



Philippians 3:17—4:1; Luke 13:31-35
Reverend Giuseppe Mattei (March 16, 2025)

In today's modern world, it seems that our propensity to complain about virtually anything has only grown. We gripe about the weather, the traffic, our health, our sport team. Yet, this tendency to complain is not new. It is as ancient as humanity itself, deeply ingrained in our nature.

Throughout history, from the earliest biblical times to the present day, humans have displayed a penchant for dissatisfaction. This inclination is depicted in numerous stories and accounts, where individuals and communities express their grievances to God and each other. The Israelites, for example, complained during their exodus from Egypt, despite witnessing numerous miracles.

In our contemporary society, this age-old tendency persists. We often find ourselves fixating on what is wrong rather than appreciating what is right. This **inclination to complain** may stem from a desire for improvement or a need to vocalize our struggles. However, it is essential to distinguish between a complaint born of resentment and a lament born of genuine concern and grief.

The distinction between a complaint and a lament lies in their origins and intentions. A complaint is often rooted in a sense of entitlement or dissatisfaction and is typically expressed with frustration or resentment. It focuses on what is perceived to be wrong and is directed outward, often with the expectation that external circumstances should change to meet one's desires or standards.

In contrast, a lament is born from a place of deep sorrow and genuine concern. It is an expression of profound grief over circumstances that are not merely inconvenient but are fundamentally heart-wrenching or unjust. A lament is directed inward as much as outward, often encompassing a plea for understanding, comfort, and change. It acknowledges pain while also seeking a path to healing and reconciliation. There is a better way and we want to be part of it. With complaints, instead, we blame others and expect them to change.

This nuanced understanding of lament can be seen in various biblical texts (and a Bible book explicitly called Lamentations), where laments are directed towards God, not with demands, but with cries for help and expressions of faith amidst suffering.

Today's Gospel lesson shows Jesus on his journey to Jerusalem (originated in Luke 9:51) doing his work, unafraid of danger, confident of the outcome and yet saddened by the response of Jerusalem.

Jesus laments over the city of God. Yet, it's Jesus' love for Jerusalem, for God, and for God's people that leads him to cry out. Jesus points out that rather than welcoming the voice of God, the religious leaders oppress the prophets that speak God's word. Instead of celebrating God's presence, the political elite fear it.

God's love is freely given. Grace is all around us. God is at work creating and sustaining life in nature, in human relationships, in social arrangements. God's presence is felt alive in our interconnectedness with God's creation. Where God is there is love, life, unity, justice, cooperation.

Where that interconnectedness is interrupted, where interactions are not righteous but unholy, there is isolation, there is alienation, there is unfriendliness and more than that: there is enmity. Grace is missing.

“Sin simply refers to all aspects of life where the reality of grace is not manifest and evil flourishes. It's what happens when we've got the wrong story about reality in our heads. If we do not recognize grace, we latch onto lies about who we are. These lies are manifest in an endless variety of godless dispositions: hatred, violence, greed, injustice, pride, despair, isolation, self-loathing, unbridled arrogance, a hardened heart, a cold soul. When these lies are aggregated over time, they get compressed into social systems and cultural patterns that look to us as if they are true, when in truth they are not. They are evil and profoundly

destructive. This is what it means to be *godless*—to not be awakened to the light of God’s love. It describes grace-asleep people as well as whole grace-asleep societies....”¹

As the true prophet that he is, **Jesus laments the lack of righteousness** in the world, the lack of right relations, of honorable dealing with one another.

Some Pharisees warn Jesus about Herod, “the fox” or “the smart one.” In Luke’s writings (both the gospel and the Book of Acts), Pharisees are not always Jesus’ opponents:

- Jesus ate at the home of Pharisees (7:36; 11:37; 14:1). However, these Pharisees find Jesus’ lack of orthodoxy troubling.
- Joseph of Arimathea, a secret disciple who will take responsibility for Jesus’ proper burial, is a member of the council (23:50), and is probably a Pharisee.
- Gamaliel, a Pharisee, will persuade the council not to kill the apostles because of the possibility that their work might be of God (Acts 5:34-39).
- Pharisees were among the early believers (Acts 15:5).

Jesus’ lament is not all-encompassing even as he seems to make a sweeping generalization (“Jerusalem, Jerusalem, the city that kills the prophets and stones those

¹ Serene Jones, *Call It Grace: Finding Meaning in a Fractured World* (Viking, 2019), xvii, xviii, xix–xxi.

who are sent to it!”²). Not all of Jerusalem (just as not all of Israel) is deaf to his word.

However, Jesus is not deterred from his mission: he has work to do. Jesus will not be the victim of random violence. His work is essential, he must proceed. He intends to proclaim God’s universal vision of wellbeing. Economic injustice and social oppression are contrary to God’s plan. Exorcism, healing and community reintegration are Jesus’ instruments of salvation.

In his lament, Jesus sounds extremely frustrated. It is a cry of grief reflecting the broken heart of one who could save the beloved but is prevented by the beloved’s resistance and stubbornness. When Jesus finally arrives in Jerusalem, he will weep over it “because you didn’t know the time of your visitation.” (19:41-44).

Jesus’ lament over Jerusalem is instructive. It tells us that **God’s love is undiminished and is always available to us**. We have only to avail ourselves of God’s help to escape tragedy.

It also tells us that **God gives us freedom to choose** between good and evil. Yet, with freedom comes accountability. Jerusalem will die for killing prophets, including the prophet Jesus.³

² Jerusalem had killed the prophets Uriah (Jeremiah 26:20-23) and Zechariah (2 Chronicles 24:20-21)—and had tried to kill Jeremiah (Jeremiah 38:4-6).

³ By the time that Luke writes this Gospel, Jerusalem will lie in ruins. In 68 A.D., in response to a Jewish revolt, Vespasian will lay siege to Jerusalem. When Vespasian is named emperor, he will turn the task over to his son, Titus, who will break through Jewish defenses and destroy Jerusalem in 70 A.D., killing or enslaving the

We have plenty of **evil** to choose from – that which is imposed on us through hate and cruelty, and that which we force on others through indifference and carelessness. Evil passes on judgment and blame. It labels and separates people.

But we have also much **goodness** to witness, to receive and to share. God is at work in transformed and generous hearts, sensitive to the plight of those who suffer.

Goodness promotes and sustains life. It creates beauty and dismantles barriers, attracting all towards a common center of wellbeing and beauty.

May the love of God touch our heart with healing on our Lenten journey. Amen.

city's inhabitants. Later, following a second revolt in 132-135 A.D., Hadrian will plow under the rubble and erect a Roman city on the site—a city from which Jews will be banned (Myers, Allen C., *The Eerdmans Bible Dictionary*, 571).