

Swallowed Up in Anger

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Date: 24 April 2005

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[0 : 00] This is the morning service at Holy Trinity on the 24th of April 2005. The preacher is Paul Barker.

His sermon is entitled Swallowed Up in Anger and is based on Lamentations chapter 2 verses 1 to 22.

On Thursday this week, as many of you will have seen or heard, Chappelle Corby broke down in tears in a court in Denpasar. The prosecution lawyers in her case had demanded life imprisonment, which in Indonesia means literally for the term of her life.

The judge made it clear that when he brings a verdict probably next month, he could still determine even the death penalty if she was found guilty of the crimes of having drugs as being charged. The Australian officials are urging leniency. Her defence lawyers argue she's innocent. She's just had drugs planted on her. The issue of guilt and what sort of punishment is appropriate is one that confronts us regularly in our lives, within family life as well as in national and in international life and law.

[1 : 32] Hers is just one of many cases that have been in our news in recent days. Nine other Australians arrested in Bali this week for drugs-related offences, some found with drugs on them, others charged with being the ringleader of the group and so on.

Some of them perhaps will face possibly ten years in jail, others perhaps life imprisonment or death. Ought they to have been arrested in Australia is one of the arguments that's floating around, where they would have had at least a more lenient sentence given if they were found guilty.

The issue of guilt and the appropriate punishment confronts us all the time. A teenager was killed a couple of years ago in Canterbury with a hit-and-run driver. That person got a couple of years. The family are outraged. The community is relatively outraged. The state government is thinking about increasing the penalty for hit-and-run offences. Maybe ten years would be more appropriate. What is right? Guilt leading to what is appropriate punishment. And then in Spain and the US, some Al-Qaeda-linked potential terrorists are facing trial and someone is calling for some sentence of thousands of years imprisonment if found guilty.

[2 : 50] I didn't know people in Spain or America live so long, to be honest. But it raises and keeps raising to us the question of what is appropriate punishment for guilt.

The book of Lamentations, which we began to look at last week and we'll look at for the next three weeks after this, laments the fall and destruction of Jerusalem in 587 BC.

One of many, dozens, hundreds in the ancient world and in the modern world of cities that have been destroyed in warfare. This one, though, is particularly significant.

At least in the Bible it is. And the book of Lamentations, though it laments with tears the destruction of the city of Jerusalem, makes no bones that this is God's direct act.

It is not a lament that is bewailing the fact that Babylon has been stronger than Israel. Rather, that God has brought this punishment and destruction.

[3 : 52] Moreover, the book makes it clear, as we saw last week and we'll see throughout, that this destruction is God's direct act against the sin and transgression of the people of Israel.

It is not a random event. It is not an inexplicable event. Lamentations laments the severity of the punishment that God brings against his people for their sin and rebellion.

Raising the question, in a sense, is this fair punishment deserved punishment or not? And like Chappelle Corby this week, the book of Lamentations we see laments with floods of tears the destruction and punishment that God has brought.

Last week, the focus of chapter 1 was more on the victim, Jerusalem itself. We saw descriptions of it in the aftermath of destruction and we saw descriptions of the destruction itself.

Now, at least for the first half of this chapter, the shift is more towards the perpetrator of the act than the victim. That is, God becomes more clearly in focus, especially in the first 9 or 10 verses.

[5 : 06] All the way through those verses, God is the subject of the verbs. God is the one who does this. Not Babylon, not another nation, but God.

So God is the one who has swallowed up Jerusalem in verse 2. God's the one who's broken them down, who's brought them low. In verse 3, God's the one who's cut them down, who's withdrawn his hand, who's burned.

God is the one in verse 4, who's bent the bow, who has slain, who's poured out his fury. God's the one in verse 5, who's become their enemy, who's swallowed them up, who's laid them waste.

God's the one in verse 6, who's broken them down, destroyed, ended and spurned. God's the one who in verse 7, has scorned and disowned, delivered up to their enemies.

God's the one in verse 8, who has determined to ruin, who's not stopped the destruction, who's caused mourning. And in verse 9, God is the one who has ruined and broken the bars of the city.

[6 : 05] That's just a sample of the key verbs, the key things that God has done against Jerusalem and Israel. It's a litany of destruction. And at the end of it, there's a sense in which nothing is spared.

No one is spared. All of it the hand of God directly. In these opening verses, 1 to 9, there is the spread of the destruction.

It's not just Jerusalem, the capital city, that's been destroyed, but all the strongholds, the towns round about, that are mentioned in verse 2, for example, and elsewhere.

Some of the significant rural towns would also have been walled to protect them. They've also fallen. And indeed, archaeologists have found a piece of ostrakon, a piece of broken pottery on which was inscribed, the fear of the people of Lachish, a town a few kilometres from Jerusalem, as it saw the beacon of Azekah up the road burn out, knowing the Babylonians were advancing, and it was the next town and the last town before Jerusalem itself later would fall.

And these verses also describe the destruction of Jerusalem itself, especially verses 6 onwards. In 6, we read that God has broken down his booth like a garden.

[7 : 28] He's destroyed his tabernacle. It's probably referring to the temple. It's using the language of tabernacle or booth, probably to show the insecurity of the temple. It's like a tent.

It's just torn away, blown down, burnt up. The actual temple, of course, was a majestic structure, the dwelling place of God. But verse 6 tells us it's gone.

And as a result, verse 6 goes on to say, no festivals or Sabbaths. No festivals of celebration.

There's nowhere to celebrate. The place you'd bring your sacrifices and rejoice and sing hymns and psalms, it's gone.

The temple or tabernacle, no more. And those special feasts of Passover, of booths, of weeks and so on during the year, no more. And indeed, as the end of verse 6 says, God has spurned king and priest, the people who would lead the congregation, lead the population, in their festivals and religious occurrences, gone, destroyed.

The verses, verse 7 goes on to say, that God has destroyed his altar and his sanctuary, the heart of the temple, where God's own dwelling place would be, gone.

[8 : 39] The walls of her palaces, no more. Either the walls of the temple, referring to God's palace, or perhaps the walls of the king's palace in Jerusalem, whatever, gone, destroyed, handed over to the enemy.

And in a sort of perverse way, the rejoicing of the enemy, at the destruction of the temple, is a bit like a religious festival. In the very place where you'd get streams of Israelites and Jews, coming to worship God, and sing the praises, at the times of festival, well now they can hear the rejoicing, verse 7 ends by saying, but it's actually a clamour of the enemies, who are exulting in the victory, over Jerusalem, on that day.

Verse 8 tells us that the walls of Jerusalem, and their ramparts, gone. Those walls would lay in ruins for another 120 years, before Nehemiah would rebuild them.

No longer is Jerusalem a protected city. The walls destroyed. People could come in and out, at will. There was nothing inside there, though, for them to go.

And finally, the gates have gone, in verse 9. Figuratively speaking, being sunk into the ground. That is, gone completely. Even perhaps the foundations might be implied, by being sunk into the ground.

[10:00] Again, no security anymore for this city, in which in the heart of the temple, God, in a sense, once dwelt. As I said last week, this is not just any city being destroyed.

This is the city that is at the heart of the identity of the people of God, in their relationship with God. This is the place where God dwelt, where people would relate to God, they'd come to for pilgrimages.

It was not only their capital city, it was their religious centre. The place that bespoke their identity, as people loved, and redeemed by God himself.

And it's gone. The city they thought was inviolable, safe, secure forever, gone. Temple, walls, palaces, everything, gone. And what is even more shocking, is that it is God who's brought it about. God, God, God alone, is the subject of all of these things, in these opening verses of chapter 2. And so for Israel, who probably relied on its special status as the children of God, thinking themselves that they were God's friends, and their enemies were God's enemies, that he'd fight against them, not Israel, their special status counts for naught.

[11:14] Notice how often in this chapter, Israel or Jerusalem is called my daughter. It's there in verse 1, how the Lord in his anger has humiliated daughter Zion. It's there in verse 2, the strongholds of daughter Judah, have been brought down.

It's there in verse 4. He's killed all in whom we took pride in the tent of daughter Zion. That is, it's heightening on the one hand, the intimacy of relationship between God and his people.

He's their father, they're his daughter. But at the same time, it's saying, and yet God's destroyed it all. It's all gone. Behind all of these actions of God, is his anger.

Verse 1 begins, how the Lord in his anger, has humiliated daughter Zion. Verse 3 begins, he's cut down in fierce anger, all the might of Israel.

Verse 4 ends, that he's poured out his fury like fire. And verse 6, the same, ends, that in his fierce indignation, he's spurned king and priest.

[12:20] An understanding that God is angry sometimes, full of wrath and fury sometimes, is much maligned in modern Christian preaching, it seems to me.

That's a serious mistake. It shows a small-minded understanding of the anger of God. The anger of God is not a hot-headed, fickle temper, a sort of road rage that just all of a sudden bursts out in an expression of anger.

Not at all. As we see here, the anger of God is considered, calculated in a sense. It's his response to people's sin and rebellion and transgression.

That's it. It's a righteous anger that is angry at any offence of sin and error. And anger shows that God loves and God cares.

On those very rare occasions when I as a child did something wrong, my parents, I can't even remember any actually, but my parents would get angry.

[13:31] It showed that they actually loved and cared. And I'm sure those of you who are parents know the same response. That when your children do something wrong, there is an anger there.

Not an anger without love. It's an anger because you love and you want your children to do the right thing. It's because you love them and you love them with some element of righteousness. So when God is angry because we sin and we fail and we rebel against Him and we don't do what is right according to His standards, His anger to us is because He loves us and He cares for us.

It shows us that what we do matters to God. How much worse it would be if God didn't care. If we could do this or that with impunity. We don't matter to God but we do matter to God and His anger shows that love and care for us.

So do not dismiss quickly the view that God may be angry at sin. It's thoroughly biblical. It begins and ends it runs all the way through the Bible.

And don't also pit the anger of God the Father against a sort of loving benign Jesus either. For we see on more than one occasion Jesus getting angry with the sins of those around Him.

[14:53] Not only when He overturned tables in the temple but at other times as well. The anger of God is real against human sin and rebellion.

And that's what Israel, Judah, Jerusalem are lamenting that they are now the objects of God's anger because of their sin and rebellion here. All of this as we saw last week is meant to warn us that if we pursue paths of sin and rebellion against God then like Israel suffered the destruction of Jerusalem and the end of many of their lives one day we too will face the judgment of God when Jesus returns and this is but a pale imitation of the fury and anger of God on that day.

This is warning us not to end up where Judah and Jerusalem ended up as victims of the anger of God punished for their sins.

Well no wonder it's such a lament. They're not just destroyed but they're the victims of the anger of God. So in verse 10 we get a picture of their lament. The elders of daughter Zion sit on the ground in silence they've thrown dust on their heads and put on sackcloth.

The typical actions of mourning and grief no longer sitting in places of honour on seats of pride but rather the elders the leaders of the people now sitting in the ground in the dust in silence.

[16:17] No longer able to offer any word of comfort or advice or guidance. And on the other social extreme the young girls of Jerusalem have bowed their heads to the ground.

The old and the young male and the female it's not meant to be two exclusive groups it's probably a way of saying in effect everybody from the old to the young male and female are mourning and bewailing the fall of Jerusalem.

And the narrator who's describing this like the TV commentator that I suggested last week he himself is caught up and cannot stop himself crying and weeping as well.

He's not immune to the scenes of carnage that he observes. So in verse 11 he says of himself my eyes are spent with weeping my stomach churns my bile is poured out on the ground.

The ancient world the liver was what people regarded as the seat of the emotion. because infants and babes faint in the streets of the city. He's seen the aftermath of destruction the famine that is a result the lack of infrastructure to get food and he sees people starving and fainting with weakness.

[17:34] These children cry to their mothers where is bread and wine as they faint like the wounded in the streets of the city as their life is poured out on their mother's bosom. Don't think that these children crying for bread and wine is a bit odd.

Why are they wanting wine? Give them water. But it's probably implying that the water supply has expired and there may well be wine in reserve. In those days of course they didn't have coke.

Hard to imagine a world without coke or lemonade. It was basically wine or water that you would drink and wine was there not for alcoholic purposes so much as just preservative purposes.

It's saying in effect the times are dire. It's famine conditions and the writer himself is brought to tears stomach wrenching mourning and tears as he observes the city of Jerusalem in this way.

Now he turns his attention from description to actually address Zion himself. So far in a sense he's told us the reader what he's seen what he's observed.

[18:39] He's told us his own reaction in verses 11 and 12 and now he addresses Jerusalem Zion itself. He's struggling to find words of comfort. He wants to be able to sort of put his arms on Jerusalem so to speak and offer them some form of comfort but he can't.

Verse 13 he asks rhetorical questions that in a sense have no answer of comfort. What can I say for you to what compare you O daughter Jerusalem? That is I can't find anything to compare you with. I can't ease your grief by saying other people go through this and they pull through. There's nothing comparable. To what can I liken you that I may comfort you O virgin daughter Zion?

And the implied answer is no one can I compare you with. And the reason for vast as the sea is your ruin.

Who can heal you? Implied answer no one. That is their grief is as vast as the sea the oceans. There's no comfort.

[19:55] No words of comfort. Think how easy it is to give cheery words of comfort to people. There there it'll be alright it's not as bad as you think.

Always look on the bright side of life. Things will be okay. Just wait. It's not really that bad. Often they're vain words empty words really. Trying to bring comfort.

But they may not be that much help and they certainly may not be true. We often clamour when we're grieving with itching ears for words of comfort like that. Oh it's not your fault don't worry God's not angry with you he's loving you he's going to do everything that's right no judgment from God don't worry about that.

At the time of the fall of Jerusalem there were lots of prophets around. Jeremiah who many think wrote this book of Lamentations was often confronted and besieged by false prophets who kept on saying it'll be okay Jerusalem will stand when it fell it'll be rebuilt God's okay God loves you you're all right don't worry nothing to worry about.

But like the writer here Jeremiah the same. There were no words of comfort because the writer here Jeremiah the prophets the true prophets that is they knew what was going on.

[21 : 14] They knew that this was God's punishment for Israel's sin and there was no comfort. See what verse 14 says your prophets have seen for you false and deceptive visions they have not exposed your iniquity to restore your fortunes but they've seen oracles for you that are false and misleading.

See what the false prophets were doing? They were trying to offer vain words of comfort that completely ignored the real cause of the problem Israel's iniquity.

The true prophets like the narrator here they had no words of comfort because they knew the cause of the problem Israel's iniquity. Unless you deal with the core problem the sin of the people of God then there can be no comfort.

None at all. It's Israel's sin that has brought about the judgment of God here. The false prophets don't see that or ignore it.

They turn a blind eye to sin and in a sense they just pat them on the back saying there there it will be okay. Times don't change that much there's nothing new under the sun.

[22 : 31] Our modern church is inundated with false prophets who keep telling the people in the pews there there you're right keep doing what you want in effect. Keep ignoring the standards of God the morals and the ethics that God reveals to us in the scriptures.

And of course people clamour after that. We like to be told that God loves us and we can do what we like. We like to be deaf to the moral standards of God in the scriptures.

But they're false prophets who speak like that who don't deal with the iniquity of God's people. Don't be deceived by false prophets.

They're in our day as well as in Jeremiah's day at the fall of Jerusalem. Human sin is real and God's punishment and wrath are real. Don't be deceived that they're not.

Human sin will be judged by God on that final day. will be held to account for our lives and our actions. And the Bible makes it very clear that whatever we think about human sin, God regards it most seriously and the death penalty is appropriate wherever we're from.

[23 : 49] Of course God gives us ways out through forgiveness through Jesus Christ. Christ. But in no way does they compromise his moral standards and the final judgment and wrath.

Or for Jerusalem, wallowing in their pity and lamenting their grief and destruction, insult is added to injury. The passers-by mock them in verse 15, clapping their hands, not with encouragement, but mockery and derision, hissing and wagging their heads at door to Jerusalem, quoting in effect Psalms 48 and 50, but turning them back on Jerusalem, saying you trusted in this city and look what's happened.

And then the enemies join in along with those passers-by in verse 16. They also hiss, they gnash their teeth and they cry out with gloating and arrogance, although the early part of this chapter has made it clear that God has brought the destruction, not them.

Insult added to injury, their destruction is worsened by the hostility and ridicule they face. And then comes the climax of this description of this chapter in verse 17.

The narrator makes it clear that what's happened is not a spontaneous event, not a spur-of-the-moment occurrence, but rather the Lord has done what he purposed. He has carried out his threat as he ordained long ago.

[25 : 10] He's demolished without pity, he's made the enemy rejoice over you and exalted the might of your foes. That is, you Jerusalem in your lament, you should know what's going on here.

Because long ago God threatened to bring these events about. Long ago? 800 years before in fact, as God gave his law to Israel through Moses at Mount Sinai, as we read it in the book of Exodus, Leviticus and Deuteronomy.

It's very clear there that if you rebel against the Lord and do not keep his law as has been given to you here at Mount Sinai, then these things will happen to you, culminating in destruction of Israel, exile to foreign lands, the ridicule and mockery of pagan nations round about.

It's all there earlier on. There's nothing new here. God's not fickle. God hasn't changed. God has acted as an enemy against his people, not because he's changed sides, but because they have.

Their sin has meant they've transferred their allegiance from God to the enemies of God and therefore God now acts as their enemy in bringing down Jerusalem. God made it clear earlier in the scriptures, how important you see the scriptures are for us to understand the ways of God and to understand how we ought to live in response.

[26 : 27] This is cruelly calculated anger and wrath of God, predetermined against sin, made clear both in the law 800 years before and in the true prophets like Amos and Isaiah and Micah and others who spoke at periods leading up to the fall of Jerusalem.

But all that time Israel ignored and were deaf to the threats, the warnings, the laws of God. In effect, you see, the narrator is in verse 17 drawing attention to the sin of Israel.

He's making it clear that their suffering is because of their sin. They are guilty. And sometimes when we suffer, we must do the same. That is, not all the suffering that you and I will suffer will be because of our own failings and sins and transgressions against God, but some will be or might be. We must entertain the possibility when we suffer that God is punishing us for something. It will not always be the case. I don't mean to say that every time you suffer you think God's punishing me for something.

But there is that possibility. And my perception of us as Christians is that we are not keen for that possibility. We don't consider it much when we suffer.

[27 : 45] But sometimes it may be that the suffering we have is God punishing us for our sin. Sometimes. As a result here, the narrator now pleads with Jerusalem to turn to God.

See verses 18 and 19. They're urgent words. Cry aloud to the Lord. Let tears stream down. Give yourself no rest. Give your eyes no respite.

Cry out in the night. Pour out your heart like water. Lift your hands to him. A sequence of urgent imperatives and commands to Zion to cry out to God.

I find those verses striking. They're striking because here Israel is in the midst of the destruction of the city. as though in effect there's no life and no future left.

And yet the writer here is pleading with Zion, turn to God. Don't give up on God, he's saying. We may well think that after the fury of his wrath unleashed against Jerusalem with its temple, its walls, its palaces, its priests, its kings, all gone, all in exile, destroyed.

[29 : 03] It's now too late. It's all over. God and Israel irrevocably gone their separate ways. And that's not the narrator, not the Bible's view, that even here, after this vast act of destruction and punishment, he says, turn to God.

With unrelenting tears and crying and prayer, turn to God. Don't give up. Not just a simple prayer. At every watch of the night, he says in those verses, that is meaning in effect, all night, day and night, keep on pleading to God, turn to God.

What does that imply? It implies that God's not finished with his people. It implies that God may well rescue his people.

That is, implicitly, turn to God because he's merciful, he's rich in mercy. Turn to God for the steadfast love of the Lord never ceases, his mercies never come to an end.

As we'll see explicitly. next week. You see, even here, in the midst of the gloom and lament of destruction, turn to God. It's not too late.

[30 : 15] You see, when God does punish us, and maybe our suffering is for our sin, it's not a final end from God. God is rich in mercy.

And so his punishment of us is disciplinary. God is to provoke us to turn back to him with repentance of our sin. For what God wants of us is that we be pure and spotless on the final day. And he will do anything to make us pure and spotless on that final day. Even cause us to suffer by his punishment against our sin.

so that it will be purified and will be refined. So even here, where Jerusalem is destroyed in such shocking ways, there is this glimmer of real hope.

Turn to God and turn away from your sin, is what the writer is really saying. Implying that God, even now, will forgive and bring mercy.

[31 : 25] that's rich words of comfort, actually. It's astonishing that even at this point, we can still see hope for repentance.

It's not too late. There is an urgency in those words of verse 18 and 19. It's not saying take your time, you might want to think about going back to God. It's pleading urgently, turn to God.

There is an urgency because there does come a time when it is too late on that final day. when Jesus returns. Zion's response, it seems, is only halfway.

They do turn to God. Verses 20, 21 and 22 to finish the chapter are the words of Zion back to God. They're words to try and evoke and arouse the sympathy of God.

They recite many of the things earlier in the chapter that's happened to them, but wailing them. They don't ask actually God to do anything though. Simply to look and consider at the beginning of verse 20.

[32 : 34] Other than that, it just laments its plight, its grief, its sorrow and the destruction. Zion, it seems, has still steps to take before it comes to repentance of its sin and finds mercy from God.

the book of Lamentations deals really with one aspect of human suffering. Human suffering because of your own sin.

There are a range of other ways in which humans suffer and ranges of other reasons why humans suffer and we find those issues addressed in other parts of the scriptures. Lamentations is one particular aspect of suffering.

But so often we are puzzled by the fact that if God is in control of everything and if God is all loving, then why is there any suffering? And here is the heart of the answer to that.

Human beings sin. The world is not as it's meant to be. The world is not as God originally made it. Human beings sin.

[33 : 40] We fail God. We fail to love God with all our heart. We fail to love our neighbour as ourselves. We sin. And the world is consequently a mess. Sometimes we suffer because of the fallen world as a whole.

Sometimes we suffer because of our own sins and God's punishment. But even then, the punishment of God is disciplinary, motivated by love, so that we may be corrected, we may be repentant, and on that final day, be pure and spotless before the throne of Jesus Christ.

God wants us to repent and turn away from our sin and turn to God. Don't let false prophets deceive you otherwise. But there is an urgency about that.

Don't keep putting such matters off. For the day is coming like a thief in the night. Amen. Amen. Amen.