

Disgrace and Doubt

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[0 : 00] You may like to open the Pew Bibles at page 671. And for those who are visiting today, this is the final of five weeks looking at the book in the Bible called Lamentations.

Let me say it's not the cheeriest of books, so I don't want to make an apology for that. I didn't write it. But just to give you a bit of context, be prepared.

It's not the cheeriest of books in the Bible. But let me pray for us as we begin this sermon. God our Father, you've caused all of the scriptures to be written for our benefit, to train us in righteousness, to make us wise for salvation in Jesus Christ.

And we pray now that your word will take root in our hearts and minds and bear much fruit for your glory. And we pray this for Jesus' sake. Amen. There is a time to weep and a time to laugh, a time to mourn and a time to dance.

How real the Bible is and how real Christian faith is. For Christian faith is not an escapist fantasy into a life that is all pure bliss and happiness, joy and smiling and songs and dancing and feasting and so on.

[1 : 20] Being a Christian isn't an escape from the world to just try and find some idyllic paradise. But rather the Bible and Christian faith are real.

They are earthed in the messy, mixed up world in which we live. In which there is a time to dance and be joyful, a time when there are good things. But there is inevitably also times of sadness, times of evil and hardship and so on.

Our Anglican Diocese of Melbourne has a monthly newsletter called The Melbourne Anglican and this month's newsletter that was out last week had in it an article that said that for many Christians we have lost the art of lament.

That very often contemporary Christianity is very upbeat, very happy, full of clapping and joy and smiling and song and so on.

And there is much that is appealing and attractive about that style of especially contemporary Christian worship and gathering. There is a time for joy and song and dancing, certainly.

[2 : 27] But if that's all there is, then in the end it becomes shallow, lacking in reality for the world in which we live. There is also a time of lament, a time for crying and weeping, a time for tears, a time for grappling with the evil of our world and the evil which we commit.

See, Christian faith and the Bible deals not only with the high joys of life, but the depths of sorrow and sadness also. And this book of Lamentations addresses that latter aspect.

It drives us to share the depths of despair of the writer, that we may learn from that, be warned and encouraged and comforted in our own suffering, but also warned about our own wrongdoing.

The historical context of this book was that in 587 BC, a long time ago, Jerusalem fell to the Babylonian Empire under Nebuchadnezzar. But this book is more than just a lament at the fall of the capital city and the end of the kingdom.

Though that did occasion lament, your capital is gone, your king's been carted off, your nation is in effect no more a nation. Jerusalem was the place of the temple where God was regarded as dwelling.

[3 : 51] It was the place where God and people symbolically came together. And so the destruction of Jerusalem and the destruction of the temple was also the end of the identity of God with his people.

And that is at the heart of the lament of this book. For now it seems that all the promises and activity of God for the benefit of his people in this world have come to nothing.

It looks as though the promises are over. It looks as though God has wiped his hands of his people. And that's why we have this lament in this book.

And Lamentations has shown us over the last four weeks and again today, there is no quick fix. There is no simple, easy solution to end suffering and bring joy.

And this book compels us chapter after chapter to enter into the pain of the writer and their suffering and their lament. And yet in the midst of the darkness of the pain of suffering, we see in sharp relief glimmers of the mercy of God and of the hope that he provides for us.

[5 : 02] This final chapter is the shortest of the book. It is in the first person plural. It is the people of God as a whole lamenting the events of the destruction of Jerusalem and its ongoing ramifications and aftermath in the years subsequently.

It opens with an urgent plea to God, three things for God to do. Remember, look, see. All in verse 1. An urgent prayer to God in particular to remember.

Not because God has sort of got some amnesia and has forgotten, but the call to remember is a call to act. You may know in the flood story when Noah is with the ark in the flood, the end of the flood in effect begins when God remembers Noah.

That is, God then acts to end the rain, to dry up the flood and bring Noah and the ark to land. And later in the book of Exodus, when the people of God are under oppression in Egypt, the people cry out and lament to God for the oppression they are suffering under Egypt and the Pharaoh.

And God remembers the covenant that he made with his people. That is, he now acts. So when this chapter begins pleading with God to remember, it's not because God is full of amnesia and absent-minded.

[6 : 28] It is a call to God now to act on the basis of the promises that it earlier made. And then follows in the next several verses, elements of the description of the destruction and the effects of that destruction on the people of God.

Verse 2 is in particular full of despair. Our inheritance has been turned over to strangers, our homes to aliens.

Not just becoming homeless, not just because the Babylonians have come and taken their houses and streets and businesses, but in particular by using the language of our inheritance, it is implying the despair that the promises of God are abandoned.

Because the inheritance for God's people was the land of which Jerusalem was the capital. It was entrusted in effect to the people of God. So to say that our inheritance is gone is in effect to say that the promises of God have also gone.

For what God wanted of his people in the Old Testament was to entrust them with the land as an inheritance. But his ideal was that God's people would live in that land of God, but under God's rule.

[7 : 46] And what's happened is that the people of God have rejected the rule of God, so God has withdrawn his land from them. And that's the lament behind this chapter.

The chapter goes on to say in verse 3 that we've become orphans, fatherless, our mothers are like widows. Probably literally the effect of the destruction as the men were killed in battle, some were taken off into exile back to Babylon.

And so for most if not many people, literally they were now orphaned. Parents gone, killed in exile, families disrupted and so on. To add insult to injury in verse 4, we must pay for the water we drink, the wood we get must be bought.

The irony is that the water comes from the very wells and cisterns that were Israelites. The wood comes from their very own trees. What was their own possession, they now have to pay for the basic commodities of water and wood.

They pay people who did not plant them or build the cisterns, paying for their own water and their own wood. Verse 5 says, With a yoke on our necks, we are hard driven, we are weary, we are given no rest.

[9 : 01] That is, they're treated like slaves. The yoke would be like you would have on an animal to plough the field, to guide and control the animal. So a yoke is a symbol of slavery.

Here it is that the people of God are now enslaved in effect to the Babylonians who've conquered their land. The next verse pauses for a minute from this description and gets a little bit behind its cause.

It's a verse that could easily be misunderstood. Verse 7, Sorry, not the next verse, verse 7. Our ancestors sinned, they are no more.

And we bear their iniquities. And a simple reading of that verse might be that we think they're complaining that they are suffering for what their ancestors did. Our ancestors sinned, we've got to

pick up, we're suffering the consequences.

It's not fair. Now we know from elsewhere in this book of Lamentations already, and we'll see it again later in this chapter in a couple of minutes' time more clearly as well, this is not a declaration of innocent suffering.

[10:10] It is not the people saying we're innocent, but we're suffering God's punishment for what our parents and grandparents and great-grandparents did. Rather, this verse is saying that the sins of God's people have been long time coming.

All the ancestors, generation after generation, have disobeyed God, have not loved God, have not loved their neighbour as their self, including the current generation. But God's punishment against all that long line of history of sin is now coming on this final generation when Jerusalem fell.

The description resumes in verse 8 of the destruction and its aftermath. Slaves rule over us, verse 8 says. There's no one to deliver us from their hand. That is, probably Babylonian lackeys to the emperor are now bureaucratic officials, are now ruling over the people of God who are left in the surrounds of Jerusalem and in some of its villages and towns.

That is, they're ruled by foreign people, treated as slaves, ruled by people who are little better than slaves. Verse 9 shows the difficulty of eking out an existence.

We get our bread at the peril of our lives, probably reflecting the fact that Jerusalem is set in the midst of quite a wilderness of mountain areas where bandits and marauders would well hide, as they did in Jesus' day later on, as indeed they do sometimes today.

[11:39] So even going out into the country to find bread and food was actually a dangerous exercise. In verse 10 we see the effect of famine because our skin is black as an oven from the scorching heat of famine.

Not just talking about sunburn in the heat, but in particular the famine that's caused people's skin to dry up and darken in the sun and the exhaustion of being malnourished and so on.

And then we find in the next few verses different groups of society being maltreated. So in verse 11, women are raped in Zion, virgins in the towns of Judah, the standard thing that happens in battles and war all around the world, as we've seen in recent times in Iraq, the same sort of thing.

So here, the women are brutalized by, in this case, the Babylonian invaders. But not just the women, the nobility, the upper class, in verse 12 are described.

Princes are hung up by their hands, no respect is shown to the elders, probably describing some form of torture, even death, to those who are of royal descent or the nobility of the society, strung up by their hands or fingers, left perhaps to die.

[12:55] Humiliated, certainly. And not only the older men and the nobility, but the younger men the same. In verse 13, they're compelled to grind and boys stagger under loads of wood.

Not just because they're given hard jobs to do, they're given the jobs of animals, in effect. Animals would carry loads of wood, young boys have to do that. The grinding would be done by an animal, maybe a donkey or whatever, that would have a wooden bar tied to it and it would walk round and round the grinding mill.

And as it did so, it would be rolling stones on the grinding mill to grind the grain. But now young boys have to do that sort of job. They're being, in effect, brutalised and maltreated as well.

We've had the women, the elders, the young boys, in verse 11, the old men, have left the city gate. And the joy, the young men have left their music.

The city gate was the place of trade, and business, and justice. It's gone. They've lost their livelihood, and their jobs. The infrastructure of the city is no more.

[14:00] And the young men have lost their music. Maybe referring to temple music, but maybe just hinting at the lack of joy left. As verse 15 goes on to say, the joy of our hearts has ceased, our dancing has been turned to mourning.

There was a time for dancing, but now it's a time for mourning. The culmination of despair. Verse 16 says, the crown has fallen from our head.

Either metaphorically talking about the glory of Jerusalem gone, or maybe literally talking about the king, who would wear the crown, gone away into exile, taken away to Babylon, into prison.

The nation has come to an end. Now it's just a province of the Babylonian empire, a far outpost of maltreatment and brutalisation, of poverty and a struggle to live.

This lament is different from a complaint. It's not a complaint to God, you've harshly or unfairly treated us. It's a lament to God that, yes, you've treated us harshly, but as the end of verse 16

makes clear, woe to us, for we have sinned.

[15 : 20] Generation after generation of the people of God in the land for 600, 800 years have failed God, not keeping his laws, not loving him, not loving their neighbours as their selves.

And finally God's patience has run out and he's brought down Jerusalem and the nation. On the whole, we're not good at owning up to our mistakes.

It's a constant human trait. We pass the buck. I used to blame my sisters when I was a kid. Usually they were in the wrong anyway. Most of us blame our parents at times.

We blame the government, the weather, our husband or our wife. We blame anything and anyone for our mistakes. It's what we humans have been doing since the very beginning in the Garden of Eden where Adam blamed Eve and Eve blamed the serpent.

We're not very good at accepting our own mistakes, at confessing them and saying we are wrong. This book of Lamentations, like so many parts of the Bible, is thoroughly realistic and it is an example for us to see the confession of someone's sin and wrongdoing.

[16 : 44] God wants us to love him with all our heart, soul, mind and strength and love our neighbour as ourself and we, without exception, fail and fail regularly.

God wants us to own up to our mistakes, our sins as the Bible calls them, to say we have done wrong. We need your forgiveness and mercy.

God wants repentant people who own up to their mistakes and seek to turn away from them and live as God wants us to live.

And so when these people of Jerusalem say woe to us for we have sinned, we see an example of confession, indeed a hint of repentance that is meant to be on our own lips every time we fail God's perfect standards.

And indeed today in the baptismal service, the promises made by those who are making the promises on behalf of the two children being baptised, repent of their sins, owning up to their failure to live up to God's standards, asking God for forgiveness and mercy.

[17 : 57] Indeed this lament as we've seen in recent weeks and here again in verse 17 is full of tears for our sins. There is real grief that we, these people writing here, speaking here, have sinned and fallen short of God's standards.

See verse 17, because of this our hearts are sick, because of these things our eyes have grown dim, that is, through all the tears and crying for failing to heed God's word and God's law.

The description of verse 18 completes the description in this chapter. Mount Zion, another name for Jerusalem, lies desolate with jackals prowling over it.

Jackals are animals that will flee when there are people around. Clearly Jerusalem's been depopulated. What was once a throng of people doing business and trade and living and coming to the temple for worship, it's gone, it's been decimated and demolished.

And now there are just jackals left. Some people living are perhaps in the hills surrounding Jerusalem, struggling for a living. The rest dead or taken into exile. At the heart of Jerusalem was the temple.

[19 : 08] And at the heart of the temple was the Holy of Holies, the room at the center, which symbolized the throne of God ruling in the midst of his people. It's gone.

And yet, the writer of these words can say with such confidence in verse 19, that you, O Lord, reign forever. Your throne endures to all generations.

In the ancient world, if your country was defeated by another country in war, you usually said that in effect, their God has defeated our gods.

Their gods must be better. That was the boast of the Babylonians when they defeated other nations, including Jerusalem. Their gods, Bel, Nebo, Marduk and others, they're great gods. They've defeated the other gods of these nations. But not so here. This striking verse acknowledges that even in defeat, their God still reigns.

[20 : 08] And even though the Holy of Holies, the throne room of God on earth, has been demolished and scattered, God still reigns on his throne, on his heavenly throne, which will never, ever be destroyed or taken away.

This chapter in this book ends with another plea and a cry in despair. Chapter 5 began calling God to remember.

Verse 20 goes on to say, Why have you forgotten us completely? Why have you forsaken us these many days? It's calling God to end the suffering.

Probably it's written just a few years or maybe even less than that after the fall of Jerusalem. But it knows that the end of suffering is not a rebuilding of a temple.

It's not just a rebuilding of a house or a city. It's not just a political change so that the Babylonians would be expelled from the land. The restoration that is needed is not political or domestic.

[21 : 14] The restoration that is needed is spiritual. And so verse 21 says, Restore us to yourself, O God, that we may be restored.

Renew our days as of old. You see, the answer to that prayer didn't come in 538 when the empire of the Persians allowed the Jews to go back to Jerusalem and rebuild it.

That's a political restoration, but it's not the answer to the prayer. What this prayer recognizes is that the real problem is spiritual. A break in the relationship between God and his people.

It acknowledges that the people can't get right with God, that God needs something, somehow to do something to restore those people to himself. God needs to act because his people are helpless. They can't get right with God unless God acts. And that's so true. Not one of us can do anything remotely sufficient to get into God's good books, if I can put it like that.

[22 : 23] God needs to act in order for a relationship between us and him to exist. For we are helpless and weak and enslaved in our own wrongdoing.

No amount of our own personal exertion and effort will ever achieve the standards of God to love him with all our heart, soul, mind and strength and to love our neighbour as ourself.

And the cry at the end of this book, restore us to yourself, O Lord, acknowledges our human frailty and inability and helplessness to get right with God unless God acts and acts in mercy to restore people to himself.

The book ends with the possibility that God may not do that. That is, it's not God's obligation to restore us to himself. He doesn't have to do that.

And so the book ends, unless you've utterly rejected us and are angry with us beyond measure, is an acknowledgement that God is actually right to punish people for their wrongdoing. And that punishment may be forever.

[23 : 32] But nonetheless, verse 21 is this plea for mercy, that God may restore people to himself. Not what he's obliged to do, not what we deserve, but what God, who is full of mercy, may choose to do.

It's the prayer of a desperate people who've got nowhere to turn but to God. Indeed, we are in the same boat, for our eternal destiny is in the hands of God, on God alone.

And this book is warning us, teaching us, to abandon all other pursuits of trust or reliance or vain hope, and place ourselves at God's mercy, and God's mercy alone.

When you're driving down the road, down the freeway, the Geelong freeway, for example, at 101 kilometres an hour, and you realise that nobody's booked you for speeding, I could do this trip a little bit quicker, 102 kilometres an hour, and that seems to be safe.

No great foot of police wrath has come crashing down upon you, maybe 103 then is okay, 104 after another week or two, and no little letters in the mail, and you keep pushing the bounds.

[25 : 10] I'm getting away with this. I'll keep doing what I'm doing. I might even push the bounds a bit further, 106 or 7 or 8. How far can I go?

I'm not just talking about speeding down a road, but spiritually in our lives, that's how most of us act. I seem to have got away with not loving my neighbour as myself.

I seem to be getting away with not reading my Bible as I should. I seem to be getting away with not being generous as I should. I seem to be getting away with perhaps not being faithful to my spouse as I should.

I seem to be getting away with all sorts of things. God's great foot of judgment is yet to come down on me. Maybe he doesn't actually care, maybe he just forgives me, maybe I'll just keep doing what I'm doing because it doesn't seem to matter and God's not punishing me and so I'll just keep doing it more and more.

For generations Israel had been like that. For hundreds of years leading up to the destruction of Jerusalem they'd been like that. They thought they were doing it and could sin with impunity and get away with it forever until Babylon came and God's judgment came.

[26 : 27] don't fool yourself that you can live life as you like and God doesn't care because one day he will act and one day his patience will run out and one day will be brought to account before his judgment throne.

Lamentations is here to warn us that God does judge in the end. Do you remember Manuel that bumbling servant in faulty towers when he's trying to learn the job he says to John Cleese I'm learn I learn eventually or without wanting to make a joke of God's judgment God does judge and will judge eventually.

don't think we can keep on getting away with our sin because he will judge. Though the book of Lamentations ends with this question of God's mercy in some sense unresolved keep reading the Bible for we know that within a few years the people were allowed back to Jerusalem and eventually the city and the temple and the walls were rebuilt but even then the pleas of this book were unanswered but in his time God answered their lament.

In verse 5 we read with a yoke on our necks we are hard driven we are weary and given no rest and Jesus said come to me all who are weary and are heavy laden and I will give you rest for my yoke is easy.

In verse 3 we read we have become orphans fatherless mothers like widows and Jesus invites us I will not leave you as orphans I am coming to you.

[28 : 34] In verse 16 the people lament woe to us for we have sinned and Jesus is introduced as the Lamb of God that takes away the sin of the world.

In verse 15 they lament that the joy of our hearts has ceased and Jesus invites us to keep his commandments so that my joy may be in you and your joy complete.

In verse 4 they lament that they must pay for the water we drink but Jesus promises that to those who are thirsty I will give water from the spring of life without cost as a free gift.

Let us thank God that in Jesus Christ our lament is answered. Let us thank God that in Jesus Christ our sin is atoned for. Let us thank God that in Jesus Christ God has restored us to himself.

Amen.