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## “New Every Morning”

### The Mercies of God in a Time of Angst

#### **Introduction**

If you'd like to turn to Lamentations 1, that's where we'll be in about 10 minutes, but first: Every morning, I have a habit, an admittedly bad one, of scanning several news websites to find out what I missed during the night, and whether or not the world ended while I was asleep. One site I always check is BBC World, as though incredibly biased, it presents far more information about stories outside of the US than our national networks. A few days ago, while briefly perusing BBC, I noticed an article lower on the screen titled, "How to use anxiety to your advantage." In the article, the author makes a case that anxiety is something useful – not a character flaw meant to be fixed, but a useful tool to help us thrive by making us more creative and efficient. In one of the opening paragraphs, the author says this: *“Today, we seem to be living in the age of anxiety. Google Trends shows that searches for the word anxiety have increased over 300% since 2004. Anxiety is on our minds, with good reason. As much as 31% of the US population will experience an anxiety disorder at one point in their lives, which can range from generalized anxiety disorder to panic disorder and social anxiety disorder – which is one of the most common types.”*

As I had already intended on addressing the topic of anxiety, I did some more internet searches using the word in different contexts. What I found was an endless supply of stories and articles from every possible publication or news outlet referencing anxiety in every possible context, all posted within the last few days.” This is something I didn't need to be informed about, as I've seen and to a degree, experienced, a massive, intensely dramatic spike in profound, life-altering anxiousness all around me, especially in places I've worked, and especially post-March 2020.

But just for the purpose of illustration, here's a quick list of where we're at in general: The Irish Times - *‘Children are suffering and getting worse’: Principals’ alarm at rise of anxiety among primary schoolchildren;*“ The Irish Examiner: *Post-Covid anxiety threatens to overwhelm children, parents, and schools* (insert bad joke about Ireland), The Telegraph - *Mental health issues like depression and anxiety on the rise globally*, (this is from a few weeks ago) NPR - *What's Really Causing America's Mental Health Crisis?* (first sentence) “This week the U.S. Preventive Services Task Force announced recommendations that doctors screen all patients under 65 for anxiety.” Let's try one that hits closer to home: Forbes Health -*Sharp Increases In Winter Heating Costs Cause Worry, Anxiety To Spike.*

## Defining Anxiety

We don't often do a lot of thinking about our own language, so let's use "anxiety" as an excuse to do so: the adjective, "anxious" appears around the 1620s and was defined as "greatly troubled by uncertainties." This word was derived, as many of our words are, from a Latin word, *anxius*, which means as "solicitous, uneasy, troubled in mind." I won't dive any deeper than that, but I will mention that there is a pre-Latin prefix, "angh," that appears in a host of languages that basically means to "constrict," "tighten," "suffocate," "squeeze" or "narrow." From that prefix, "angh," we get "anger," "anguish," "angst," and of course, "anxiety." When you think of the physical manifestation of anxiety, you do find you immediately think of constriction and suffocation, a narrowing of things, a lack of escape and panic setting in. That is reflected in the root word, and that can help us think about what we mean when we say "anxiety."

Next, we'll turn to the Old Testament see look at Hebrew words that can be translated as anxiety, or something close to anxiety: Psalm 94:19 says, "When my anxious thoughts multiply within me, Your comfort delights my soul." What's translated as "anxious" in the NASB is the word *sarapim*, which is a noun that means "disquieting or anxious thoughts." Two words that appear in the book of Daniel are *paam*, which occurs when Nebuchadnezzar has his disturbing dream ("The king said to them, 'I had a dream, and my spirit is anxious to understand the dream'"), and later the word *kaw'raw*, when Daniel has his visions: "As for me, Daniel, my spirit within me was anxious, and the visions of my head alarmed me." *Paam* is sometimes translated as "stir" or "impel," and *kaw'raw* means most closely in English, "distressed." A more familiar use of what's translated as "anxiety" is found in Proverbs 12:25, "Anxiety in a person's heart weighs it down, But a good word makes it glad." Strong's concordance notes that the range of this word can include "carefulness, fear, heaviness, sorrow, and obviously, anxiety." There are several other words, but we could basically boil them down to "fear, worry, dread, uncertainty and anxiety."

There are several familiar passages in the New Testament that use a word translated as "anxiety," and each one is using the same Greek word, *mer-im-nah'-o*. Some passages: Matthew 6:25 "For this reason I say to you, do not be worried about your life, as to what you will eat or what you will drink; nor for your body, as to what you will put on. Is life not more than food, and the body more than clothing?" Matthew 13:22, "And the one sown with seed among the thorns, this is the one who hears the word, and the anxiety of the world and the deceitfulness of wealth choke the word, and it becomes unfruitful." Philippians 4:6, "Do not be anxious about anything, but in everything by prayer and pleading with thanksgiving let your requests be made known to God." 1 Peter 5:7 "having cast all your anxiety on Him, because He cares about you." All of these passages use *mer-im-nah'-o*, a word that, similarly to our understanding in English, has a physical root. It derives from the word *merizō*, which means to "divide into parts." So the one who is anxious is divided, separated, not whole because they are fractured by cares, concerns and worries.

Just as an aside, a note about the two passages that are most looked at to indicate that anxiety can be sinful, Philippians 4:6, "Do not be anxious about anything..." and Matthew 6:25

“For this reason I say to you, do not be worried about your life...” In Greek, in both passages, anxiety is a verb, not an adjective, as we tend to think in English. You could almost translate the command, “don’t be anxious” as “don’t fall to pieces.” So we don’t live without concern, as there are plenty of examples of our Biblical models, including Jesus, being concerned and even experiencing dread (Garden of Gethsemane). Paul even says in 2 Corinthians 11, “I have been in labor and hardship, through many sleepless nights, in hunger and thirst, often without food, in cold and exposure. Apart from such external things, there is the daily pressure on me of concern for all the churches.” The key, instead, is to not be overcome by our worries, cares, concerns, stresses, and anxieties.

Now, I realize that that was a lot, and hopefully you found some of it interesting, but you probably didn’t need most of that because you already know what anxiety is. More than likely you’ve felt the constricting, suffocating feeling of dread that comes with great stress or anxiety at some point in your life, or maybe it’s a daily struggle. In fact, I’d say there’s very few deep-level conversations I’ve had in recent memory which didn’t touch upon either my own, or the other person’s, profound, debilitating anxiety. But 2022 anxiety is quite a bit different than 2019 anxiety. I would make the case to you this morning that we are living during a mass anxiety event. Sociologically, I think there are many major contributing factors for the overwhelming angst of our age, and we could spend all day talking about them, but I want to focus on the one that marks the difference between many personal cases of anxiety and a generalized, mass anxiety. And that, as the English definition of anxiety reflects, is uncertainty. We do not live in the final gasp of breath of our culture and civilization as we said for many years, we now live in its free fall into darkness and chaos, and we are utterly unsure of what information, institutions, and leaders we can put any confidence in. By way of practical example, there are some of you sitting here this morning that wonder sometimes if you’ll be able to heat your home this winter – not just afford it, but whether the energy to do so will be available. I could list off a 100 more examples of uncertainty playing out in our everyday lives, but for our purposes, let’s take a look at another time of mass anxieties to gain some insight into our current situation, and learn what our outlook should be in such a time.

## **Historical Context of Lamentations**

Now, normally a message on anxiety would probably be based in Matthew 6 and focused on Jesus’ words to “consider the lilies of the fields.” Or, it might be based in Philippians where Paul says to be “anxious for nothing.” If your struggle, like mine so much of the time is a battle with anxiety, I’d encourage you to read those passages, commit them to memory and meditate on their solutions for dealing with your own stress. However, in addressing mass, national, even global anxiety, it might be beneficial to look at another time of such troubles, which is why we’re going to look at the book of Lamentations.

First, let’s look at the first three verses of chapter 1:

*1 How lonely sits the city*

*that was full of people! How like a widow has she become,  
she who was great among the nations! She who was ca princess among the provinces  
has become a slave. 2 She weeps bitterly in the night, with tears on her cheeks;  
among all her lovers she has none to comfort her;  
hall her friends have dealt treacherously with her; they have become her enemies.  
3 Judah has gone into exile because of affliction and hard servitude;  
she dwells now among the nations, but finds no resting place;  
her pursuers have all overtaken her in the midst of her distress.*

The book of Lamentations was likely written by the Prophet Jeremiah in the midst, or shortly after the fall of Jerusalem to King Nebuchadnezzar and the Babylonians in 586 BC. This was an imminent event long prophesied by a line of Hebrew Prophets, but Jeremiah bore the distinction of witnessing a siege of Jerusalem that caused a famine, the defeat of King Zedekiah and his army, physical destruction of Jerusalem including the temple, and the carting off of the living inhabitants, like Daniel, to Babylon. Just for an overview of the context, let's turn quickly to 2 Kings 25 and look at verses 1-12:

*1And in the ninth year of his reign, in the tenth month, on the tenth day of the month, Nebuchadnezzar king of Babylon came with all his army against Jerusalem and laid siege to it. And they built siege-works all around it. 2So the city was besieged till the eleventh year of King Zedekiah. 3On the ninth day of the fourth month the famine was so severe in the city that there was no food for the people of the land. 4Then a breach was made in the city, and all the men of war fled by night by the way of the gate between the two walls, by the king's garden, and the Chaldeans were around the city. And they went in the direction of the Arabah. 5But the army of the Chaldeans pursued the king and overtook him in the plains of Jericho, and all his army was scattered from him. 6Then they captured the king and brought him up to the king of Babylon at Riblah, and they passed sentence on him. 7They slaughtered the sons of Zedekiah before his eyes, and put out the eyes of Zedekiah and bound him in chains and took him to Babylon. 8In the fifth month, on the seventh day of the month—that was the nineteenth year of King Nebuchadnezzar, king of Babylon—Nebuzaradan, the captain of the bodyguard, a servant of the king of Babylon, came to Jerusalem. 9And he burned the house of the LORD and the king's house and all the houses of Jerusalem; every great house he burned down. 10And all the army of the Chaldeans, who were with the captain of the guard, broke down the walls around Jerusalem. 11And the rest of the people who were left in the city and the deserters who had deserted to the king of Babylon, together with the rest of the multitude, Nebuzaradan the captain of the guard carried into exile. 12But the captain of the guard left some of the poorest of the land to be vinedressers and plowmen.*

I don't think that there's any event in our lifetimes that could come too close to the level of complete devastation that's described in 2 Kings 25, but I think perhaps if you fuse the feeling that many of us had during the Afghanistan pullout last year with the terror of being a New

Yorker during 9/11 and contemplate the entwining of those two events, you may just possibly be starting to approach something that's similar the feelings that Jeremiah was having when he wrote Lamentations. While the destruction of Jerusalem is the focus of Jeremiah's lament, it gets so much worse when we realize the full weight of what was going on in Judah at the time: Zedekiah was basically installed as a puppet king by Nebuchadnezzar – this is after Jehoiachin, the rightful heir has been exiled, Jerusalem has been already sieged and sacked once a decade earlier and many others in Jerusalem had already been moved to other parts of the Babylonian empire.

So to recap – if you're a Judean living at the beginning of the 5<sup>th</sup> century BC, it's only been 3 generations since the righteous king Josiah instituted sweeping reforms – he even went after the high places, killing the pagan priests and dashing the false idols to pieces. Not to belabor the point, but when it comes to an ideal leader, Josiah is your guy – it says in 2 Kings 24 *Moreover, Josiah put away the mediums and the necromancers and the household gods and the idols and all the abominations that were seen in the land of Judah and in Jerusalem, that he might establish the words of the law that were written in the book that Hilkiyah the priest found in the house of the LORD. 25 Before him there was no king like him, who turned to the LORD with all his heart and with all his soul and with all his might, according to all the Law of Moses, nor did any like him arise after him.* David may have been a king after “God's own heart,” but not even he receives that level of praise from the historical record of the kings. What a time it must have been to be alive in Judah! What excitement if you were a prophet or priest of the true God to see the reforms instituted, the idols smashed and the evil ones purged. But it says in the very next passage, 26 *Still the LORD did not turn from the burning of his great wrath, by which his anger was kindled against Judah, because of all the provocations with which Manasseh had provoked him. 27 And the LORD said, “I will remove Judah also out of my sight, as I have removed Israel, and I will cast off this city that I have chosen, Jerusalem, and the house of which I said, My name shall be there.”*

Now let's consider what happens in an incredibly short amount of time in the grand scheme of things. We go from perhaps the most faithful human king in history, and in only 22 ½ years, the Temple, the sacred dwelling place of God, built by Solomon, is a smoldering pile of ash. There's been over 20 years of war, pestilence, and political upheaval, that never calms, but just ratchets up and up and up until the final prophesied time when the destruction is total, the city lies in ruins to the point that even its walls are gone. Can you imagine the bewilderment of someone like Jeremiah? Can you imagine the mass anxiety of the people of Jerusalem? To put it into perspective, Jeremiah is only around 10 years old when Josiah comes to power – his formative years are spent learning and growing while the reforms are happening. He spends 30 years of his life under the righteous rule of Josiah – and then, when he's probably close to 40 years old, everything starts to go downhill at breakneck speed. Think about the contrasts he observed in his life. It might give us a little insight into the deep, profound level of brokenness and angst that we find in Lamentations. So let's flip back over there.

## Lamentations 1 and 2

Lamentations is basically divided into five laments, hence the way the 5 chapters are divided. The first lament covers the devastation of Jerusalem which is the overarching theme and context of the book. Henceforth Lamentations 1:1 *How lonely sits the city that was full of people! How like a widow has she become, she who was great among the nations! She who was a princess among the provinces has become a slave.* The extent of the loneliness of a city now devoid of people is especially poignant when you consider how little time separated its destruction from its flourishing. In vs. 8 he recognizes that what's happened is recompense for sin: *Jerusalem sinned grievously; therefore she became filthy; all who honored her despise her, for they have seen her nakedness; she herself groans and turns her face away.* He also makes the lament very personal, for example in vs. 16: *For these things I weep; my eyes flow with tears; for a comforter is far from me, one to revive my spirit; my children are desolate, for the enemy has prevailed.* At the end of the first lament he lets a bit of hope through though, but it's hope that the ones who have done this to Him and Jerusalem will one day receive their retribution: 20 *"Look, O LORD, for I am in distress; my stomach churns;*

*my heart is wrung within me, because I have been very rebellious.*

*In the street the sword bereaves; in the house it is like death.*

21 *"They heard my groaning, yet there is no one to comfort me.*

*All my enemies have heard of my trouble; they are glad that you have done it.*

*You have brought the day you announced; now let them be as I am.*

22 *"Let all their evildoing come before you, and deal with them as you have dealt with me because of all my transgressions; for my groans are many, and my heart is faint."*

Calvin has a beautiful note on verse 22 in his commentary: *We, in short, see that the faithful lay humbly their prayers before God, and at the same time confess that what they had deserved was rendered to them, only they set before God their extreme [sorrow, griefs, tears, and sighs]. Then the way of pacifying God is, sincerely to confess that we are justly visited by his judgment, and also to lie down as it were confounded, and at the same time to venture to look up to him, and to rely on his mercy with confidence.* In other words, the correct attitude when in the midst of God's judgement is to receive it, confess our unworthiness before Him and at the same time hope in His goodness, grace and mercy to make things right in His own time. We'll see this even more strongly in chapter 3.

The lament contained in chapter 2 is concerned mostly with God's righteous judgement against Israel as a whole. In verse 5 he says, *the Lord has become like an enemy,* verse 6: *He has destroyed His appointed meeting place (the Temple),* verse 7: *The Lord has rejected His altar; He has abandoned His sanctuary,* in verse 8: *The Lord determined to destroy the wall of the daughter of Zion.* Then in verse 11 Jeremiah gives voice again to his own devastation at what has happened: *My eyes fail because of tears, My spirit is greatly troubled; My heart is poured out on the earth Because of the destruction of the daughter of my people.* Like so much of the Hebrew

descriptions of emotion, it's visceral and physical: "My spirit is greatly troubled," "troubled" being the word *khaw-mar*, meaning literally "to boil" or "foment" – so "my heart is boiling and fomenting." In verse 17 he explicitly credits God with the destruction even though its being accomplished through Nebuchadnezzar: *The LORD has done what he purposed; he has carried out his word, which he commanded long ago*; Jeremiah then wraps up the lament with even more horror and atrocity: food was so bad during the famine that the people in Jerusalem degrade themselves to cannibalism:

*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?*

*Should priest and prophet be killed*

*in the sanctuary of the Lord?*

Things are pretty bleak. You might say that this is a period of mass anxiety, although at this point there aren't even that many left to be anxious for Jerusalem. Because I want to get to chapter three, I'm not going to spend a lot of time on chapters 4 and 5, only to say that much of the lamenting in chapters 1 and 2 is carried on, and it ends with a prayer for God to remember them in the midst of their suffering, specifically the remnant that has mostly been carted off to Babylon and other parts of the Babylonian Empire, for example, chapter 5:1: *Remember, O Lord, what has befallen us; Look and see our reproach.*

But why would we wrap things up with the third lament? It's worth noting that like many of the Prophets, books of poetry and the book of James, Lamentations is written in a very poetically Hebrew way, and it's very easy to import the way we're used to reading just about any text into how we read scripture, but this book works a little different. Lamentations isn't a narrative that's linear in time like the Genesis, Exodus, Kings or Chronicles, and it isn't a developed argumentation that builds on itself like Romans or Galatians. Instead, it's actually written in a poetic form that you wouldn't be able to catch unless you read Hebrew. I don't read Hebrew, so I'm grateful that there are study Bibles and commentaries to explain this, but here's what's basically going on: there are 22 letters in the Hebrew alphabet. Chapters 1, 2, 4, 5 all have 22 verses with chapters 1, 2 and 4 going in alphabetical order for each verse. Chapter 3 has 66 verses, so three verses for each Hebrew letter. Chapter 3, or the third lament is very personal, with the author, again, usually assumed to be Jeremiah, taking on the destruction of Israel as something that he is also experiencing: Verses 1-3: *I am the man who has seen affliction; Because of the rod of His wrath; He has driven me and made walk in darkness and not in light; Surely against me He has turned His hand repeatedly all the day.* Verses 7-8: *He has walled me in so that I cannot go out; He has made my chain heavy; Even when I cry out and call for help He shuts out my prayers;* Verses 17-18: *My soul has been rejected from peace; I have forgotten happiness. So I say, "My strength has perished, and so has my hope from the Lord."*

After so much darkness, we suddenly get one of the most profoundly hopeful passages of scripture in all of the prophets: Let's just read it together, chapter 3, and then I promise I'm going to tie together mass anxiety, the history of the fall of Israel and the book of Lamentations, look at chapter 3:19-41;

*19 Remember my affliction and my wanderings, the wormwood and the gall!*

*20 My soul continually remembers and is bowed down within me.*

*21 But this I call to mind, and therefore I have hope:*

*22 The steadfast love of the LORD never ceases; his mercies never come to an end;*

*23 they are new every morning; great is your faithfulness.*

*24 "The LORD is my portion," says my soul, "therefore I will hope in him."*

*25 The LORD is good to those who wait for him, to the soul who seeks him.*

*26 It is good that one should wait quietly for the salvation of the LORD.*

*27 It is good for a man that he bear the yoke in his youth.*

*28 Let him sit alone in silence when it is laid on him;*

*29 let him put his mouth in the dust— there may yet be hope;*

*30 let him give his cheek to the one who strikes, and let him be filled with insults.*

*31 For the Lord will not cast off forever,*

*32 but, though he cause grief, he will have compassion according to the abundance of his steadfast love;*

*33 for he does not afflict from his heart or grieve the children of men.*

*34 To crush underfoot all the prisoners of the earth,*

*35 to deny a man justice in the presence of the Most High,*

*36 to subvert a man in his lawsuit, the Lord does not approve.*

*37 Who has spoken and it came to pass, unless the Lord has commanded it?*

*38 Is it not from the mouth of the Most High that good and bad come?*

*39 Why should a living man complain, a man, about the punishment of his sins?*

*40 Let us test and examine our ways, and return to the LORD!*

*41 Let us lift up our hearts and hands to God in heaven:*



I could do another 20 minutes of exposition of this section of Lamentations and explore the inns and outs of the language, poetry and placement of this glorious section of scripture, but I would prefer to sort of let it stand on its own and instead return to where we started in talking about anxiety. We are obviously not living in 586 BC, and I want to be careful about over applying scripture that was written in a specific context to our situation. That being said, remember in Romans that it says, *...whatever was written in earlier times was written for our instruction, so that through perseverance and the encouragement of the Scriptures we might have hope.* Let's just think about our own situation so that we can come to terms with our anxieties: We are living in a culture that has entered the final stage of Romans 1. If you remember what that oft quoted passages lays out, basically the human spiral into depravity starts with suppressing the truth with unrighteousness, leads to idolatry (worshiping the creature rather than the creator), then leads to sexual perversion with built-in consequences, and then ends in a total giving over to insanity where all manner of evil takes place without restraint, as God removes His hand. Although the fall of Jerusalem is a very specific prophecy, you do have the same basic format present in the time of the Hebrew Kings, and it should be noted that although Josiah's time was a reprieve from the chaos of other, evil kings, even his faithfulness was not enough for God to relent from the destruction He intended to bring about on Israel for their overall unfaithfulness, and that destruction came fast! Even now, our nation's descent into insanity has come fast!

It has come so fast, so quickly that many of us can identify with these words of lament in ways we may have never thought we would in our lifetimes. We're experience uncertainty that we may never have imagined we could. Maybe we're even dealing with levels of anxiety because of all the chaos around us that that is bordering on debilitating. It's hard not to wonder if Nebuchadnezzar is somewhere out there on the horizon getting ready to lay siege, and very quickly even the walls of Jerusalem will be a pile of rubble. But look back to Lamentations 3:

"His mercies are new every morning."

"It is good to wait quietly for the Lord."

"He will not cast off forever, for though He cause grief, he will have compassion according to the abundance of His steadfast love."

Maybe most importantly: *Who has spoken and it came to pass, unless the Lord has commanded it?*

Most of the devastation, though caused by Israel's sin, was brought directly by Nebuchadnezzar. Do you remember what happened to Nebuchadnezzar? Here's the last words we have recorded from Him in the Bible in Daniel chapter 4: *At the end of the days I, Nebuchadnezzar, lifted my eyes to heaven, and my reason returned to me, and I blessed the Most High, and praised and honored him who lives forever, for his dominion is an everlasting dominion, and his kingdom endures from generation to generation; 35all the inhabitants of the earth are accounted as nothing, and he does according to his will among the host of heaven and among the inhabitants of the earth; and none can stay his hand or say to him, "What have you done?"* That reminds us as well, who was one of the members of the remnant that was carried

off to Babylon? A young man named Daniel. And Daniel's prophecies extend beyond the current point of history that we are living in all the way to the end times.

If you're here and you are anxious about the present or the future, know this, nothing has come to pass unless the Lord has commanded it – that may not be a silver bullet if you're having a rough time with worry, but your and my responsibility as a follower of Jesus Christ isn't to be completely devoid of all concerns, but to not be broken, fractured and debilitated by them, because you're first and foremost confident in His plan and design for your life, whatever that may look like now or 5, 10 or even 50 years from now, regardless of what God allows the Babylonians to do.

I want to wrap by telling you about two messages it might be worth listening to if you do struggle with worry or anxiety about your own life and the chaos surrounds it. One is called "The Failure of Human Wisdom," it's about the story of Gibeah and the Benjamite War and it was preached by our own Pastor a few months ago.... (explain the sermon); The other is called "Our Great Savior" (Part 2), and was preached by John MacArthur in August of 2021, and is on Ephesians chapter 1... (explain the sermon and the context) "Everything is on schedule."

<https://www.gracechurch.org/sermons/17880>

<https://www.gracebibleny.org/the-failure-of-human-wisdom-judges-17-21>