

SUMMER A4 - Resolution and Reality

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[0 : 00] Almighty God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, you have said that your word is living and active, sharper than any sword, that it penetrates to the division of soul and spirit, joints and marrow.

You have made it able to judge the thoughts and attitudes of the heart. So please enable me today to speak from your word faithfully and please cause it to do what you promised it will.

And we pray this in the name of Jesus Christ and for his glory. Amen. Friends, I want to tell you that I hate waiting. I hate waiting to move into a house that I've bought or to start driving in a car that I've bought.

I hate waiting for results of exams to arrive. I hate waiting for my online purchase to arrive in the post and sometimes we'd rather just go up the road and buy it at a slightly more expensive price. I hate waiting to hear whether or not I've got a job. I hate waiting for particular events to occur. I'm not all that enamoured with Heather not turning up on time either.

[1 : 06] I'm generally an impatient man. I don't like waiting. Well, today I want to talk about waiting. But the waiting I want to talk about is not that sort of trivial waiting that I've just mentioned.

No, today I want to talk about waiting for something of critical importance. Waiting for God to be whom he promises to be.

Waiting for God to be who we really know that he is. Waiting for God to fulfill his word. Now, friends, I want to say that this sort of waiting can be very hard for us as Christians to bear.

After all, we see we know who God is through Jesus. We know that God is good. We know that he's great. We know that he loves us.

And so waiting for him to be who we know he is can be very hard for us to bear. And so I want to see what the book of Lamentations can tell us that will help us with this sort of waiting.

[2 : 14] Because I know most of you here will have had times when you have waited for God to be exactly that. To be who you know him to be. So let's see if we can learn from the book of Lamentations.

So I want you to open it up in your Bible. You turn to the middle of your Bible. And then you move toward the back till you get to Jeremiah. And it's just after Jeremiah. Let's remember the context. The book of Lamentations is a series of poems.

Poems. Those poems are a response to a historical event. And the historical event is the destruction of Jerusalem by the Babylonians. And it was a very gruesome destruction.

They lay siege to this city for a long time. They waited for people to starve. They waited for them to get on the edge of dying without thirst. They waited for them to be in desperate straits.

And what this book is about is a sustained theological and personal reflection upon that event. That destruction of Jerusalem.

[3 : 18] And so, so far we've looked at three chapters. And tonight we're going to look at two more. But let's quickly go over, for those of you who weren't in the first two, let's go over what we learnt in the first three.

Chapter 1 pictures the city of Jerusalem as a deserted widow. Five times we are told there is none to comfort her. None to comfort her, none to comfort her, and so on.

The impression being that God is not there to comfort her. God, her husband, appears to have left her. He refuses to bring her comfort as a good husband must, as a good father must.

The nation that God wooed as his elect wife is now not a wooed wife, but a desolate widow, as it were. And so this widow pours out her grief before her husband, her God.

That grief can be captured in the very opening verses of Lamentations. Look at them with me. In Lamentations 1, the prophet says, You see, she had not only been a married woman, but she had

taken on.

[4 : 46] Other men. And all those lovers have now left her. Now she feels that the one true husband has even left her as well. All her friends have betrayed her.

They have become her enemy or her enemies. Chapter 2, though, moves forward a little bit.

Because what happens in chapter 2 is the emotion intensifies. Anger replaces grief.

You see, there's a perception among the people of God that God has become the enemy of them.

He has covered Jerusalem with what is called the cloud of his anger. He has not remembered mercy.

And so his people feel that he has left them in deep, deep shame and deep, deep shock. And so in shocked amazement, the poet representing the people cries out to God with the people of God.

And he says these words. Look at verse 20, chapter 2. Look, Lord, and consider. Whom have you ever treated like this? Should women eat their offspring, the children they have cared for?

[5 : 54] Should priest and prophet be killed in the sanctuary of the Lord? That is, don't you aren't even overseeing your house? Will you allow priest and prophet, your leaders, to be sacrificed there, killed in that sanctuary?

Young and old lie together in the dust of the streets. My young men and young women have fallen by the sword. That is, my future has gone. You have slain them in the day of your anger.

You have slaughtered them without pity. Chapter 3, as we saw last Sunday, is the pinnacle of the whole book. The poet begins by describing his own experience.

In verses 1 to 17, he puts himself in the shoes of his people, of the people of Israel. And he talks about how he has been mistreated and persecuted.

But then, in this incredible turning within the book, in verse 18, he names the one responsible. It is the Lord, Yahweh. Yahweh's persecution has driven him to hopelessness.

[7 : 00] And then the poet stops in his tracks. He has remembered his affliction. He's been brutally honest about that affliction. But now, he's going to seek resolution.

And he does seek resolution by recalling God's character revealed in history. The poet takes his eyes off his own suffering, off his own situation, and he refocuses on what he knows to be true of God.

In the very first word of the very next verse, he tells us what he remembers. He remembers, and those of you here on Sunday night remember the word that I taught you.

He remembers chesed. That is, he remembers God's steadfast love. He takes to mind what God revealed of himself to Moses. That is, that he's the Lord, the Lord, the gracious and compassionate God, abounding in love and faithfulness.

His overwhelming disposition is therefore toward mercy and great love. And with this now, in the forefront of his mind, with him having remembered this word and this disposition, the poet then assures himself that this is what God will eventually be.

[8 : 14] This is what will eventually emerge from the hand of God. Whatever anger was there, he is sure that it will eventually be overwhelmed by his great love.

And so he decides that he can hope and wait. Eventually, God will be good. And so he says so in verses 31 to 33. For no one, particularly, you could put in inverted commas, as it were, and in brackets, particularly his people.

No one is cast off by the Lord forever. Though he brings grief, he will show compassion. So great is his kesed, his unfailing love, as it were.

For he does not willingly bring affliction or grief to anyone. So he doesn't willingly bring it. He never casts off forever. So if there is grief, he will display his character eventually of compassion, his kesed, his unfailing love.

Finally, the poet and the people acknowledge their sin. Look at verse 42. They urge each other on with, let us lift up our hearts and our hands to God in heaven.

[9 : 24] So, you know, hands lifted up and hearts with them. And let us say, we have sinned and rebelled. And you have not forgiven. An earnest request, as it were, for God to forgive.

Together in sin, they brought about God's anger. But they know that God cannot remain angry forever. He will overwhelm his anger with love. Mercy will triumph over judgment, as the writer of James, as James says in the epistle to James.

So that's where we've been, friends. And what I want to do now is quickly take a run through chapters 4 and 5. And I'd like to summarise chapter 4 by talking about depression. And I'd like to

summarise chapter 4 by using the sort of language of depression, because I think that language is present within the chapter.

Now, those of you who have suffered depression will know that depression can take the colour out of life. In fact, when I suffered depression, I said to the doctor I went to see, you know how I think about depression?

I said, it's like those old movies set in London, you know, a century or two ago. Particularly the black and white movies.

[10:39] And you would see people moving about in London in a dark, foggy night. I said, that's what I think depression is like. There is no colour left in life.

It is dark. It's dank. It's depressing. All colour, all vitality is overwhelmed by gloom and darkness. It's as though you're in one of those sort of nights.

Everything is dim. Everything is colourless. Well, this chapter is intriguingly marked by references to colour. Have a look. I'll show you. Look at verse 1.

The poet says, gold has lost its luster. It's become colourless. Fine gold has become dull or dim. Now look at verse 5. It talks of children who were brought up in purple. But now those very same children cling to ash heaps. So, regally clothed children.

[11:37] Now in ash heaps. In colour purple. Now in black. Now verse 7. It says that the princes were brighter or purer than snow and whiter than milk.

Here are the references to colour again. Their bodies were more ruddy than rubies or coral. They were red-cheeked as it were. Their hair was like sapphires or lapis lazuli.

But not now. Look at verse 8. Now their visage is blacker than soot. Can you hear all the references to colour? Colour gone. It has become dry as a stick.

Their skin has shriveled on. Their bones become dry as a stick. These references to colour are matched by portraits of wealth turned to poverty or greatness turned to destitution.

Have a look. Verse 1. Gems are scattered, not put on display. People have become heartless like ostriches in the desert.

[12:38] Verse 3. Children beg only to have no one being generous. Verse 4. One-time consumers of delicacies are now destitute in the streets.

Verse 5. Holy men. Priests are no longer honoured. They're no longer treated with the respect and honour that is due theirs by who they are.

Older people are given no favour. Verse 16. The Lord's anointed. This is an incredible verse. The Lord's anointed. The Lord's Messiah who was the source of life and hope for the people.

Had been caught in traps. You see, these colours and these images capture the chapter. It is all about beautiful things being degraded.

All that was normal in Judean society has been turned on its head. The rich have become destitute. Parents have become predators.

[13:42] Kings and messiahs. Have been left cowering. Human dignity has become human degradation. God the compassionate has become God the fierce judge.

And all because Israel's prophets and priests abused God's people. Look at what verse 13 says. It says, But it happened because of the sins of her prophets and the iniquities of her priests who shed within her the blood of the righteous.

All of this happened because of sin within the rulers of God's people. And all of this has left the people of God in deep depression. Colourless existence.

Everything reversed and turned upside down. Reflected in these colours and images throughout the chapter. Now that's chapter 4. Now chapter 5 has a very different tone again.

For a start, it's a prayer. It's talk to God. Second, it is much shorter than the previous chapters.

[14:51] Third, the acrostic. Remember every verse starting with A, B, C or the Hebrew equivalents. The acrostic is gone. Fourth, the events that were the focus of chapters 1 to 4 now seem to be some time in the past.

Now I wonder if you can imagine the setting perhaps. Perhaps some future generation has gathered together at the site where the temple used to stand.

You know, an equivalent to Jews today sort of going to the temple mountain, standing beside the wall, the wailing wall. And wailing. So you can imagine it.

Sort of something like that, but not so near. Something perhaps after the exile. Perhaps during the first part of the exile. We're not quite sure. You see, this future generation's there.

They're watching the rubble. And they're waiting for God's mercy to triumph over judgment. They've been waiting for him to be what he promised to be.

[15:57] And their waiting has not been realized. And so they look at the rubble. The temple is still in ruins. And so they turn to God with this prayer. And they lament before him.

And first, look at how they lament. First, they appeal to him to listen. Verse 1. Remember, Lord. That's a very powerful word in the Hebrew Bible. Remember means to not just sort of recall, but to do something.

Remember what has happened to us. Look and see our disgrace. The word remember is the word that is remembered, that is used when Noah's on top of the flood. And God remembers.

That's what's being requested here. Remember, Lord, what has happened to us. Look and see our disgrace. And they urge him to look at their present reality. Look at what they tell God in verses 2 to 4.

Our inheritance has been turned over to strangers. Our homes to foreigners. We have become fatherless. Our mothers are widows.

[17:01] We must buy the water we drink. Our wood can be had only at a price. Can you hear what they're saying? They're saying, this was our land which you gave us. We're now going to buy our water.

Our houses are occupied by other people. Or look at verses 8 to 10. Slaves rule over us. And there is no one to free us from their hands.

We get our bread at the risk of our lives because of the sword in the desert. Our skin is as hot as an oven, feverish from hunger. Or verses 13 to 15.

Young men toil at millstones. Boys stagger under loads of wood. The elders are gone from the city gates. There's no one there judging them any longer.

They're not in control of their own destiny. The young men have stopped their music. You see, young men who should be at the height of the joy of their life. With everything in front of them, they've stopped singing.

[18:04] Joy has gone from our hearts. Our dancing has turned into mourning. You see, here they're saying, it's all gone. Finally, they appeal to the Lord for help and deliverance.

Verse 20. Why do you always forget us? That is, God's absence has now been so long that they think it's always.

Why do you forsake us so long? You see, these people have no doubt as to why this happened. They know that their ancestors sinned.

And they make this clear in verse 7. Look at verse 7. There they say, Our ancestors sinned and are no more. That is, the people who committed these sins, they've gone.

But we're here. But, actually, they know that their ancestors were not alone. They know that they, as well as their ancestors, are sinners. Look at verse 16. The crown has fallen from our head.

[19:08] Woe to us, for we have sinned. Very same thing as Daniel does in exile himself. You see, Daniel in chapter 9 says, We sinned. Not they sinned and I'm getting the consequences.

We sinned. So these people are saying, yes, they did sin. There's no doubt about that, just as Daniel acknowledged. But we stand in their shoes. We stand with them. We too have sinned.

Look at verse 16. They know that. Woe to us, for we have sinned. But they know more than that, you see. They also know God. And they know that God rules over the world. They make this clear.

Verse 19. You, Lord, reign forever. That is, it's not as though many people may have thought when they went off into exile. It's not as though they think that God has been in this world of new super gods and super nations.

No. They know he's the real God. They know he reigns forever. They know he's sovereign over all. Your throne endures from generation to generation. No, you are God of all the earth.

[20:11] And if that's true, if the Lord does indeed reign forever, if he is in fact sovereign, then he can, they know, reverse their situation.

He can restore them to himself. He can do what he's done before in their past. He can act with mercy as well as judgment. And so look at verse 21.

Hear their request of this sovereign Lord. So we read 19, now read 21. Restore us to yourself, Lord, that we may return. Renew our days as of old.

But then comes verse 22. Unless. Unless you have utterly rejected us.

And are angry with us beyond measure. What a way to finish a book. Can you feel a doubt?

[21 : 11] The haunting. Lingering. Evocative. Lack of surety. In the words.

Doubt, you see, just dangles in the air. Has God utterly rejected them? Like I said, what a way to finish a book.

Is he angry beyond measure? Is this perhaps the end after all for Israel? Is he maybe not the God of Kesed?

Does he start off terrible? Go to a pinnacle in the middle and then you go downhill again. And you're left with doubt in your mind. Way away from what we saw last week.

With that magnificent. Middle of the book. Friends, let me try and put all of this together for us. You see, we have seen some amazing things in this book.

[22 : 12] Haven't we? We've seen people being brutally honest with God. We have seen their honesty turning to frank anger. Then we've seen that anger turn aside and rise to this crescendo of hope.

And in chapter 3, we watch them remembering God as they know him to be. And staking their future on it. He is the Lord, the Lord, the gracious and compassionate God. Slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love.

His Kesed will inevitably come. But in these last two chapters, we've seen this downhill run again. This regression in Israel. You see, they've heard the poet's confidence.

They've joined in with him. But in chapter 5, they lapse back into depression again. Chapters 4 and 5. And they have those events weighing heavily upon them again.

They've reviewed them. They've recriminated. Now they've turned to God in prayer in the last chapter. And their prayer expresses the ambiguity of their situation.

[23 : 16] They know. The book tells us this. They know that hope lies in God. They know that it is his disposition to do good.

They know that he is great enough to do good. They know that all hope they have lies in him. But until he acts, their reality is fraught with ambiguity.

Friends, all of this sort of to-ing and fro-ing, this sort of variety of emotional reaction, this grasping out in hope, and then this taunting tentativeness, these are the marks of reality, aren't they, in a broken world, which does not yet reflect God's goal for his creation.

And if you have not experienced it yet, you will. I pray that you don't. But my suspicion is we all will at some point in life. These are also the marks, by the way, of a real book about real people who believe in a real God, in a real world.

Within it, we find this strange mixture of all sorts of things, of hope, review, recrimination, sadness, repentance, depression, and, of course, doubt.

[24 : 45] Can you see what I'm saying? These people don't just need hope. They need resolution. They need final resolution. And let me tell you, friends, that that resolution did finally come.

Of course, it even came in the Old Testament in one sense because they returned from exile and their mouths were full of joy. And the grief of those psalms about the exile was turned into joy as they ascended, Zion again, only to find it, though, a pile of rubble.

And they wept over it. But, of course, friends, the exile never measured up to what it could have been, to what they hoped it would.

They waited for another return. And the New Testament tells us how God brought about that return. God answered his prayer, the prayer of the people in the Book of Lamentations, and blew aside all doubt because he sent his son and his son dealt with sin.

And he took abandonment by God on our behalf and on behalf of his people. He cried out in our place, my God, my God, why have you forsaken me?

[26 : 03] He restored his people and brought comfort. The comfort promised by the prophet Isaiah, comfort, comfort, say to my people.

And they're the very, those words, that chapter, Isaiah 40, is echoed with the coming of John the Baptist. God restored his people, brought them comfort.

What's more, through Jesus came the ultimate comforter, the gift of the Holy Spirit who renews our hearts and who filled the hearts of God's people.

In Christ did what the poet was convinced he would do. He was chesed. His compassions did not fail, they were new every morning.

His great love triumphed, his faithfulness was renewed and the salvation of the Lord came.

However, the people in this book, you see friends, did not experience that.

[27 : 06] They did not experience that salvation. They may have had a little glimpse of it if some of them stayed till when the exile actually, when the return actually happened. They simply hoped for it.

Now friends, I want us to use the experience of these people to reflect ourselves on life, you see, what we see in this book is what many of us daily experience.

Oh well, if I could put it slightly, that for many who know and love the Lord Jesus Christ and know the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, this book expresses what many of them feel on a daily basis.

You see, there are many Christians in this world who live in the situation of the book of Lamentations. They may be people who are suffering the effects of the situation, that is, the effects of their sin and find it overwhelming.

There may be Christians who are innocent and righteous but who are tortured for their faith. It may be those who are in prison because they believe in Jesus. It may be those who have deep psychological illness that gives them no relief.

[28 : 20] It may be the married couple who are unable to have children. The single person who's been looking for a life partner but is watching the increasing age take that out of the realms of possibility.

Or the person who has a homosexual orientation that he or she knows they can never express because they want to obey God. It might be the person for whom God has long seemed absent. Or the Christian person who's just watched their home, their livelihood and perhaps even the lives of family members consumed in fire. Or the one in Christian ministry who once had a deep intimacy with God but that's only a vague memory for them now.

And they long for it to be restored. But God seems inactive or silent. Friends, there are many people for whom God seems to not be all that they were led to expect he would be.

His actions don't seem to meet expectations. And perhaps you're one of these. Perhaps it's not just momentary but year has rolled on after year.

[29 : 38] and pain has not been relieved and you believe and you wait and you hope. But there's doubt and there's uncertainty. And you wonder if the impossible might be true that perhaps perhaps God has utterly rejected you.

Friends, if that's you I do not want to come today to you with platitudes. They are not the thing that is needed for such people.

Often given to them I might say but often not but what is not it's not the thing that is needed. No.

Friends, if that's you then it seems to me that there are a number of places you can go and I want to summarise them as the beginning the middle and the end.

Okay, a number of places you could go the beginning the middle and the end. You see some of the people that I've talked about they need to go to the beginning of history. That is they need to go and read the book of Genesis and the theology that it proclaims there and hear about a God who's a creator that he can make things out of nothing.

He can give form where there was chaos and emptiness that he's sovereign over history and their situation and he can do with it as he wills. And they need to know that God knows their world that seems chaotic and helpless and he knows their situation and he knows them as he knows every creature in his created world.

[31 : 17] Moreover, as a sovereign creator he is able to help them. You see, these people need to remind themselves or be reminded that God is a very able sovereign creator.

Others are in a different situation. Others, the people I've talked to in their grief, need to go to the middle of history, not the beginning in the middle.

That is, they need to find solace in a God who loves them despite their sinfulness. They need to find his love expressed in the death on a cross of the Son of God and they need to hang on to this and see everything through its lens.

Through the prism of the cross, God in Jesus Christ being their ultimate loving redeemer. He has loved them with an everlasting and unstopable love.

He has exercised incredible chesed toward them. So some need to go to the middle and others need to go to the end.

[32 : 30] They need to go to the end of history. They need to hear of God who has a future for them. Now friends, there are some of you here today who will be in that situation and I want to

assure you that if you are his, then he has a future for you.

He has a future for you. he has guaranteed that future for you in his son, Jesus Christ. And I want to encourage you today with a glimpse of what that future might look like.

I want you to come with me and open your eyes and watch as that future unfolds in the book of Revelation. Imagine it, we are at the end of time and we've only got picture language to describe it so we'll only use picture language.

We're at the end of time and we're looking over this incredibly great expanse and you and I stand there among this great multitude that is beyond number, surrounded by people from every nation, tribe, people, language, and together we stand before the throne of God.

And there's the Lamb and he bears all the marks of being slain but yet he stands and as we look down we see that we are wearing white robes and their garments of victory for white in that language, in the language of apocalypse means not innocence, not purity but victory.

[34 : 11] And in unison, knowing this we cry out in a loud voice salvation belongs to our God who sits on the throne and to the Lamb and there around the throne are angels and elders and living creatures and then one of the elders notices us and he speaks to one nearby and says these in white robes who are they and where did they come from?

Of course he knows those are they who have come out of the grief of the great tribulation they have washed their robes and made them white in the blood of the Lamb they are therefore before the throne of God and serve him day and night in his temple and he who sits on the throne will spread his tent over them never again will they hunger never again will they thirst the sun won't beat down on them nor any scorching heat for the Lamb at the centre of their throne will be their shepherd and he will lead them to springs of living water and God himself will wipe every tear from their eyes and there will be no more death or moaning or crying or pain the old order of things will have passed away and the one who overcomes will say the

Lord Jesus Christ inherit all this God will be our God and we will dwell in his presence forever he will make all things new amen now friends this is the future God has in store for us it is a future worth waiting for even in pain amen come Lord Jesus let's pray our father we those of us who are here who are in grief we look for these three things for you the creator and sovereign Lord we look to you through your son through the lens of the cross we therefore know you to be the God of all love and we look also father through this lens of the end of history and father we pray those of us who are in grief pray that you'd come to us afresh with all these things we do pray particularly for our brothers and sisters around the world who can't see a way through this we pray that you'd bring these thoughts to them this day as well and father we pray that with them at this final day you will wipe every tear from their eyes we pray that you give them the comfort of no more death or mourning or crying or pain we long father for this old order of things to have passed away and we long for that very tangible situation where we will see you to be our

God and we'll dwell in your presence and we'll feel the touch of your son and we say amen come Lord Jesus lo immer who came I say amen to wenig and we'll me I was we don't maar