

Does God punish people today?

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[0:00] Father, we ask that the Holy Spirit would come and help us as we read your word. And Father, we don't want to just read your word as an academic exercise, but we ask, Father, that you would help us to understand who we really are, come to a better self-knowledge of who we are in light of you, and come to a better knowledge of you in light of who we are.

And we ask that the Holy Spirit would do this this morning, and we ask it in the name of Jesus. Amen. One of the questions which I have not talked about throughout these five, this is the fifth week, so the four previous weeks, is a big one.

Does God punish people today? We've been looking at the Book of Lamentations. Our Jewish friends would say that it's part of the Tanakh or the Torah.

We as Christians say that it's part of the Old Testament. And the Book of Lamentations, it's these five linked poems. Each poem, in a sense, is a separate poem or a class group of poems.

And now we're coming to the fifth one, and it's all dealing with the fact that it very clearly says that God has punished the people, that he has punished them because, in fact, they deserve to be punished.

[1:18] And the punishment is very harsh. And we've been looking at that, and if you're curious about some of the aspects of that, and this is the first time you're watching, you can look at the other sermons.

I will retouch a little bit on some of these issues again, but it will be fresh. But I haven't actually addressed a very important question that many of you probably have, and I've been wondering if I was going to address it.

Does God still punish today? Is it just something he did in the past? Is it changed now that, you know, there was the Old Testament, God is very angry, but now we have Jesus, it's very different. Is punishment purely in the future? Does God punish today? So we're going to walk towards that question today as we look through. And the fifth and final poem of the Book of Lamentations will help us to ask that question.

So just before we get to it, hopefully there'll be an image. You're going to not see me for a second, and you're going to see an image. And one of the things which is important to understand about reading the Book of Lamentations is the context, so to speak, of it.

[2:22] You know, there's a very, very famous part of the Book of Lamentations, the steadfast love of the Lord never faileth, his mercies never come to an end, they are new every morning, they are new every morning, great is your faithfulness.

And that's from the Book of Lamentations, it's in Chapter 3, and usually when that quote is seen, you see something very bucolic, you see a beautiful village or a beautiful farm and full fields or a beautiful cottage, and everything looks just very, very, very, very prosperous.

But to understand that these five poems were written amidst the ruins of a city, that's the way to understand it. So even in Chapter 3, when you have this very, very powerful thing of, you know, great is your faithfulness, the steadfast love of the Lord never fails, that's in Chapter 3.

Chapter 4 and Chapter 5, the person's still wrestling with the devastation in the poems and their pain. Because, and one of the things is, on one level, we might think this is disappointing, that the really good part should be the ending, but it actually is very, very psychologically and emotionally true.

Some of you are dealing with very, very hard things. Some of us are dealing with very, very hard things this morning. And it's the ruin of our health, the ruin of our finances, the ruin of our family, the ruin of our business, whatever it is.

[3 : 46] And having, in a sense, a better sense of who God is doesn't necessarily take away the pain. And that's one of the things which is very rich about this text.

So you see in Chapter 4 and Chapter 5, there's movement. And at the end here, we're going to see this heartfelt prayer for restoration. But you need to understand that it's almost as if you're sitting amidst the rubble in the ruins of the city and continuing to address these things, pouring out your heart to God.

And one of the things which is different about this chapter is this chapter, all the other chapters are, in a sense, poems all grouped together around a poetic structure called an acrostic, which is a geeky type of thing to even say, and I hope I didn't lose you when I said it.

This is just a prayer. And it's not an acrostic, but it keeps the same number of verses. And it's just a prayer. And so let's see how this book ends, how, in a sense, they pray at the end, how they pray amidst the ruins.

And it begins like this. Remember, O Lord, what has befallen us. Look and see our disgrace. And just sort of going to pause. The way this poem is organized, there's this opening plea, threefold plea.

[5 : 02] And then there's, from verses 2 to 18, there's just an unpacking of the heart and an unpacking of the concerns that bother them.

The looking around, the poet looking around at the city and looking around at the people who are still left in the city and just pouring out what's actually going on. And then verses 19 to 22 are sort of the actual final request.

And in the original language, there's these three imperatives. So it's a very, very intense prayer, which is hard to capture in English. It says, you know, remember, look, see.

And these are all, it's very, very intense. And so this person is, the poet is asking this intense thing for God to just look at what's going on around them.

The poet is going to make his final request at the end, but this initial request is just see what's going on. Just look. We know that these things matter to you, and we know that it's, I know that it's valid and fair for me to bring these to your attention.

[6 : 17] Just remember is a way, it always implies that God is going to act, by the way, not that he's forgotten. It's sort of a formulaic word in the Tanakh, the Old Testament of calling God to act based on his character, look and see.

And it's all about the disgrace. And what does that disgrace mean? Well, verses 2 to 18 are going to sort of, rather than trying to describe it by giving a definition of disgrace, it's going to describe the disgrace within a series of images.

Very powerful image after image after image after image. It's like a heart dump. And it goes like this. Verse 2. We have become orphans, fatherless. Our mothers are like widows. We must pay for the water we drink. The wood we get must be bought.

Our pursuers are at our necks. We are weary. We are given no rest. At our necks is an image as if there's a, it's as if somebody's unleashed dogs on them.

[7 : 27] And these are attacked dogs that go for the arms or go for the neck, go for the kill. And they're at our necks. They're on us all the time. The people who are our overlords are very attentive and very attentive to keeping them under, keeping us under their heel.

We have given the hand to Egypt and to Assyria to get bread enough. This is all part of the earlier poem, how they've gone to these other powers. And these other powers, which they at first thought would help them, well, on one level they are sort of helping them, but they're not really helping them.

They've come in. You know, it would be a little bit as if you're watching a movie and an area has been devastated and some powerful business people come in from, you know, an area that hasn't been afflicted.

And they come with their arms. They come with their guards to make sure that nobody can get their bread, the grain, the staples that we need. They charge exorbitant prices.

And they use their, they're not so much guards as thugs. And wherever they go, they keep people down and they keep themselves rich. Now, another important thing here, just as a bit of an aside, before we go any further in reading this.

[8 : 45] And I don't know where you are with the Lord when you're watching this, but this is a very important thing for Christians to notice. And for those of you who are trying to figure out whether,

what this Christian thing is, it's important for you to notice that this is something which Christians are called to.

Christians aren't called to be an elite. We are not called to be over society. We are not called to be sort of separate from what happens to the community in the city.

It's not as if God says, listen, you join the church, you become a Christian, a true Christian, and you're going to sort of enter a little bubble. And bad things will happen to Ottawa, and bad things will happen to Canada, but bad things won't happen to you.

The economy of Canada can go down the tubes, but you will still have a good job and be making good money. The safety of the city can deteriorate, but you will be safe. That's not what the Bible says.

The person who's praying here, and there's lots of our conservative Jewish friends would say that Jeremiah is the author, a famous prophet of the Old Testament, the weeping prophet.

[9 : 55] Many Christians would believe, and I think there's actually a good case that Jeremiah is the author of this. But if it is Jeremiah, he himself wasn't a bad, I mean, he didn't do all of these things that brought judgment upon the city, but he shares in the judgment of the city.

See, it's part of the way that the Bible slowly but powerfully forms us to understand that we are to have a heart for our city, that we are to have a heart for our nation, that it's a good and proper thing for Christians to seek public office and to seek the good of the city, the good of the province, the good of the land.

It's good for a person to enter into the civil service or to enter into business, to seek the good of the city, the good of the country, the good of the province. It is a good thing to do, that we should have a heart for our city.

The things in our city which are evil should break our heart. We should speak against it. We should pray against it. The things in our city which are good, we should celebrate. But in all things, we should see that, in a sense, our final and true home is in heaven, the new heaven and the new earth.

But our earthly home matters very, very much. There is no holy land for us. There is no place that we should go and let the whole world go to hell, so to speak, that we are to put down roots where we live and seek the good of our city.

[11 : 15] And it's captured here very powerfully in all of the our praying, the us praying throughout the poem. Verse 7. Now in verse 7 here, all of a sudden it's going to sound a little bit as if it's a very, very Canadian, contemporary Canadian and North American prayer.

Because one of the things that's kept, that's very, very true of modern Canada is virtue signaling repentance. And by that I mean, you know, we confess all the terrible things done to First Nations in the past.

We confess all the terrible things done to this group or that group or the racism, et cetera, all in the past. And we can look very virtuous. We can look very pious. And if I'm offending some of you, it's the Bible.

I'm not going to apologize for it. It's just virtue signaling. There's no real repentance there, no real accepting of any type of responsibility. So look what happens in verse 7.

Our fathers sinned and are no more, and we bear their iniquities. And we bear their iniquities.

[12 : 26] And so this sounds as if it's just talking about this modern, it's as if they're now, has it, if you've been reading all the way through, one of the things which is very telling throughout chapters 1 through 4 is that the poet is accepting responsibility for what's happened, that they themselves have done something that means that God's punishment is deserved.

But what, well, actually, we're just going to hold this. This isn't virtue signaling. It's actually talking about something very, very important to understand about the nature of being human and when human beings do something wrong.

And it's the opposite of what Canadians do with virtue signaling. But we'll come to that when we get to verse 16. Verse 8. Slaves rule over us.

There is none to deliver us from their hand. We get our bread at the peril of our lives because of the sword in the wilderness. Our skin is as hot as an oven with the burning heat of famine.

Women are raped in Zion, young women in the towns of Judah. Princes are hung up by their hands. No respect is shown to the elders. Young men are compelled to grind at the mill and boys stagger under the loads of wood.

[13 : 44] The old men have left the city gate, the young men their music. The joy of our hearts has ceased, our dancing has been turned to mourning. The crown has fallen from our head.

Woe to us for we have sinned. Now just sort of pause here. You'll see here once again the very, very clear recognition on the poet that they as a people, including himself and him in his own ways, have sinned and God's punishment is just.

Now there's two things about here to notice before we go anything further in the psalm. The first thing is this. If I do something which is very wrong, in fact does have repercussions to my children, and it might even have repercussions to my grandchildren or my great-grandchildren, that in fact we often think of sin or doing wrong as a very, very individualistic act.

But the fact is that it's never an individualistic act. We, you might or might not accept this, you might not accept this if you're not a Christian, it, everything which we do which is wrong is something which is in a sense an offense or an attack against God.

But because we human beings are inextricably part of the created order and inextricably part of a social order, whenever we do wrong, the whole utilitarian, consequentialist, relativistic understanding of doing wrong is just not humanly true and we see that.

[15 : 21] Many of us struggle with, in fact, the repercussions of what our parents or our grandparents have done. We're dealing with a dad maybe who was a terrible alcoholic or who was exceptionally violent and broke up the family that was violent towards you and you still bear the scars of that.

You still hear his voice in your head and it's hard to get over that, to get around that. That there was some type of maybe terrible financial ruin that completely and utterly affected your family and still continues to affect you and your grandchildren.

I know that if I was to have an affair and to break up our marriage it would have repercussions not just to myself and my wife but to my kids and to the grandkids.

It would be devastating to a large number of people. It would be devastating to the congregation.

And so what we see in chapter, in verse 7 isn't virtue signaling saying, oh yeah, you know, our parents stole this land and we're really sad for it.

We continue to live in the land which is one of the reasons why you will never see in Church of the Messiah us beginning a service about how we're on land that belongs to other people because, and if I offend you, maybe this will cause a Twitter storm.

[16 : 36] People who say that don't believe it. They don't give up their house. It's virtue signaling. And it's virtue signaling with no type of cost.

And what we see here is this very, very powerful empirically true understanding of the consequence of evil. that the wrong done in an earlier generation or generations continues to have a consequence that barrels for several generations and that we often experience.

But at the same time, and they're now, and they're living with this. And they're acknowledging this. And at the same time, though, they themselves have done something wrong. And the punishment that they bear is not just part of the consequences of that which was done in an earlier generation by forebearers, but also something which they themselves are responsible for.

In fact, actually, one of the things which is very hard in this book, the book of Lamentations, for us as Canadians to get our mind around, and I'm definitely including myself in this, is it's very, very hard for modern Canadians to actually confess wrongdoing.

I find this all the time. I get validly called out maybe that I haven't answered an email or something like that. And I start to answer and in my reflex motion, I want to start saying, I want to do this.

[18 : 04] I want to say, I'm really sorry for not responding to your email that came two weeks ago. I apologize for it. And then as soon as I say I apologize for it, without even having to do it, I can say, you know, but I've been really busy.

But I've been really busy. I have lots of emails. I've been dealing with these really important things. There was this crisis. You see what I've done? I haven't actually apologized. And the fact of the matter is, is that one of the things which is so hard for us when we read this book is this, he acknowledges and accepts that he has done wrong.

And at no point in time in any of the five chapters is there anything like what you and I do all of the time that's part of the air that we breathe? There's no blame shifting.

There's no face-saving stories. There's no excuses. There's no smoke being blown to try to distract you from what the real issue is. There's no distracting.

There's no dissembling. There's no cloaking. Cloaking means, well, I was really doing this for this very, very good reason and I'm really sorry that you are upset. Well, once again, one moment, I'm doing this for a good reason.

[19 : 17] I'm sorry you're upset. That's a very common thing as well. No, no, no, you lied. No, you stole. No, you cheated.

Not, I was intending something really good and I really, really, really mean well and I'm sorry you're upset. No, you abused your power. Don't give me this thing that you have good motives that somehow cloaks what you did and you're just bothered that I'm bothered.

No, you abused your power. There's no cloaking. There's no whining. There's no virtue signaling. And I would like to suggest, that's one of the reasons we have a hard time reading the book, by the way, is that none of this happens and we're not quite sure what to do with somebody who just says, we did wrong.

I did wrong. Stop. I mean, period. No good motives. Well, we're just, yeah, yeah, okay, I know that we were worshipping all these other gods.

Yeah, I know that we were sacrificing babies. Yeah, I know that we practiced infanticide. Yeah, I know that we sold our boys and girls to be prostitutes.

[20 : 29] Yeah, but I was really trying to find myself and find God and I'm really bothered that you're upset. that's what we expect because that's what we do.

And you see, it might be one of the reasons why we have so much problems with relationships, that so many marriages end in divorce, that so many common law partnerships end in separation and divorce, that so many friendships end, is you see, we're just so deeply addicted to not accepting responsibility.

responsibility. But if you'd actually have a good relation, you can't have a good relationship without accepting responsibility for the bad that you did. You see, the other person will put up for it for a while, but at some point in time they don't.

Because you see, when we just use excuses, when we just use blame shifting, when we do this virtue signaling, when we do all of this stuff, we're really just trying to manipulate the other person. And at some point in time, the person being manipulated says, you know what? I don't like being manipulated. I want to have a good relationship with you. And I can have a good relationship with you if you're always manipulating me.

[21 : 49] You know, you can't actually extend grace or mercy if there's no acknowledgement of wrong. And that is so much a part of what it means to be Canadians today that is part of the problem we have with the Book of Lamentations.

See, time and time and time and time again, the problems we have with the Book of Lamentations, if you sit and think about it for a while, actually shows there's a problem in us. We think that the Book of Lamentations, in a sense, is ammunition against God who's on trial.

But if you think about it, if you really think about what's going on, you start to realize that it's revealing us. And if we, if I, if I spend all of my time trying to manipulate my kids, manipulate my wife, manipulate my grandkids, never accepting responsibility, never accepting any type of blame, and it, it wrecks the relationship.

And if I, if I do that with my wife, how can that ever, how can I ever possibly do, how can I ever possibly be right if there really is a God that does exist? Now, we've read up until verse 16. the last two verses are very important to bring this, the long list of the disgrace to a completion, the pouring out of their heart to God.

[23 : 28] And then we see how they pray in light of all of this. Verse 17, for this, okay, look at verse 16 again, the crown has fallen from our head, woe to us, for we have sinned.

For this, our heart has become sick. For these things, our eyes have grown dim. In other words, our heart has become sick because of their sin and because of their disgrace.

It's both. It's not an either or. It's both the disgrace, which carries its own weight, and the sin, which troubles them. You see, this is a whole other sermon, but it's actually part of the profound wisdom. I think only, no system of thought is as wise as the Bible. If you actually compare it, if you look at the options, because the fact of the matter is, there is something in us.

There is something in you, and there is something in me that does wrong. Like, it's just there.

[24 : 35] Not all the time, obviously. Like, not all the time. But, you know, but why is it that, you know, you have a whole day, maybe, you know, with your best friend or something like that, and

they've been really kind, they've been really generous to you, and then at the end, I don't know, maybe it's like washing dishes, or maybe it's doing some of their little simple chore, and you know you should get up and do something, but you just sit and be selfish.

Like, why is it you do that? Like, why do I do that? Like, there's a type of mystery to why, anybody ever chooses evil, because it's just, it's just there.

And as that becomes clear to us, and that's what's going on here, it's just there. The sin is just there. And you've seen that in the previous weeks, that even after they've been judged, there's still these terrible things that people are doing.

It's just there. Well, the Bible describes why that happens very powerfully. It not only describes it in poems like that, but it actually, we'll see in a moment, gives a bit of a, of a way to dealing with the fact that this makes our hearts sick when we realize it.

Verse 18, for Mount Zion, which lies desolate, jackals prowl over it. And it's a very, very powerful closing image. Just think, those of you who watch movies, if you, maybe it's an adventure movie or a fantasy movie or something like that, and you have the, the hero or the heroine and, or the group, and they're, they're walking along and off in the distance they see some ruins and in the ruins they see some jackals.

[25 : 58] What does that always mean? It means that if there are human beings there, they're hiding. It means it's a place of devastation that might once have been great, but now is not.

To see the couple of jackals wandering around amidst the ruins creates a very type of emotional type of response, a place of danger, a place of some great evil that had befallen that place and those are the final words of the pouring out of their hearts.

It begins with, see our disgrace and from verses 2 to 18 the disgrace is loaded with pictures, powerful images and this is the final image of the jackals amidst the ruins, which is where the poet lives.

So how does the poet now turn to talk to God? Verse 19 through 22 or maybe I'll just, well, I'll read all four verses and I'll sort of loop back and talk about it and then we'll try to unpack a little bit about this particular question which started the whole sermon, does God still punish people today?

It goes like this, verse 19, but you, O Lord, reign forever. Your throne endures to all generations. It's very powerful, right? You have the, you go from verse 18, the jackals amidst the ruins, the ruins where the poet lives.

[27 : 23] Verse 19, the Lord reigns. Despite the circumstances that he sees around him, the Lord reigns. The Lord has reigned in the past.

He reigns today. He will reign forever. But you, O Lord, reign forever. Your throne endures to all generations. You know, one of the things which I often pray about in my own personal prayers, especially this last couple of years, it's been a very important thing for me to pray that the Lord continues to reign in our world.

That the Lord reigns in Canada. The Lord is sovereign, maybe is a better way to put it. And that he only works on his plan A. He doesn't need plan B, he doesn't need plan C, he doesn't need plan D. Not surprised by what happens and thinks, oh dang, I hadn't taken that into account, I better change. He's always only working on plan A. And so they're often asking, so Lord, hold me in the hollow of your hand and help me to walk with you.

But verse 20, and here one of the things you're going to see at the end, and one of the things to notice in verses 19, 20, 21, 22, you're going to see this claim, the doubt, the claim, the doubt.

[28 : 35] And it's, to be in doubt is, to have doubt is to be in two minds, or at least two minds. In a sense, a mind about who God is and what he's like, and have some other doubts about whether he's really like that, or in this case, the emotions and the images are driving the fact that maybe, just maybe, this time has come that their evil has been so bad that in fact, it's irredeemable.

That the evil that they have done, the evil that he has done, is so bad that it is irredeemable. And the Lord is still on his throne, he does show mercy, but they have done something ten steps beyond which mercy can be shown.

So you go to verse 19 again, but you, O Lord, reign forever, your throne endures to all generations. Why do you forget us forever? Why do you forsake us for so many days?

Restore us to yourself, O Lord, that we may be restored. Renew our days as of old, unless you have utterly rejected us and you remain exceedingly angry with us.

You'll notice here that it's restore us not to riches, restore us not to power, restore us not to perfect health, but restore us, O Lord, to yourself.

[29 : 54] Last week I gave you a bit of an analogy, and this is something which you need to also take into account when you read the book of Lamentations. It's asking a deeply personal question. It would be as if, you know, some evil person came up and said, George, I'm going to give you an option.

You can, I'm going to take away your house. I'm going to take away your car. I'm going to take away your job, but your marriage will be intact. Or I'm going to give you a bigger house, a better car, way more money, but you're going to lose your marriage.

You're going to lose Louise. What do you choose? And if I even pause about that, then there's a problem. I mean, I know I would choose my wife. I would choose the poverty and have my wife. And we all know that if, in fact, we could listen in on other people's minds, another couple, and, in fact, the woman was thinking, okay, I think I would take the house and the car, while the husband's saying, I think I'd take my wife, and that became public, we'd all be on one person's side and not the other, right?

Because we understand the deep importance that human beings have to be with another person, to be with a person in the covenant of love. And throughout the entire bigger story of the Bible, the bigger story of the Bible is a love story, that God, the triune God, made human beings not because he had any particular needs or because he was lonely, because only Christianity accounts for the fact that there's not a lonely God, that we're not a God that's sort of above or below love and good and evil, that the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit, three persons, yet one God, from all eternity there has been love, there's been goodness, there's been beauty, there's been exchange, there's been interactions.

[31 : 39] And out of the fullness of love, God creates human beings. Out of the fullness of God's being, he creates contingent human beings made in his own image who can not only learn to amongst themselves in some small way model the eternal love of the Father for the Son and the Son for the Father and the Holy Spirit and all, but also be able to love him.

And that's how God made the entire world. And then we human beings broke that. We decided that we would be God. We wanted to be like God. We wanted to take God off of his throne and we wanted to be on that throne.

And in doing that, we broke our relationship with the source of love, the source of goodness, the source of truth, the source of beauty. And as soon as we did that, not only did we break our relationship with God, but if you go back and you read Genesis 3, we instantly broke our relationship with ourselves, our relationship with others, and our relationship with the creation. And that's, you see, why there's just something within us that does wrong, and yet we are not completely wrong. Because the image of God and God's creation within us was bent but not broken, not effaced.

And God never gave up on his created order. And even in that early story, he promises that there will be a day when he will restore human beings to himself. He will renew by bringing a way to have people in him to come back into him, and that that will come in the future.

[33 : 03] And this book of Lamentations is part of that, setting the riddle, so to speak, of how could human beings who continue to sin possibly be restored? How can God show mercy, which is not just privilege?

And the Bible as a whole is part of this larger love story about how God redeems and restores people to himself purely and utterly out of the beauty of grace, the beauty of mercy.

The beauty of justice is not broken by the beauty of mercy and of grace, but that the grace of God illuminates his justice, and the justice of God illuminates his grace, and it all becomes real in flesh. Because, you see, here's the question. Which I started with. Does God still punish today? Well, what we see here is an account of God having punished in history.

And if you read the New Testament, if you read the story of Ananias and Sapphira, it is obvious that even after the death and resurrection of Jesus, that God still actually does punish in history.

[34 : 12] So is it possible that what's happening to you might be God's punishment? Well, I think we can't know for certain.

It might be. And that's not the answer most of you are wanting to hear. In fact, it probably creates fears within you. But it might be.

I mean, I can share with you, when we walked away from our property because we wanted to be loyal to Jesus, and we moved to the Ottawa Little Theatre, we had to leave our denomination because our denomination had left the gospel and was following a false gospel.

And so we, to be true to Jesus, had to separate from our denomination, and they came after us, and eventually we settled out of court and we walked away from our property.

And for the first two years, the congregation declined almost by, well, declined by 40% over the first two years. Not at first, but over the first two, two and a half years.

[35 : 18] It was a very, very, very hard time of leadership for me. And I will confess, one of the things I kept pointing out in my heart to God is, God, is it because of some sin in my life or is it because of some sin in the congregation?

You know, have I stopped preaching your word? Have I stopped praying? Are there things which I have done for which this is coming? Now, I didn't come to a particular, I mean, you can never, you can't, people who go and say, you know, this is God's judgment, COVID's God's judgment on Canada, you can't make those claims.

You're not God, I'm not God. But on the other hand, people who say that it definitely isn't, they're not God either. It might be. And in fact, it's a valid type of thing for a Christian to ask.

Is this because of some sin that we have been doing, that I have been doing, that this is happening to me? And if it is, Lord, my cry of my heart was to show me if this was the case, that I might repent and be restored to him.

But while this troubles us a little bit, it actually points us to something which is of great hope. You see, if I tell you that there's the, all of the history of the world is captured in the Bible and that it's ultimately a love story, that human beings were made by a God and then we fell and then God promised that he would send a redeemer and he sends a redeemer and he makes us right with himself and we're going to go to a better place when we die if we're in him.

[36 : 49] And you might say, George, well, that's just a good story, but it's just a story. It's just one of many stories. But the fact of the matter is, is we have no grounds to believe that story or any story. The fact of the matter is, is the hard-headed amongst us say, you try to get as many toys as you can while you live, you get sick and then you die and that sucks, but so be it.

At least I'm alive right now and I'm going to eat and I'm going to drink and I'm going to party, I'm going to consume, I'm going to try to get as much as I am, I'm going to forget about the fact that at the end of the day it's just the grave. I'm going to do whatever I can to have a good time right now because, you see, all you are presenting is a story to comfort people, a story of a God that actually isn't there, there really is a world, it's just a story, George, and there's lots of stories.

And if you know what, George, if that story gives meaning to your life, that's fine. For me, a trip to a bar, a couple of Jack Daniels with my friends, that gives me the meaning, and why should I pick yours over mine?

One of the things which is so powerful about the book of Lamentations, the fact that God's judgment actually happens in history, is it points to the true and greater judgment that will fall to each human being, that if, in fact, God has judged in history, is judging in history, and will judge in history, it points to the true and greater judgment that any human being, every human being, will be under. But it also points to the true and greater restoration and renewal. When the book of Lamentations was written, the person could just look back on the Exodus, he could just look back on how God used Gideon to defeat Midian.

[38 : 31] He could just look back at these times of great things in the past and wonder if it's going to happen today. But what we Christians understand, and this is why that thing which sounds so odd to people, George, why should you be so concerned about whether you can actually know whether Jesus exists?

Why are you so concerned whether he actually died on the cross and rose from the dead? Well, it's because it changes the Christian story from just being one story amongst many, the great pumpkin, the tooth fairy, Santa Claus, and Jesus.

And it's just one fanciful story and Santa Claus and the tooth fairy please two-year-olds and for some odd reason Jesus pleases 22-year-olds and 52-year-olds and 62-year-olds.

It changes it from being just another story to saying it's not just another story. The mercy of God took flesh.

The justice of God took flesh. The judgment of God took flesh. That in my place condemned he stood.

[39 : 42] That the judgment and lamentations happen in history. The judgment that I deserve which I will only know in the future when I die impure before God.

that that judgment was laid on Jesus. And my hope is the real defeat of death by Jesus. This actually happened in history.

Santa Claus not in history. Easter Bunny not in history. Tooth Fairy not in history. This happens. Jesus. And it's only from that place to understand that the doom that I deserve fell on him and the grace and the love and the mercy that I do not deserve is offered to me.

That the brokenness of my relationship with God was laid on him and the purity of his relationship with God was offered to me. And when I put my hands in the hands of Jesus that's what I receive in this profound exchange that happened in history and is available at every moment in history.

And that once you put your hands in the hands of Jesus it is the beginning of a completely different eternal destiny. So you see it is from that point of view that I can begin to try to learn to acknowledge that I have done wrong.

[41 : 07] Because no amount of recognizing wrong in my life is something that is going to shock Jesus. And it is from that point of view of the cross that I can begin to understand that there is no degree of wrong that I could ever possibly do that was too big for Jesus to deal with when he died upon the cross.

And that's true of you as well. And it's from that particular place of security that even if there are things by which we are being punished that we can call out to God that he would restore that relationship to us and calling out to him won't take it away instantly because our emotions don't usually change that quickly but that he in fact will hear our prayer and the longing of his heart that all that he is doing is preparing you and I for an eternal weight of glory and that we can pour out our heart to him that we can pour out our heart to him and that we don't have to worry that you know if anything particular thing has happened to us or it's not it's that the final word about you and me in Christ we already know about the final word for you and me when we are in Christ because in my place condemned he stood from there I can pray for there I can look at the city and bless it from there I can look at the city and know that the city doesn't get the final word about right and wrong the city isn't if the city ends the city of God continues and endures because God is still on his throne I can pray for the city I can pray for myself I can pray for you I can look at my sin I can seek the true good of the city and the true good for you anyway we're coming to a close I just want to encourage you if you have never given your life to Jesus there's no better time than today to call out to him to be your savior and your lord and to know that he will accept it and receive it and for all of us we need to pray for our city we need to pray for our land is God wanting to teach us something and even if it's completely unrecognized and unrepentant of can we at least for those of us who are in church of the Messiah begin to maybe see and understand and pray into it and continue to seek the blessing of our city the blessing of our province and the blessing of our land and the blessing of the earth let's pray Father we thank you for the hard truths that you introduced to us through the book of Lamentations the hard truths about ourselves and Father we give you thanks and praise that not only do you reveal the hard truths about ourselves to us but because this is setting forth or preparing us to know about Jesus it's also preparing us for the beautifully rock hard rock solid truths about your grace your mercy your justice your peace your truth your grace offered to us in the person of your son we ask Father that you would make us disciples of Jesus who are gripped by the gospel learning to live for your glory and this we ask in the name of Jesus
Amen