

LESSON SEVEN

Creation Laments



Main Idea

Creation itself laments.

Focus Scripture

Isaiah 24:4–6, 8, 19; Romans 8:19–23

Opening Prayer

You spoke, O God, and there was light.

You spoke creation into being and you spoke your word into scripture.

Both are lights that guide us.

Guide us now as we marvel at your creation and listen for your word. Amen.

Before You Begin

- What are the places in creation that call you to praise God? Is there one place in particular, over all others, you want to go?
- What situations in the natural world call you to lament?

Isaiah 24:4–6, 8, 19

- ⁴ The earth dries up and withers,
the world languishes and withers;
the heavens languish together with the earth.**
- ⁵ The earth lies polluted
under its inhabitants;
for they have transgressed laws,
violated the statutes,
broken the everlasting covenant.**
- ⁶ Therefore a curse devours the earth,
and its inhabitants suffer for their guilt;
therefore the inhabitants of the earth dwindled,
and few people are left.**
- ⁸ The mirth of the timbrels is stilled,
the noise of the jubilant has ceased,
the mirth of the lyre is stilled.**
- ¹⁹ The earth is utterly broken,
the earth is torn asunder,
the earth is violently shaken.**

Notes on the Text

Verse 4: The Hebrew word translated “dries up” can also be translated “mourns.” There seems to be a subtle difference in meaning if we choose to use “mourns” as the translation instead of “dries up.” “Dries up and withers” sounds straightforward: the plant dried up and withered because there wasn’t enough water. “Mourns and withers” implies that someone could have done something to stop the drying up and withering. Perhaps water was diverted upriver and the crops downriver withered and died because of it.

Verse 5: What is the source of the earth’s problems? The inhabitants. The inhabitants have transgressed, violated, and broken things put in place to protect the earth.

Verse 6: A curse devours the earth. Creation is destroyed and the inhabitants die because they caused its death.

Romans 8:19–23

¹⁹For the creation waits with eager longing for the revealing of the children of God; ²⁰for the creation was subjected to futility, not of its own will but by the will of the one who subjected it, in hope ²¹that the creation itself will be set free from its bondage to decay and will obtain the freedom of the glory of the children of God. ²²We know that the whole creation has been groaning in labor pains until now; ²³and not only the creation, but we ourselves, who have the first fruits of the Spirit, groan inwardly while we wait for adoption, the redemption of our bodies.

Notes on the Text

Verse 19: Creation waits to be restored,

Verse 20: not because it did anything wrong but because it was cursed when God confronted Adam and Eve in the garden.

Verse 21: Creation waits to be set free;

Verse 22: all of creation waits,

Verse 23: and humans wait, too. The coming of Christ will redeem creation and humankind. Everything is connected.

Creation has had cause to lament from almost the very beginning. The first lament in scripture, following Abel's murder by his brother Cain, sets the pattern to cry out to God to right wrongs. God hears this first lament from the blood-soaked ground. Abel himself is not present to lament, but his lament finds a way to be presented to God. God hears the one who suffers, and questions his brother: "What have you done? Listen; your brother's blood is crying out to me from the ground (Gen. 4:10)!"

As with all lament, creation suffers through no fault of its own. Rather, the source of creation's suffering is humanity and human failings. When Adam and Eve choose to eat from the forbidden tree, one of the results is a curse placed upon the ground (Gen. 3:17). God subjects the earth to humanity. From that moment on, it would take real effort for humans to make a living from the earth, as farmers can bear witness. God no longer provides regular waterings to keep things green and growing. Humans are not able to wander through the garden of Eden choosing dinner from among the offerings growing there.

Isaiah's description of the earth's condition may call to mind the state of the earth just before Noah was commissioned to build an ark. Here the earth is polluted; in Genesis 6:11 the earth is corrupt in God's sight and filled with violence. In Isaiah 24:18, we read that part of the eventual destruction of the earth will occur when "the windows of heaven are opened, and the foundations of the earth tremble." In the time of Noah, when the rains began flooding the earth, the deluge is similarly described: "In the six hundredth year of Noah's life, in the second month, on the seventeenth day of the month, on that day all the fountains of the great deep burst forth, and the windows of the heavens were opened" (Gen. 7:11).

Isaiah blames a broken covenant for creation's suffering, a covenant broken by the earth's inhabitants. Isaiah reminds us that there are consequences to humanity's choices, consequences for all creation. So, as it did following Abel's death, the ground cries out.

Paul describes it as groaning.

And not just any groaning, but the groaning of a woman in labor! The same word is used in Genesis 3:16b: "I will greatly increase your pangs in childbearing." The groaning of labor is also part of the Genesis curse in Chapter 3 that includes the added difficulty of wresting a living from the ground.

Creation groans in Romans 8:22–23. The Israelites groan under the yoke of slavery (Ex. 2:23). Jerusalem groans after the destruction brought by Babylon (Lam. 1:8). The Israelites groan because of persecution and oppression (Judg.

2:18). These are all situations of suffering. They are situations in which the people lament.

God responds to the groans and leads the people to freedom. God responds to the groans and brings the people back from exile. God responds to the groans and appoints judges to govern the people. When someone or something groans, groans in lament, scripture tells us that God answers.

The whole creation has been groaning—lamenting. Creation groans; we groan. One day all those who are groaning—lamenting—will be redeemed. Humanity and creation will be redeemed together. The ground will be redeemed when human sin is redeemed. We await the day when creation in all its forms returns to the state that God calls “good.”

A Contemporary Lament

“Some Day the Earth Will Weep”

Creation laments. A lament for creation, attributed to John Hollow Horn of the Oglala Lakota people, begins:

Some day the earth shall weep,
she will beg for her life,
she will cry with tears of blood.¹

The image of nature weeping tears of blood and being near death is similar to Jeremiah’s description in Chapter 9, verse 10, of pastures that are laid waste so that no one passes through. The pastures are no longer home to a single bird or animal. In the second part of verse 12 through verse 14, the prophet ties humanity to the laments of creation:

^{12b}Why is the land ruined and laid waste like a wilderness, so that no one passes through?¹³And the Lord says: Because they have forsaken my law that I set before them, and have not obeyed my voice, or walked in accordance with it,¹⁴but have stubbornly followed their own hearts and have gone after the Baals, as their ancestors taught them.

Certainly creation laments. Verses 13 and 14 remind us, though, that the creation’s cause for lament is human failings.

Laments for creation may help define what is at stake and who is addressed as the one who can change things. While the prophet ties humanity’s past to creation’s lament, Horn’s lament for creation (above) looks ahead. It continues here:

You will make a choice,
if you will help her or let her die,
and when she dies, you too will die.²

You. You will make a choice. We have choices to make.

Can humans rightly lament with creation? Can we protest to God? Is lament our proper response? Or would a more accurate response be to repent?

1. James Wilson, *The Earth Shall Weep: A History of Native America* (New York Grove Press, 1998), vi.

2. *Ibid.*

Practicing Lament

Mountains, water, air, trees, animals. All are elements of creation that are mentioned in scripture; all have the potential to lament. Choose a creature or a creation-related issue and write a lament in the voice of creation. You may want to use some of the common elements of scriptural lament:

- address to God
- description of the complaint
- statement of faith
- call on God to act
- assurance of being heard
- praise to God

To whom do you address your creature's lament? What request will your creature or issue make?

Write your lament and share it with others if you study with a group.

Trusting in the God of Hope

Isaiah 11:6–9

- ⁶The wolf shall live with the lamb,
the leopard shall lie down with the kid,
the calf and the lion and the fatling together,
and a little child shall lead them.**
- ⁷The cow and the bear shall graze,
their young shall lie down together;
and the lion shall eat straw like the ox.**
- ⁸The nursing child shall play over the hole of the asp,
and the weaned child shall put its hand on the adder's den.**
- ⁹They will not hurt or destroy
on all my holy mountain;
for the earth will be full of the knowledge of the Lord
as the waters cover the sea.**

The vision of the Peaceable Kingdom promises a restoration of creation as it was meant to be. Shalom, in its sense of wholeness, covers all of creation. Relationships among animals and humanity are lived with integrity, again in the sense of wholeness. All this happens because—at last—the earth is full of the knowledge of the Lord.

Try including your creature or issue lament in the Isaiah 11 passage above. Read the passage aloud and following “the weaned child shall put its hand on the adder's den,” say aloud the subject of your creation lament, along with the creature that would seem to be its natural enemy. For example, “The honeybee will live with the bear.”

What similarities do you see between the Isaiah scripture at the beginning of the lesson and Horn's lament for creation?



National Gallery of Art/Gift of Edgar William and Bernice Chrysler Garbisch

The Peaceable Kingdom, Edward Hicks

Closing Prayer

Creator God, when you made this world, you knew it was good. May we be stewards of your creation in such a way that everyone may see its goodness, now and into the future.
Amen.

Practicing Lament

Use this space to create your own lament.