

Am I Doing This Right? What Lamentations Teaches Us about Grieving



by TODD STRYD

As most of us know all too well, grief is an inevitable part of life. Death, decay, and disappointments litter the human experience. It might be the loss of a loved one, the death of a dream, or failures and mistakes that change the direction of our lives. If these disappointments and tragedies haven't happened to you yet, they almost certainly will.

As Christians, we believe there is something unnatural about these occasions. We feel deep in our bones that brokenness, evil, suffering, and tragedy are not the way it is supposed to be. Therefore, grieving and lamentation are appropriate responses to such unnatural happenings. But even though we know this in our heads, we can still feel insecure about how it looks in our lives.

Am I Grieving Right?

Even when we come to terms with the appropriateness of grief, much of the grieving process can still feel foreign and uncertain. For example, most of us struggle to know what is genuinely helpful or most socially

Todd Stryd (MDiv, PsyD) is a faculty member and the counseling coordinator at CCEF. He is the author of several JBC articles and the minibook Schizophrenia: A Compassionate Approach.

appropriate when coming alongside those who are grieving. Be it individual differences, cultural norms, or lack of experience, we persevere on what we're supposed to do and say and internally rehearse how to best support a loved one or acquaintance in their loss. When the time comes, we stumble through it, hoping we did it "right."

We even wonder about our own grief. Simply put, we experience feelings of uncertainty and pressure about how to grieve "correctly." In a peculiar sense, it is probably because it can feel like so much is at stake. Does my reaction say something deep about who I am? Does it reveal the truest part of me? Am I really a coldhearted jerk? A calloused monster? Or maybe I'm an overemotional basket case and it reveals that I'm faithless or emotionally immature. If so much is at stake in my grieving, and if it threatens to expose the true me, I want to do every-

Even when we come to terms with the appropriateness of grief, much of the grieving process can still feel foreign and uncertain.

thing I can to do it right. Even in the midst of horrendous loss and difficulty, we still instinctively long to know that we're okay, that we're not failing at grieving. Whether I didn't cry at the funeral or I was a weepy mess, is that okay? Or does that mean my faith is weak? Or perhaps it's been three months and I just can't shake how I feel. Am I supposed to have moved on by now?

This article centers around answering questions such as these, and attempts to follow the witness of Scripture into the details and depths of the grief experience. I will build my argument primarily from the book of Lamentations but will begin by recognizing the cultural air that we breathe and its influence on our default understanding of grief.

Kübler-Ross: Grieving Simplified

The operating assumption of a Christian worldview is that Scripture has something to say about all aspects of human experience. This holds true for the experience of grief. Scripture provides a foundation for understanding what grief is supposed to look like. While the bulk of this article will look to answer these questions about the right way to grieve, it's also important to consider how Christian thinking has been influenced

(even unknowingly) by the cultural ideas and opinions that surround us. Considering competing ideas and influences makes us aware of unbiblical assumptions and convictions that need to be appropriately critiqued and questioned or altogether discarded. Consider for yourself: In what ways have your thoughts and understanding of grief been shaped by the voices and systems of our culture?

Not surprisingly, the field of psychology is the most prominent contributor in experiences of grief. The insecurity and skepticism about grief has led psychologists to explore the ins and outs of the experience. Many have worked to quantify and qualify grief within models or stages. This was done most notably in the 1960s with the work of Elisabeth Kübler-Ross. While she was not the first or the last practitioner in the field to study the grief experience, her work has had the most cultural impact.¹ In her work with the terminally ill, Kübler-Ross attempted to develop a model that identified the stages people commonly experience when faced with loss. As the model expanded beyond terminal illness, it became widely used and popularized and provided some orientation for grieving individuals and the professionals working with them in these difficult times.

The model consists of five stages.

1. Denial: the individual may refuse to accept that the loss has occurred, or they may minimize the impact of the loss.
2. Anger: the individual may feel angry at themselves, others, or even the person who has died for leaving them behind.
3. Bargaining: the individual may try to bargain with a higher power or with themselves to undo the loss.
4. Depression: the individual may experience feelings of sadness, loneliness, and hopelessness as they come to terms with the loss.
5. Acceptance: in this final stage, the individual may reach a point where they can accept the reality of the loss and move forward with their life.

1. Here are a few examples of lesser-known attempts to either help or codify the grief process: Colin Murray Parkes developed a theory of grief that emphasized the importance of attachment in the grieving process. Margaret Stroebe and Henk Schut proposed a dual process model of grief that emphasized balancing the expression of grief with the need to continue functioning in daily life. J. William Worden presented a model of grief that outlined the most important tasks of mourning.

While the field of psychology has come to recognize that the emotional experience of grief can be quite variable and manifest itself in some common patterns and expressions, Kübler-Ross's model fails in two regards.

First, as much as Kübler-Ross's model attempts to avoid being prescriptive, the stages invariably communicate a particular criteria and process for acceptable grieving. Within her system, the experiential palette of grief is reduced to only five primary colors.

Second, and most importantly, her model is stuck in the horizontal. There is more to be done with grief than simply identifying its form and waiting until it runs its course. Kübler-Ross fails to consider how grief is located in a godward universe. Grief doesn't exist in a closed system. God tells us something about our grief and listens as we speak back. Christian grief doesn't just generically move on or come to an acceptance. It lives before God, rests in an eternal and indestructible hope, and seeks God's kingdom.

Christian grief lives before God, rests in an eternal and indestructible hope, and seeks God's kingdom.

So even though the endeavors of Kübler-Ross and others like her have provided a better understanding of the common manifestations of grief, as Christians we have something better and more comprehensive to look to and be influenced by.

Lamentations: Grieving Exemplified

Thankfully, God has not left his people without hope or help in this regard. Scripture offers us divine guidance in the midst of these nagging insecurities and competing explanations. God's people are offered perspective with the Psalms, the narrative of the Old and New Testaments, and even the pithy guidance of Proverbs. While these all contribute to a full-orbed biblical understanding of grief and grieving, one resource sheds a special light on the reality of human lament: the book of Lamentations.

This collection of lament poems mourns the destruction of the temple and Jerusalem. It gives the reader a biblical example of God-fearing grief. It expresses the grief and despair of the people of Israel in the aftermath of the Babylonian conquest. As the fullest expression of lament in

the Bible, we have a reference point by which we can reliably compare and contrast our own experience with a biblical one.

As our divine frame of reference, I will emphasize three observations and three consolations that are relevant to both Christian ministry and Christian comfort. I'll begin with the observations and follow with the consolations.

Three observations about lament. We can learn a lot about lament by studying its form.

1. *Lament has two aspects.* This observation is an obvious one, once you start to look for it. In broad terms, Lamentations can be separated into two types of laments: *crying out* and *looking for hope*.²

The most substantial part of Lamentations can be described as crying out and is simply the expression of the author's emotion and distress. It can take the form of recalling, complaining, pleading, and protesting. Jeremiah articulates his anger and anguish and then expounds on and illustrates them.³ One such example is Lamentations 2:11.

My eyes fail from weeping,
I am in torment within;
my heart is poured out on the ground
because my people are destroyed,
because children and infants faint
in the streets of the city.

Jeremiah's cry captures the incomprehensibility of what seems to be God's divine forgetfulness of his people and his covenant. We see Jeremiah crying out from the beginning chapter to the last verse of the book. These are his final words.

Why do you always forget us?
Why do you forsake us so long?
Restore us to yourself, LORD, that we may return;
renew our days as of old

2. We see these two parts of lament in Psalm 77. The language of Psalm 77 parallels the language of Lamentations 3 as a communal prayer that expresses the nature of God's relationship with his people in the midst of tragedy. Verses 7–8 parallel Lamentations 3:18–21 by crying out, while verses 11–12 parallel Lamentations 3 verses 21 and 24 by looking for hope.

3. The authorship of the book is traditionally ascribed to the prophet Jeremiah.

unless you have utterly rejected us
and are angry with us beyond measure. (Lam 5:20–22)

These raw expressions with their excruciating commentary reveal Jeremiah's pain and sorrow in agonizing detail.

The second component of lament in the book of Lamentations is looking for hope. In the midst of unspeakable tragedy, Jeremiah steels himself against the flood of despair by calling to mind God's love and character. Here is an excerpt from chapter 3.

But this I call to mind,
and therefore I have hope:
The steadfast love of the LORD never ceases;
his mercies never come to an end;
they are new every morning;
great is your faithfulness.
“The LORD is my portion,” says my soul,
“therefore I will hope in him.” (Lam 3:21–24)⁴

Jeremiah props himself up against the weight of this tragedy by leaning into the faithfulness of God and his covenant love for his people. As a result, this part of Lamentations offers the reader a privileged window into Jeremiah's profession of faith and trust.

2. *The two aspects of lament are disproportionate.* The second observation about the book of Lamentations is that the sections of crying out and of looking for hope are unbalanced. Of the five poems, the lion's share of them are about crying out while a shocking minority of the content is about looking for hope. The reorientation and redirection portion of this biblical lament is at best ten verses out of the entire 154. It's important to notice that the Holy Scriptures don't shy away from this fact! God's ordained example of human lament is intentionally structured in this way. This is not a mistake. God means to communicate something important to us about the typical experience of grieving. In our grief, our recalling, complaining, pleading, and protesting will likely eclipse our experience of calling to mind God's faithfulness. This

4. Lamentations 3:19–24 has much in common with Job's radical proclamation in Job 13:15, “Though he slay me, I will hope in him.”

imbalance is not only permissible, but according to Lamentations, it's an acceptable and expected feature of the grieving process.

3. *Lament has a center.* Even though the two aspects of Jeremiah's lament are unbalanced, there is nevertheless a clear center of the book—his act of looking for hope in chapter 3, verses 19–24.

We know this because Lamentations uses a classic, chiasmic literary device to highlight this fact.⁵ By using this chiasmic structure, the format of Lamentations prepares and guides the reader to engage with the most important part of the book. The author purposely chose this arrangement to communicate that finding hope *is* the center of his message. While it's an extremely small section of the book, these verses are the midpoint of the chiasm and are what Lamentations is best known for.

Our grieving can have an unbalanced distribution of crying out and looking for hope. It does not need to be neatly divided up or equally portioned out.

Three consolations about grieving in faith. The book of Lamentations is helpful precisely because it gives us a reference point for our own grieving. Each of the three observations in the previous

section flows directly to a particular consolation, and these consolations, in turn, offer a poignant answer to the question: Am I doing this right? Because Lamentations is a divinely inspired example of grieving, we can use it as our guide.

Observation number one (above) leads to consolation number one, observation number two leads to consolation number two, and so forth.

1. *Your grieving can have more than one aspect to it.* This first consolation is obvious: broadly speaking, grieving is not an either/or experience. We're not forced into picking between either a crushed despondency and its paralyzing ruminations or a strident, hope-seeking posture. Christian

5. The structure of a chiasm is best expressed through a series of letters that represent particular ideas and their repetition. For example, the letters ABXBA refer to two ideas that are communicated (A and B) and then repeated in reverse order (B and A) with a third and central idea (X) inserted into the middle. By virtue of its position, the insertion is emphasized. This chiasmic structure is true of both the overall construction of Lamentations as well as the arrangement of chapter 3.

grief includes both. While varying in the details and the arrangements, our grieving will mean we both cry out and look for hope. *Our grieving can look like the grieving of Lamentations.*

2. *Your grieving can be disproportionate and unbalanced.* This second consolation expands the boundaries of our grieving even further. Not only can it have more than one aspect, but these aspects can be out of proportion to one another. Lamentations teaches us that our grieving can have an unbalanced distribution of crying out and looking for hope. It does not need to be neatly divided up or equally portioned out. Much of grieving is overwhelmed by the what-was, the what-ifs, and the what-might-have-beens. Alongside the expressions of “it’s not fair” and “how can it be?” Christian grieving will also proclaim a radical trust in a faithful God. *Our grieving can look like the grieving of Lamentations.*

“Doing it right” just means a Christian’s lament will entail both raw human expression and genuine godward struggle.

3. *If you’re looking for hope, your grieving is Christian.* This third consolation rounds out the answer to the question: Am I doing this right? Simply put, where one’s grief includes the God of the Scriptures, there you will find Christian grief. What makes it Christian is not a certain sequence or a particular distribution of emotions. Rather, what makes one’s grief Christian is the fact that it contains the act of looking for hope.

This is Jesus’ very point in Luke 17:6 as he speaks about the power of the mustard seed despite its small size. The emphasis is not on the size of one’s faith but its mere presence. Similarly, whether that faith is .01% or 50%, it is this faithful looking for hope in the God of the Bible and his promises in Jesus Christ that is the unique distinctive of Christian grief. This, and this alone, makes our lament Christian. This is Paul’s point in 1 Thessalonians 4:13 when he says, “You do not grieve like the rest of mankind, who have no hope.” It’s not about obtaining a certain quantity or quality of looking for hope. Rather, it’s about the mere presence of hope, a hope based on the covenantal faithfulness of a loving God, the

defeat of sin and death, and the confidence in an eternal future. *Our grieving can look like the grieving of Lamentations.*

Our Ultimate Consolation

The most important observation in our Christian faith is that the person of Jesus changes *everything*. This is why Paul says he counts all things as a loss for the sake of knowing Jesus (Phil 3:8) and claims to know nothing other than Christ and him crucified (1 Cor 2:2). Jesus leaves no part of our lives and experience untouched, and that includes how we grieve. In this respect, Christians can enthusiastically affirm that one's commitment to Jesus Christ turns their world upside down (Acts 17:6).

This central observation about Christ is also our ultimate consolation. As we venture into the darkness of grief, we take consolation that while we are not given a predefined process that maps out the progressions of our lamentation, we are given something better. We are given the person of Jesus Christ. The reason that looking for hope is part of our grief and lament is because of Jesus. Here are a few particulars as to why Christ is our ultimate consolation and hope.

- Jesus has conquered death, and Christians are set free from both the fear of death and its sting (Rom 8:2; 1 Cor 15:56).
- We have a personal relationship with the conqueror of death and the harbinger of life eternal. Our hope is not in an abstract idea or an intellectual proposition, but it is connected to an actual relationship and a real person (John 14:17–18).
- Jesus understands our grief. As Hebrews 2:17 and 4:14–16 so wonderfully proclaim, we do not have a high priest who is unable to sympathize with our weakness, because he was tempted in every way when he took on human flesh. He both understands us and has compassion on us. Not only do we have a personal relationship with the victorious conqueror of death, but he also understands what we face. He was “a man of sorrows and acquainted with grief” (Isa 53:3). He knows what it means to suffer the traumatic effects of death and sin. He understands us.

Jesus Christ changes everything. He is our ultimate consolation. There is no better help in the face of death, tragedy, and loss. Because of who

Jesus is, we are not alone, we are not powerless, and we are not hopeless. With the Son of God in the picture, we can face our grief.

Grieving Well

While there are no checklists or instruction manuals for Christian grieving, we are given examples, reference points, and even certainties. And while every person and every situation demands a unique grief experience, we are assured of its typical composition—a personalized arrangement of crying out and looking for hope. While grieving and lament will always have a variety of expressions and behaviors, they will still find their place within these two forms of expression. Doing it right does not mean following a prescribed sequence or progression. It does not mean having to walk through a particular list of emotions or behaviors.

From the paradigm of Jeremiah in Lamentations and the apostle Paul in his epistles, “doing it right” just means a Christian’s lament will entail both raw human expression and genuine godward struggle. God doesn’t shoehorn our lament into a precise formula, a restrictive model, or a progression of stages. He gives us the freedom to grieve naturally and genuinely as long as somewhere along the way, in whatever quantity or quality, our lament is arrested by a hope in Jesus that sets it apart from “the rest of mankind” (1 Thess 4:13).

The Journal of Biblical Counseling

(ISSN: 1063-2166) is published by:

Christian Counseling & Educational Foundation

1803 East Willow Grove Avenue

Glenside, PA 19038

www.ccef.org

Copyright © 2023 CCEF

All rights reserved.

For permission to copy or distribute JBC articles, please go
to: ccef.org/copyright-permissions.