

Think of a number between 1 and 100. Don't worry I'll wait. Got it, good. My number is 86. 86. Hold on to that. You may be wondering what this number has to do with me. Well nothing if you don't want to think about it. Or it could mean everything if you want to imagine with me. So 86. 86 days since what I once knew turned into what I could only hope for. What I could only dream of. For me I've spent the last 86 days in my home avoiding reality, why? Not because I don't believe it but because it is hard to think about what is really happening in our world. A world lost in its own reality. A world living in fear, whether it's a virus or racism. A world that filled with more anger than compassion. I've spent the last 86 days deciding whether I would find joy or find that permanent dent in my couch each day. For 86 days my emotions were on full display, even dictating how my day would go. For 86 days I was stuck in a cycle. Well I was only in the cycle for the first 60 days. For 60 days I was motivated by optimism. Mere optimism that I would wake up one day and this would be over because I wanted to believe it was that simple. Believing that the miracle would come and all that was in front of us would be behind us. However, for the last 26 days my mindset has been transformed.

Now think of a number between 1 and 1000. It can be the same number or a new number. Don't worry I'll wait. Got it, good. For the Israelites that number is 587. 587. Why? From 589 to 587 BC the Babylonians destroyed Jerusalem. To put this into perspective, this comes after the Israelites have escaped Egypt, wandered in the wilderness for 40 years and even found the promised land. Jerusalem was the capital of Israel, the temple, the sacred temple was there and they had their king. Life was good. Then in an instant everything has changed. In 587, they stood in the rubble of what was left. It was tragic, cataclysmic, catastrophic, destruction or any other horrendous word you could add to it.

The book of lamentations is a response to this. Did you know there was a book called lamentations in the old testament? Of course, you knew. But how often do you read it? I like to think it's one of the few books that showed true human emotion. Five chapters of deep and intimate thoughts. A book of personal lament. Lament is honesty with God and each other, about grief, loss and pain. This is not the only place that we see lament in the bible but it's one of the places that challenge our understanding of how we can talk to God. Because the poet in lamentations left nothing to be interpreted and instead said everything they were feeling. In most books we see a story or hardship, followed by saving or miracle and then we are pointed to glory. However, in the book of lamentations the people are sitting in anger, looking for hope. This book is unaltered human emotion and confusion in the midst of chaos.

The poet begins the book with two chapters about the suffering of Jerusalem. Yet this was not the first time someone attacked Jerusalem, however, it was the first time someone succeeded and all was destroyed. The first verse reads "How lonely sits the city that once was so full of people!" Utter disbelief that what they were living in, was truly happening. For two chapters the poet cries out, but what is interesting is that the poet isn't crying out to be saved. Rather the poet cries out to reveal their suffering and the fact that no one has come to their rescue, not even their allies.

Then we get to chapter three. The poet is still crying out to God, but there is a moment where the poet's attitude shifts briefly. Reading from The Message, verse 19 says "I'll never forget the trouble, the utter lostness, the taste of ashes, the poison I've swallowed. I remember it all—oh, how well I remember—the feeling of hitting the bottom." The poet knew that this was the lowest moment. This was the place that they did not want to be but they were stuck here. It was the beginning of the end in

their mind. We too will never forget the moment when the chaos began. The confusion, uncertainty, the pain it has caused and continues to cause.

Still reading from *The Message*, the poet goes on to say in verses 21-24, “But there’s one other thing I remember and remembering, I keep a grip on hope: God’s loyal love couldn’t have run out, God’s merciful love couldn’t have dried up. They’re created new every morning. How great your faithfulness! I’m sticking with God (I say it over and over). God’s all I’ve got left.” The poet recognizes in the midst of lament there is a need for hope. “Hope is dependent on who God is rather than what we can do for ourselves.”¹ Hope rooted in the fact that God is there with them, that God will take care of them and that God is not just there to bring forth miraculous acts to save them. The poet understood that God’s grace and mercy would get them through. The poet knew there was nothing they could do to shift, alter, move, restart, mold, reshape or change the past. However, what they could commit to was the next day. With each new day they began, they knew that God was still compassionate, still merciful, still gracious and even now God is still God to those who were looking.

Then in verses 25 & 26 the poet reminds us of what we must continually do. Reading again from *The Message* it says, “God proves to be good to the one who passionately waits, to the one who diligently seeks. It’s a good thing to quietly hope, quietly hope for help from God.” These verses point to our need for prayer and the power of prayer that changes things. In addition, the poet is reminding us of the journey to get to something greater.

In this summer theme we are bringing you this framework of a new beginning. We are introducing this idea that we can begin again even now in the midst of trouble. We are willing to let our gratitude and thankfulness ground our outlook on daily life. All while recognizing that this still sucks. Now why would I spend the last ten minutes talking about lament only to invite you into a new beginning? It’s because of the connection between the two: lament and hope. Out of lament hope arises and pushes us toward true worship. Out of lament we see our deepest needs and put our faith in the only one who can help.

So, let us focus on our new summer theme which is centered around two words, new and beginning. I think it is important to define these words in order to help us better understand the framework for our theme.

First, we begin with the word “new.” The definition of the word new is having but lately come or been brought into being. Now in my mind the word new implies a recent change and it doesn’t take over what is already there. Another part of my rediscovery of the word new is looking at its antonyms. Here are just a few words that are the opposite of new: familiar, existing, regular, standard, usual and even normal. Normal is the state of being that we all wanted to go back to at one point but that’s not an option. These are some of the ways we used to describe things in the good ole days. We cannot use those words to describe our future because we hope for something better.

Second, we have the word “beginning.” The word beginning means an act or circumstance of entering upon an action or state; the point of time or space at which anything begins. The word beginning

¹ Soong-Chan Rah, *Prophetic Lament: a Call for Justice in Troubled Times* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Books, an imprint of InterVarsity Press, 2015), p.127)

reminds us that it takes action and we cannot remain stuck in the same place. By taking action it means that we are moving toward where we want to be rather than waiting for the world to change for us. Another definition of beginning is the first part. This definition implies that beginning is just the first step toward what will be and points to more things that need to be done. No task is completed in just one step.

Just like the poet in lamentations we must commit to the next day. Knowing that with each day comes new mercies and new beginnings. Neither the poet nor I are forgetting the past, instead we are aware that each day brings a new decision. Do I focus on the good or the bad? Because we are still in chaos, just like the Israelites were still standing in destruction. But here's where it gets good. The poet doesn't say after this glimpse of hope everything will be easy. Because the grass isn't always greener on the other side. No the poet is still human, they understand that lament is still happening and it still sucks. Our feelings don't go away, they aren't swept under the rug, instead they are acknowledged. So remember this, out of lament hope arises and pushes us toward true worship. A new beginning is not about leaving the past behind you or living in the oblivion of optimism. It's about living in the truth of reality and embracing each new day. It's about committing to action and not just reliving the good ole days. As the world evolves, so do we and we have choices to make. Do I remain stuck in the past or open myself to the new beginnings of the future? Amen.