

Book Review-*Prophetic Lament*

Soong- Chan Rah, author of *Prophetic Lament: A Call for Justice in Troubled Times* leads his readers in a detailed analysis of the message found in the biblical book of Lamentations and the lessons that can be learned from it.

Rah argues that Lamentations shows the way God managed the nation of Israel's disobedience, and how he showed them the way to their full restoration. That restoration laid squarely in their complete surrender and trust to Yahweh's lordship and supremacy through a sincere brokenness of heart and will—a true lament. In the prophet's own words, "Let us examine our ways and test them, and let us return to the LORD. My eyes will flow unceasingly, without relief, until the LORD looks down from heaven and sees" (Lamentation 3:40, 49-50).

Prophetic Lament shows Yahweh's work on a nation in despair. The Hebrew nation in turn, needed to be engaged with God in the process of full retribution and complete transformation. Similarly, God is involved in the affairs of 21st Century individuals and communities, and they need to be engaged with him in the sincere recognition that God is sovereign, holy, and awesome. They are to lament for their sinful ways. This lament is to be individually as well as corporately. The entire community engaged in true surrender. Sadly, the hardened hearts of individuals often refuse to surrender to God's lordship in their lives. This brings about God's judgements and much suffering to individuals, entire communities, and countries. Injustice, then, becomes prevalent as individuals selfishly search for advantage over others. As a result, communities become impoverished, lack of trust prevails, and a culture of decay becomes the new normal. The book reminds us that the church, as the body of Christ, must help individuals and communities turn their hearts to God in lament for their crooked ways, and wait in the Lord for renewal.

The church in The United States of America, however, has often abandoned the challenging sections of communities and fled to the suburbs in order to continue their religious practices isolated from those whom they consider different from themselves. Recently, though, some have moved from their locations to urban areas, and have tried to implement their mindset there.

According to Rah, the current church's approach to dealing with community's issues has not worked. He argues, "Lament in the Bible is a liturgical response to the reality of suffering and engages God in the context of pain and trouble."¹ The church must participate fully in the ministry of reconciliation, helping communities look to God for restoration through a sincere lament and repentance ... instead of coming with a particular set of skills to try to fix the community's problems, the church must come alongside individuals and communities at large to beg God for his mercy and grace. Rah, states, "The fullness of life that God has in store for us requires the intersection of suffering with celebration." He also added, "Lament and praise must go hand in hand."²

In his book, Rah argues, "The American church avoids lament. The power of lament is minimized and the underlying narrative of suffering that requires lament is lost. [The] loss of lament in the American church reflects a serious theological deficiency."³

Prophetic Lament is divided into five chapters, which correlate with the five chapters in the biblical book of Lamentations.

Lamentations 1

¹ Rah, Soong-Chan. 2015. *Prophetic Lament*. Downers Grove, Illinois: InterVarsity Press, 21

² *Ibid.*, 23, 199.

³ *Ibid.*, 22, 24.

Chapter one introduces readers to the fact that the Israeli community had experienced the loss of their way of life. They had turned their backs on God. The prophet grieved, “The LORD is righteous, yet I rebelled against his command. Listen, all you peoples; look upon my suffering. My young men and maidens have gone into exile (Lamentations 1:18). Jerusalem had been destroyed, and many of its citizens had been taken captive into Babylon. Now, the community needed to live as captives of another nation. Theirs was a tragic reality. In the midst of their struggle and suffering, they needed to examine their lives, repent, and wait on Yahweh for justice. They needed to turn to God with sincere and broken hearts and lament before his presence, recognizing that their restoration would only come in his time and by his faithfulness. In Rah’s words, “The fall of a once-great city provides the background for the emotional depth in Lamentations.” Moreover, “The very real pain of the suffering people is heard.”⁴ The prophet counseled the nation, “. . . cry out to the Lord. O wall of the Daughter of Zion, let your tears flow like a river day and night; give yourself no relief, your eyes no rest. Arise, cry out in the night, as the watches of the night begin; pour out your heart like water in the presence of the Lord. Lift up your hands to him for the lives of your children, who faint from hunger at the head of every street” (Lamentations 2:18-19).

Lamentations 2

The second chapter speaks of the people who, in pain for their predicament, turned to God for answers. They suffered greatly. They lamented before God for their condition. Moreover, they recognized that God is in-charge. In this second chapter, “God emerges as the main subject...all of the actions against Jerusalem are attributed to God” (p. 73).

⁴ Ibid., 32, 73.

Here Mr. Rah challenges the reader to remember that the righteousness and holiness of God does not allow him to ignore sin. God's righteousness will pay the due retribution for transgressions. On the same token, however, God righteous judgements will provoke him to bring justice and healing as well. Rah asserts, "God's mercy is understood in light of God's justice. Not only has God shown his faithfulness, but also he has demonstrated his sovereignty."⁵ "Because of the LORD's great love we are not consumed, for his compassions never fail. They are new every morning; great is your faithfulness. I say to myself, "The LORD is my portion; therefore I will wait for him" (Lamentations 3:22-24).

Lamentations 3

This chapter "reveals the heart of a prophet who offers a personal lament on behalf of the community ... [and] a personal reflection revealing a connection to the community's experience"⁶ (p. 119). In his explanation, Rah suggests that, since the sin of individuals has communitywide repercussions, individuals, as well as the community at large, is responsible of confessing their sin, and sincerely lamenting before God for the blatant disregard of his demands.

"Shame arises out of a corporate context and one's relationship to that context. Therefore, shame is not absolved by simply confessing sin; it requires a transformation before the community and accountability within that context."⁷

It is here where we begin to see hope in the writings of the prophet. After much suffering and lament, the writer expresses hope in who God is. God's righteousness would not permit the suffering to continue forever. In recognition of full surrender and sincere grief and lament, God will remember his covenant.

⁵ *ibid.*, 105

⁶ *ibid.*, 119.

⁷ *ibid.*, 125.

In the words of Mr. Rah, “Spiritual renewal emerges as God’s people engage in a corporate confession of sin, and sincere repentance moves the community toward a changed and renewed life.”⁸

Lamentations 4

Lamentations four “deepens our understanding of God’s value system. Reminds us that God does not respect what we respect. Our concerns are not God’s concerns. Our values are not his values.”⁹

“Through the full expression of suffering by the city, we are given glimmers of hope—not hope in human abilities to fix the city, but in God’s faithfulness to restore the city.”

This chapter “reminds us to persevere, even as our energy fades. The conditions of suffering persist and so we must persist.”¹⁰ “For men are not cast off by the Lord forever. Though he brings grief, he will show compassion, so great is his unfailing love” (Lamentations 3:31-32).

Lamentations 5

Lamentations chapter five shows the signs of a community lamenting. Here the author reminds his readers that the importance of lament cannot be underestimated, it must run its course. Lament gives a voice to those who suffer.

In Mr. Rah’s views, lament gives a unique opportunity to suffering people to share their thoughts, struggles, and injustices that they are experiencing. In today’s America, however, the church has chosen to mute the voices of lament in their midst.

Book Reflection

⁸ Ibid., 131.

⁹ Ibid., 139.

¹⁰ Ibid., 141, 146.

The book *Prophetic Lament* contains a crucial reminder to today's Christian community as well as the community at large. The church must consider the injustices that minorities are suffering today. Instead of muting their voices, the church should serve as a forum to allow those voices to be heard.

The community at large is also called to recognize that the God of covenant is also the God of justice and righteousness. The community is called to repent and recognize the sovereignty of God. They are called to change their ways of sin and injustice, and lament for their crooked ways.

Although the author has made valuable points, he also has focused much in a bias point of view. Namely, the Caucasian church leadership is at fault, if not all the time, at most times.

For instance, he writes to America's Evangelicals, "Stop wasting your time, energy, and money on hipster Christianity in whatever nomenclature it operates under these days. Listen and learn from your Native American, African American, Latino/a brothers and sisters."¹¹ His assumption being that these groups have the answer to the current issues that communities are facing. The dilemma with this is, however, that he is suggesting that they have the answer, something that the "whites" also argue.

People are unique and beautiful regardless the culture, background, ethnicity, language, experience, and idiosyncrasies. The difficulty is, however, that in far too many occasions, one group forces itself above the other, or attempts to convince others, that following their way will be the best way. This is obviously a source of much animosity in communities today. However, it is something that Mr. Rah advocates in his book.

¹¹ Ibid., 138

One wonders what a community would look like if all turned their eyes upon Jesus. Not looking side to side, but purposefully looking to Jesus, lamenting the lack of love for God and for each other, lamenting the daily mistreatment inflicting on others, and waiting on God for his redemption and restoration. Our world would be a much better place.

Bibliography

Rah, Soong-Chan. 2015. *Prophetic Lament*. Downers Grove, Illinois: InterVarsity Press.