

SUMMER A2 - When God Appears Abusive

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[0 : 00] It's a rather overwhelming reading, isn't it? Let's pray and ask God to help us understand it.

Our Father, we pray that you'd help us understand this book. As we read it, as we hear it read, it's harrowing and your people are in great shock.

And so we pray that we might understand their grief, might understand your justice, your judgment and your mercy as well. And Father, we pray that you'd help us to do this in Jesus' name. Amen.

Well, friends, what I want to do tonight is I want to begin by showing you some photos that tell their own story, really. I don't really need to say much more about them. Most of the images I'm about to show you, you'll have seen on television screens.

I want to tell you beforehand that some are shocking. And I don't resolve from that because I know you've seen most of them. However, as we briefly flick through them, I want you to think about what you see and hear and feel as you see these images.

[1 : 12] Ask yourself, what do I feel as I see those things? What did I feel when I heard those things on the radio? Who do I think is ultimately responsible for these things?

And what do you think of those responsible for the actions that we will see? Now, the first slide of all the photos taken from the Second World War, so we'll have that first one, Barry.

And most of you will have seen some of these images before. The victims are, of course, all Jews. How do you feel as you see these images? What do you long for? And who do you think is ultimately responsible for these things?

And what do you think of those who are ultimately responsible? A second slide has photos that are unmistakable. It contains photos taken from the attacks on the US on the 11th of September 2011.

Again, what do you feel? Do you remember how you felt when you first heard the news come of these events? I can remember the place I was in when this happened. Do you remember?

[2 : 17] And what did you feel when you heard the news? What do you long for when you see these photos and think of those events? And who do you think is ultimately responsible for those things? And what do you think of those who are ultimately responsible?

The third, the fourth and the fifth slides, which I'm not going to dwell on, but I will show them to you just to remind you of the images, were taken from wars in the Middle East in the recent past. Some are in the open.

Others are what happened in prisons run by Australian allies. Some happened and were caused by ISIL forces in the Middle East. Now, the last image moves away from scenes of war and conflict to snapshots of a horror of a different sort.

This time it was in our own country. Some of the events that occurred in that last, in these last slides, occurred less than an hour and a half's drive away from here, from us here in Doncaster.

Again, what do you feel when you see those images? And what do you long for? Who do you think is ultimately responsible for them? And what do you think of those who are responsible? Now, when you come to this last blank slide, so last one, Barry, when we come to this last blank slide, I want you to just imagine yourself a different situation.

[3 : 38] Think of an ancient city. Its name is Jerusalem. It's under siege. The food has long gone. Water is scarce. The people are weak from hunger.

And then walls are breached. And the Babylonian forces move in. They swarm in. There's mass butchering of the population. And the normal atrocities of war occur.

The Edomites, who are the brother nation to Judah, side with the Babylonians and round up the escapees. The king makes a break for it. But he's captured. And then his own eyes are gouged out before his sons.

Sorry, his sons are killed first. And then his own eyes are gouged out. So the last thing that's in his, the last thing he saw were his sons being killed. Friends, as you imagine all of this, let me ask you again.

What do you feel? What do you long for when you hear these sorts of stories? Who do you think is ultimately responsible? And what do you think of those who are ultimately responsible? Well, as the ancient Israelites remembered it, they felt deeply, enormously deeply, as we've read.

[4 : 47] And they had ready answers to those questions. Underneath it all, they felt that God was responsible. And these feelings are exposed in these two chapters that we're looking at today.

And as we look at them, I want us to think about what we do when we have feelings like this about God. If you haven't, maybe you will at some time in your life.

You see, at some time in our lives, we will probably look at the situation we're in and raise our eyes to heaven and talk to God so he were responsible for it.

Even if those things don't happen to us ever in life, we'll come across others who will do that. I was looking at a movie last night. I love some of the detective stories that have come out that are produced not by British theatres but by Australian publishers these last few years.

And one of them, the Dr. Blake Mysteries. And we've recorded them and we watch them every now and then. And last night, we were watching Dr. Blake and there was a murder of a Catholic priest.

[6 : 01] And in this murder of this Catholic priest, Dr. Blake was exposed to his own prejudices and his own feelings about God. You see, he'd been Catholic and it seems a true believer.

And he wanders into the church toward the end of the movie and he starts speaking to God. Probably actually speaking to Jesus.

And he looks up at the stained glass window and he looks and he speaks and expresses his grief. He expresses the grief that he feels for those that he has had in his surgery, those who he's seen murdered.

and at the conclusion of it, he finds God unforgivable. And he turns his back on him and walks out of the church.

You see, he feels the grief. So lamentations, I think, will help us to know how to deal with such feelings and with those who have them and with ourselves if we have them.

[7 : 08] So this is not a remote question. You know, even modern movie makers play with it because these are ancient questions. So, friends, evil, hurt, pain, the absence of God and a host of other emotions will flood our existence at various times in our lives.

They cause us and our neighbours to have attitudes to God that ought not to be shut out. They scream for answers and lamentations will actually help us with these things. So let's get started. Let's turn to this book and I encourage you to have your Bibles open at Lamentations and I forget the page number as well.

Okay, Lamentations. To begin, let me tell you how we're going to deal with each chapter. We're not going to have time to look at every verse. So what I'm going to do is ask three questions of each chapter.

I'm going to ask where the focus of the chapter lies. I'm going to ask what sort of emotions are being expressed in that chapter and then I'm going to ask what sort of response is being required.

Okay, so where does the focus of the chapter lie? What sort of emotions are being revealed in that chapter and what sort of response is required? So let's have a look at chapter one.

[8 : 22] Where is the focus of this chapter? Well, the very first verses show it. The focus is on the city of Jerusalem and she is pictured as a victimized woman. After all, verse one says, she was once queen among the provinces.

That is, she was once a very exalted woman but now she is like a widow, the verse says. Worse than that, it says she's now as a slave. She's now a slave.

Look at the last two lines. She who was queen among the provinces has now become a slave. The grandest, freest woman has been reduced to slavery.

And in verse two, she grieves bitterly in the night without comforter. And not only is she affected but her children are also affected. Verse five says, her children have gone into exile.

As verse six says, her grand princes are portrayed as weaklings that flee before their pursuers. In verse seven, we hear that she is without help and that her enemies mock her and laugh at her.

[9 : 28] In verses eight and nine, she's portrayed as stripped bare and her menstrual uncleanness has defiled her clothes. In verse 11, she sees herself as despised.

In verse 13, she is desolate. The picture, let me say, she moved through the chapter, is unrelenting. Five times we are told, there is none to comfort her.

There is none to comfort her. None to comfort her. None to comfort her. None to comfort her. Here is a, this nation, you see, friends, was wooed by God.

This woman was wooed by God as his elect wife. But she has now become a desolate widow, bereft of her husband. She's a woman reduced to nothing, as it were.

All dignity gone, all glory vanished, all hope dissipated. And that's the force of this chapter. It is of Jerusalem representing the whole nation as a victimised woman.

[10 : 28] Now, let me ask yourself, you, where the emotions are in this chapter. What are the emotions that are present here? I'll listen to some verses as I read them to you and name the emotions in your mind as I read.

Okay, so name the emotions as I read. First verse is verse 2. Bitterly she weeps at night. Tears are on her cheeks. Among all her lovers there is none to comfort her.

And her friends, all her friends have betrayed her and they have become her enemies. Verse 16, remember, listen for emotions. Name them.

That is why I weep and my eyes overflow with tears. No one is near to comfort me. No one to restore my spirit. My children are destitute because the enemy has prevailed.

Verse 30, again, hear the emotions, name them. See, O Lord, how distressed I am. I am in torment within and in my heart I am disturbed.

[11 : 35] Fourth, verse 21 to 22, people have heard my groaning but there is none to comfort me. All my enemies have heard of my distress and they rejoice at what you have done.

May you bring the day you have announced so that they may become like me. Let all their wickedness come before you. Deal with them as you have dealt with me because of all my sins. My groans are many.

My heart is faint. What emotions did you notice? Well, here are the ones I noticed. First of all, she feels deep grief, agony because of her situation.

Toward God, there are hints of anger because he is regarded by her as being ultimately responsible for this situation. Towards the conqueror, there is deep desire for revenge, isn't there?

Grief, agony, anger, desire for revenge. These are the dominant emotions that saturate this chapter. It's a burdensome book for a biblical book, isn't it?

[12 : 45] But let's move on to our third heading. Let's talk about the response to her situation and her emotions. The response that stands out for me is the one in verse 18. Look at it. The Lord is righteous, yet I rebelled against his command.

I wonder if you can see what is going on here. Jerusalem, the widow, inconsolably grief-stricken. She knows that God is behind what has happened, but she also knows what is a deeper truth to that.

She knows that God acted this way because she deserved it, because she was sinful, because she sinned against him.

She broke covenant with him. She broke his command. She broke his law. And so she acknowledges, can you see it here? She says, he is in the right. She's out there with all her emotions.

In the end, she says, but, you know, he's in the right. He is right. He is righteous. He is, she is wicked and unrighteous.

[13 : 54] And she acknowledges her sin. She broke command. So there's chapter one in outline. Now let's move to chapter two and let's see how the focus just changes a little bit.

In chapter one, the focus was on Jerusalem, the victimized woman. In chapter two, the focus shifts away from her and toward God. And God is presented as an abuser of his people.

Now, you might think that's very strong language and it is. You might think that what I'm going, I'm saying, goes beyond what the passage says, but I want you to look at what the passage says and listen to the language and you tell me if I'm wrong.

I'm going to read key lines from the first nine verses. Verse one, how the Lord has covered Zion with the cloud of his anger.

Verse two, without pity, the Lord has swallowed up all the dwellings of Jacob. In his wrath, he's torn down the strongholds of daughter Judah. He has brought her kingdom and his princes down to the ground in dishonor.

[14 : 55] In verse three, in fierce anger, he has cut off every horn of Israel. He has withdrawn his right hand at the approach of the enemy. Verse four, like an enemy, he has strung his bow. His right hand is ready.

Like a foe, he has slain all who were pleasing to the eye. He has poured out his wrath like fire on the tent of daughter Zion. Verse five, the Lord is like an enemy. He has swallowed up Israel.

Verse seven, the Lord has rejected his altar and abandoned his sanctuary. Verse nine, her gates have sunk into the ground. Their bars he has broken and destroyed. Her king and her princes are exiled among the nations.

The law is no more and her prophets no longer find visions from the Lord. Can you hear the tenor of it? The tenor is he's gone beyond what was warranted, which is in one sense that's where abuse is often, that's often what abuse is, isn't it?

Where you go beyond what is right and just. And I think they're trying to express that. Can you hear what's being said? The enemy of God's people is not Babylon, you see. The enemy of God's people is God himself.

[16 : 01] He has covered Jerusalem with the cloud of his anger. He's not remembered mercy and that is what he says his name is all about. It's about being the Lord, the Lord, the grace and compassionate God.

Or he might punish for three or four generations, but he has kindness and overwhelming mercy for thousands of generations. He's behaved, these writers are saying, like an enemy warrior destroying the people, devastating their stronghold, dethroning their rulers and leaders, denuding them of the prophetic voice which is, you know, all God's people must live by the word of God, not by every word that proceeds from his mouth.

And he's taken that prophetic voice from them. The accusation here is very potent, friends. It's not that, it is that I think God has gone over the top in his anger. That's what Israel is in effect accusing God of having done.

Now, you might say, well, they're wrong and given the history of Israel, that may not be surprising that you'd come with that because actually he's being, he's restrained himself and over and over again he's relented concerning disaster.

Let me ask you what the emotions are that you hear. Do you feel the emotion in verse one as I read it to you or did you feel it? We had hints of anger in chapter one but in chapter two anger has now moved to the forefront.

[17 : 26] God is angry with his people but we also sense that the poet, the prophet and the people are angry with God. But we sense the emotions are raw and very deep.

Here is a people expressing to God frankly and honestly raw emotions. They are bewildered and in deep agony. I'm deliberately laboring this because I want you to feel it because most of us think that these things can't be said but they are said.

They're said in scripture by the people of God, to God, about God. These people are frankly and honestly expressing raw emotion.

They are bewildered. They are in deep agony. They are angry and in their raw emotion they are giving voice to their protest. Now I want to turn to our third heading and let's look at the response.

The response is clear. If they are feeling like they are then there's one appropriate response. What is it? It is to take their anger and their complaint to God.

[18 : 32] It is to go to the source. And that's what happens in the second half of the chapter. Look at verses 18 to 20. The hearts of the people cry out to the Lord.

You see it's not as though they're going home and saying God is really something else isn't he? No, they're going to God and saying God you are really something else.

They cry out to the Lord. You walls of daughter's iron, let your tears flow like river day and night. Give yourself no relief, your eyes no rest. Arise, cry out in the night as the watchers of the night begin.

Pour out your heart like water where? In the presence of the Lord. You go to him to do it. Someone since Dr. Blake was right wasn't he? He went to the source and expressed his grief.

Lift up your hands to him for the lives of your children who faint from hunger at every street corner. Look Lord and consider. Notice what he's doing. Look Lord, look and consider whom have you ever treated like this.

[19 : 43] Should women eat their offspring, the children they have cared for? Should the priest and the prophet be killed in the sanctuary of the Lord that is in your house? Should that happen? No, so there are the first two chapters of Lamentations just in outline.

I want to go back and notice something else though. I want you to notice how the prophet acts in all of this. It's an intriguing thing. In the first half of chapter 1 and then in verse 17 of the same chapter he observes as a third person.

It's as though he's an onlooker saying look at what I see. This is what I see amongst your people. He looks upon what has happened and he recounts it. He recounts it for others to read and look upon.

However in the second half of the chapter he moves beyond observing and he identifies with it. He identifies with the people. He puts himself in their shoes and he speaks for them.

He uses the word I and he carries their words. He allows the whole community through him the prophet to express it to God. Look and listen at verse 20. See Lord how distressed I am.

[20 : 52] I am in torment within and in my heart I'm disturbed for I have been most rebellious. You see he's identifying with the people saying you were right and I'm with the people. Daniel will later on say the same things.

He will come and he'll say was it that someone else sinned? No he'll say we sinned. And what's happening here is the prophet is saying I have been most rebellious.

Outside the sword bereaves inside there's only death. In chapter 2 we see a shift again. You see in the first half of the chapter he is again the objective observer. You know looking on he looks on and he counts what he sees.

Moreover as we hear what he says we begin to think that he's really not all that objective. His feelings creep through. Friends as a pastor of the people of God I find this all the time.

I will find myself in tears feeling the grief of people that I'm ministering to. I hold back the tears but I can feel it. You see that's what I think is happening to the prophet here.

[21 : 59] His feelings creep through and then he expresses his grief in verse 11. He describes how his eyes fail from weeping he's in torment. I've had people in my office like you know in this situation where I've not known what to say to them.

They feel overburdened either. I've got no answer for them. And I found myself in tears or fighting back the tears. You see here the prophet's heart is poured out on the ground because his people are destroyed.

In other words he observes his people. He identifies with them. He weeps with them and for them. Then in verse 13 there's a further shift. He wonders what he can do to help.

And in verses 18 and 19 he offers help by urging the people to take their complaint to the source. You see this is how he's going to help. He says look here's my help for you.

Take it. Go to God with this. He urges them to let their tears flow before God and to pour out their hearts like water in the presence of their God.

[23 : 07] Can you see it there? 18. The hearts of the people cry out to the Lord. You walls of daughter's iron. Let your tears flow like a river day and night.

Give yourself no relief. Your eyes no rest. Go and tell God. Arise. Cry out in the night as the watchers of the night. Begin. Pour out your heart like water. Where?

In the presence of the Lord. Lift up your hands to him for the lives of your children who faint from hunger at every street corner.

Can you see what I'm saying? The prophet is not simply an observer. He moves from observer to speaker for them, to companion with them, to fellow complainant with them.

Now friends, there's my summary of these chapters. Now what I'd like to do now is to think through how we take these chapters on board for ourselves as Christians. And I want to do this by talking about feeling bad about God.

[24 : 10] You see, what these passages tell us, and what many of the Psalms tell us, is that God's people sometimes feel bad about God. God's people sometimes feel bad about God.

And I want you to notice what they do when they feel bad about God. they take their feelings and they bring them to him. And God hears their feelings.

And he allows them to be put into poetry by his poets. And he causes them to be written in a book so we can read them much later and say, whoa, what's going on there? How can you say those things to God?

He says, oh, you can, I put them in my book so you can read them and know that they can. He allows them to put it into poetry. He allows them to sing these songs together.

You notice how they've been totally obliterated from all Christian hymnody these days. Totally obliterated because we no longer allow people to say these things.

[25 : 13] He doesn't censor these songs just like he doesn't censor the Song of Solomon for a whole different reason. Rather, he even allows these songs to be put in our scriptures for us to read.

And in doing all of us, he tells us it is okay. It is okay to express your feelings to God. And it's even okay if your feelings are those of anger.

But before we give a blank check, you might think, ah, right, I can say what I like. I can let loose. Perhaps we ought to think about whether being Christian, changes all of this.

Can we as Christians be angry with God? Well, let's think it through. First of all, let's go to the center of Christian faith. What is the center of Christian faith? It's a man dying for us on a cross.

The eternal son of God dying for us on a cross. On the cross, God proclaims beyond a shadow of a doubt that he loves us. Isn't that true? Isn't that what the cross says?

[26 : 15] It says, greater love has no man than this, that a man lay down his life for his friends. Through this, we are atoned for. We are justified.

We are sanctified. We are made right with God. But more than that, on the cross, God deals with his anger so we don't have to face it. Unlike God's ancient people, we don't have to face God's anger at our sin in this same way.

God should be what? Thanksgiving and praise. However, there's a little more to say.

You see, we still live in a world where bad things happen to good people, don't we? We still live in a world where bad things happen to good people and we know that God controls all things. He sees those things in the pictures we saw.

And so sometimes things don't make sense because we think, how is it that God's people can go through what they have gone through in Iraq and Syria and in masses of other places throughout history?

[27 : 35] It doesn't make sense. And when things don't make sense, it is entirely right to go to God and tell him. Let me put this another way. Given what we know about God in Jesus, it is probably not right for us as Christians to be angry with God.

Given what we know in Jesus, it is probably not right for us as Christians to be angry with God. After all, we know beyond a shadow of doubt that he loves us because we have the cross that proclaims it.

However, that is not all to say about the subject. You see, so many times I hear people stopping at that and saying it's not right to be angry with God. That's probably not right. I could put it slightly differently.

While it's probably not right to be angry with God given what we know about him, I think that I should say that if you are angry with God, it's not right to not tell him.

Does that make sense? If you are angry with God, it is not right to not tell him. Probably not right to be angry with God given all that you know about him, but if you are, it's probably not right not to tell him.

[28 : 44] Go to him. If you are angry with God, tell him. And that's what the Psalms and Lamentations tell us. They say God is God, he is our God, he does love us and we are safe with him and he wants us to talk with him about everything, to him about everything.

And he even wants us to talk to him about what we're feeling, no matter what those feelings are. Even if they're feelings that everyone around us says you can't have those, but we do have them, and we should go to God and say we've got them.

Instead, you know what Christians do? They shove them under. And before long they become bitter. They won't talk to God about them, they won't talk to others about them, they won't talk to anyone about them, and they stew inside them, and they turn them into bitter, angry people.

God's not going to break if you tell him that you're angry with him. He'll be okay. And we as Christians ought to hear it when some Christians need to say it to someone else, and not condemn them quickly, but hear it.

And later on maybe talk to them a bit more frankly about it and less emotionally about it. I do want to do one more thing though before I finish. You see, each one of us encounters friends who are in grief, and we are often called upon to help them, and I think these passages tonight give us some insight as to how to help.

[30 : 20] Let me quickly tell you what they teach us. First, when dealing with people in grief, may I urge you to do what these passages do. Acknowledge sin where it's present, that is, put the blame where it belongs.

If sin has been part of the cause, don't water it down. Mind you, choose the right place and the right time to say it, but don't water it down. Second thing is to learn from these passages how to allow emotion expression of real feelings without condemnation.

How to allow the emotional expression of real feelings without condemnation. God doesn't condemn his people in lamentations for expressing what they are feeling. They are wrong.

God is not their enemy. He is not their enemy. Their statements about him are not right. But he doesn't condemn them for expressing real feelings and how they're feeling.

And he won't condemn us as well, friends. So allow people to express to you and to God what they're feeling and don't jump on them. there may be a time later on when you might want to gently tell them there's another way to do things.

[31 : 37] Third thing is to learn from the prophet. Do you remember what the prophet did? He looked at what had happened and he told it as it was. He identified with the people.

He wept with those who wept. He joined in with them. He put their shoes on and spoke for them. He felt their grief. He wept with those who wept. And then he helped them by telling them to take their complaint to God.

When you are helping people in grief, don't just observe. Be a speaker for those in grief. Be a companion. Suffer with them.

Help them come to God with their grief. I've had people sitting in my office at the front here. I remember one graphic account about 18 months, two years ago. I had no answer for this man.

He was in tears in my office. I had no answer. I didn't know what God's answer was for him. I said, I don't know how to help you.

[32 : 43] I did what I could to help. He came through it with fine Christian faith. But I had no answer for him at the point. But I was able to weep with him and I was able to help him to come to God with his own grief.

Lastly, let me urge you to point toward Jesus. Don't allow people to wallow in their grief and anger. They have a God who loves them.

Point them to this God by pointing them to what God has done for them in Jesus on the cross. Point people to God by pointing them toward Jesus. Do that slowly and gently but strongly.

You don't have to spell it all out for them. Take your time with it. God. If God has been at work, he will continue to be and work in these people and he'll do his work in his time and God's time is not always ours and it won't always be instant.

So be ready for that. It took a long time for this grief to work itself through the people of God, for them to come to a new resolution and for them to come back to their God. But they did, but it took a while.

[34 : 08] Let's pray. Father, we thank you for this great insight into grief.

Thank you for letting us observe this grief. Thank you for enshrining in your book that it's okay to bring our grief even if it's directed toward you, to you.

help us father to be people who know though a greater truth than what we feel and that is the truth we know in Jesus, that you love us with a love beyond love, that you have loved us so much that you gave your only son, that we might be brought to know and love him and we might be forgiven.

father help us as we minister to those in grief to be able to bring this God who loves them and to be able to help them see him, help us to point them to this God, help us to point ourselves to you and your son.

And father we pray this in Jesus name, Amen.