanksgiving
2. A prayer of intercession
3. A prayer of lament for a loss or for suffering
4. A prayer of lament about the Coronavirus pandemic

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History

The fall and destruction of Jerusalem are described in [2 Kings 25](#)

*In Lamentations the feelings are intense but the facts are firm. Each feeling is riveted to a fact, which means that **the suffering at no time is allowed to become mere feeling**. The anguish is never given an independent existence. (Peterson, p. 125)*

The function of 2 Kings 25 in relation to Lamentations is not to explain but to locate suffering, for if suffering is severed from historical data, it diffuses, filling up the room like gas. (Peterson, p. 125)

Note: In “trauma-informed” care, caregivers are taught to ask the sufferer “what happened?” rather than “what’s wrong?”

Anger

*Life is invaded by brute, dumb, and demonic forces. There is no accounting for them. They are irrational and unpredictable - but they are there and must be put up with. **Lamentations is a distillation of the biblical view that when we suffer, we experience something intensely personal - the anger of God. God's anger, among the Hebrews, was always evidence of his concern.** (Peterson, p. 130)*

*This anger is addressed in the most personal of relationships, prayer. **Prayer is suffering's best result.** In prayer, God's anger is neither sentimentally glossed over nor cynically debunked, but seized as a lever to pry open the door of redemption. **The sufferer, by praying, does not ask God to think well of him or her, but asks that God will enact redemption**, working "fruits meet for repentance" through Jesus Christ who suffered and died for all. (Peterson, p. 132)*

*Our very pain is a sign of God's remembrance of us, for **it would be much worse if we were left in ghastly isolation.** (Peterson, p. 132)*

Exercise / Homework: Write an Alphabet/Acrostic prayer about something you're experiencing that might be a result of God's anger.

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Dignity

*Lamentations provides demonstrations for **the ennoblement of suffering**. It **faces** suffering, **encounters** suffering. It doesn't **do** anything about it. It doesn't give an answer. It doesn't provide a remedy. **By taking suffering seriously it gives significance to it.** (Peterson, p. 141)*

***Nothing**, in the long run, **does more to demean the person who suffers** than to condescendingly busy oneself in fixing him or her up, and **nothing can provide more meaning to suffering** than a resolute and quiet faithfulness in taking the suffering seriously and offering a companionship through the time of waiting for the morning. (Peterson, p. 141)*

Exercise / Homework:

1. How did your parents respond to your demonstrations of pain and suffering when you were a child? Did they say things like "stop crying, or I'll give you something to cry about" or "you're not really hurt much at all – I've seen worse"? What did they say or do? What did you do for your kids?
2. Think about how you usually respond to a person who is suffering (maybe an illness? Maybe a loss / grief?). What do you usually say to them? Does what you say demonstrate that you take their suffering seriously, or does it minimize or try to "fix" their suffering? What could you say / do instead?

Community

*Lamentations is communal. Suffering is made into a community act. . . . **When biblical people wept, they wept with their friends.** (Peterson p. 142)*

***When private grief is integrated into communal lament, several things take place.** For one thing **the act of suffering develops significance.** . . . The community votes with its tears that there is suffering that is worth weeping over. . . . Further, **community participation insures a human environment.** . . . When the community joins in the lament, sanction is given for the expression of loss -- **the outpouring of emotion is legitimized in such a way as to provide for catharsis and then renewal.** (Peterson p. 143)*

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Note: Moral injury is the suffering people experience when we are in high stakes situations, things go wrong, and harm results that challenges our deepest moral codes and ability to trust in others or ourselves. The harm may be something we did, something we witnessed, or something that was done to us. It results in moral emotions such as shame, guilt, self-condemnation, outrage, and sorrow. (<https://www.voa.org/moral-injury-war-inside>)

"Time and safety to mourn were built into ancient warfare and were absent in Vietnam." (Shay, p. 58)

"In Vietnam, when the corpse disappeared from the battlefield the thread of griefwork snapped at its origin." (Shay, p. 59)

"Thwarted, uncommunalized grief is a major reason why there are so many severe, long-term psychological injuries from the Vietnam War."

[HERE>>](#) is a brief video that gives "A Working Definition of Moral Injury"

Exercise / Homework:

1. How does the experience of the people in the Book of Lamentations echo this definition of "moral injury"?
2. How has the COVID-19 situation challenged your own moral code and your ability to trust in others, or even yourself?
3. As you think about the COVID-19 situation over the last several months, which of these emotions have you felt or experienced (even a little bit), and in what ways?
 - a. Shame
 - b. Guilt
 - c. Self-condemnation
 - d. Outrage
 - e. Sorrow
4. Who is in your community that is helping you to legitimize and grieve these feelings, losses, and issues?

