

It is Finished

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[0 : 0 0] Well, good morning everyone. We are back after four odd months of lockdown and exile from church. It's wonderful to be back in church with you. My mind this week went to John Calvin, who in 1538, on Easter Day, in fact, on 1538, was exiled from Geneva, removed from the pulpit, kicked out of the town, by the council of the town. And after, I think, a number of years of preaching there, Calvin's ministry was such that he got up every Sunday, in fact, not just Sunday, but every day of the week, in fact, and preached through books of the Bible, verse after verse after verse from the original Greek and Hebrew. He was so, it didn't matter what calendar it was, didn't matter whether it was Easter Day or, you know, whatever he was up to next, he just preached that passage and just kept plowing through the text. And so when he was banished on Easter Day, 1538, it was just over three years later, he was called back to Geneva. He ascended into the pulpit for the first time and he picked up the very next verse from three years before. Such was his confidence in the Word of God and the ministry of the Word. Well, after four months of exile, we got Lamentations 4.

And I frankly, as we gather on a day like today, it'd be good if we came up with a somewhat more of a jovial, uplifting passage, if you like, than Lamentations 4. Lamentations is the darkest book in the Bible and Lamentations 4 is the darkest chapter of the darkest book of the Bible.

So let's pray and launch in. Father God, this is your Word. It reveals sin. It reveals hope in the gospel of the Lord Jesus. And so as we gather in all the joy of gathering as your people this day, help us not to miss this moment. Help us not to bypass this text and what it reveals about the idols of our hearts. Just we pray, have mercy on us. Amen.

Amen. Recently for our family movie night, we watched the movie, The Boy Who Harnessed the Wind. It's a film based on a memoir of the same name. It retells the story of 13-year-old William, who grew up as a part of a village of farmers in Malawi. Life is very tough. Life is very basic for them.

There's no running water, no electricity. If you could afford it, your transport was a bicycle and you had one for the family. William briefly goes to school, but his parents, like so many others, can't afford the education fees. He's a bright kid. He has a keen interest in electronics, scavenging through rubbish heaps to find bits and pieces to fix people's radios and other bits and pieces for them. He secretly gets access to the school library after being removed from the school.

[3 : 3 0] He reads a book about wind turbines and the production of electricity. And in the end of all of that, scavenging through junk heaps, he builds a windmill, junk, junk, which produces enough power to run a pump to draw water out of a well and water crops.

This in the 2000s, around the 2000s, I forget exactly what the date was, 2001, 2002, where there was a devastating drought in Malawi.

And the effect of his work saved a village from starvation as a 13-year-old.

This country is devastated by drought. I think probably the most harrowing part of the whole story is the way that this community just disintegrates during the slow death of starvation and poverty.

Family relationships break down. Law and order disintegrate as people steal from even women and babies in order to survive.

[4 : 51] There is a real sense of hopelessness as people slowly starve to death.

It's a true story. And as we turn to Lamentations 4, we see a similar scenario of devastation and starvation and the upheaval of a society.

So get your Bibles, open them up for me. Be grateful if you just need to see this text this morning. Lamentations 4 casts, if you like, up a variety of mental pictures that depict the suffering of the final siege of Jerusalem and beyond.

It also lays out for us some of the reasons why the judgment was imposed on Israel.

And it ends with just this whisper. Just a hint of hope at the end. And they're the three steps that I'll be taking us through today.

[6 : 10] If you've got the St. Paul's app open, the first one is the reversal of fortunes. Lamentations is a response to the events recorded in 2 Kings 24 and 25.

There's also a shorter version of it in 2 Chronicles 36. The scene is the fall of Jerusalem. The global bully at that time was Nebuchadnezzar and the Babylonian Empire.

The Babylonian army lay siege to Jerusalem from 588 BC to 587 BC. About 18 months, they surrounded the city and they slowly, slowly choked the city.

And terrible calamities befell the citizens of Jerusalem, as we see in Lamentations 4. Some members attempted to escape, run for their lives, and they were cut down in the process.

This is a vivid description of what takes place in this city. Twice at the beginning of chapter 4, the poet cries out, Alas!

[7 : 22] The NIV translated as how. It's not quite as desperate as, Alas! The situation is unrelieved agony.

Where chapter 2 describes the leveling of the physical structures of Jerusalem, chapter 4 describes the leveling of the people. Verses 1 and 2 set it up for us.

Have a look for us with me. How the gold has lost its luster, the fine gold become dull. The sacred gems are scattered at every street corner.

How the precious children of Zion, once worth their weight in gold, are now considered as pots of clay, the work of a potter's hands.

Now Psalm 19 tells us that nothing is more precious than gold, except the word of God. And the temple of Jerusalem was covered in gold and jewels and stone, you know, precious jewels.

[8 : 35] And now the gold, it says here, has lost its shine. And the jewels are scattered like pebbles on the streets. But the primary significance of this description is it's a metaphor for the people of God themselves.

The precious children of Zion. As it says in verse 2, God's precious people are trodden underfoot like broken pottery.

They have become worthless, cast out into the street. Though once they were worth their weight in gold, they are now thrown out like worthless pots of clay, fragile, broken, despised.

So the main message, if you look through, particularly the first 12 verses or so, is the, if you like, the devastating reversal of fortunes at all levels of society.

What is precious is now treated as worthless. Children who should be nurtured are being starved. The rich are reduced to the rubbish heap.

- [9 : 54] Vivid colours are turned black. Good health has now shrunk and shriveled. Mothers who should be feeding their children are feeding on them.
- Holy men have become dirty and defiled. The royal protector of life itself is himself trapped in a pit. Verse 10 is, if you like, the vivid and disturbing image which takes us, with their own hands, compassionate women have cooked their own children who became their food when their people were destroyed, when my people were destroyed.
- Compassionate women. The author here makes it very clear. These are not immoral.
- These are compassionate women. Compassionate mothers are now feeding on their own children. Frankly, I cannot get my mind around that, let alone the emotions of what it means to have that level of despair of life itself.
- And yet all this points metaphorically to a greater level of despair that will befall upon all of humanity.
- [11 : 25] What this passage is telling us is that the whole community from top to bottom has been turned upside down and shaken out and left shattered and scattered like trash littering the streets.
- It is pure devastation. I did say this is the darkest chapter of the darkest book of the Bible.
- The tragic irony of all of this reversal of fortunes is the end of verse 2 where they are described as the work of the potter's hands.
- In the rest of the Bible, that phrase is a way of describing Israel itself. As God did for the very first human being in Genesis 2, so he has done for Israel.
- He has fashioned them with the loving care of a potter shaping the clay in his own image, his precious possession.
- [12 : 36] It's a way of describing throughout the rest of the Bible the special covenant relationship when Israel needed to appeal to God for help as their merciful father when they appealed upon his compassion.
- For instance, Isaiah 64 verse 8, Yet you, Lord, are our father. We are the clay.
- You are the potter. We are the work of your hand. Lord, so do not be angry with us. Beyond measure.
- Lord, do not remember our sins forever. Oh, look on us, we pray, for we are your people. The metaphor is normally used to convey the preciousness of Israel in God's hands.
- The tragedy of something so precious being squandered as though worthless is an echo of Jeremiah's warning in Jeremiah chapter 2.
- [13 : 59] In Jeremiah 2, he lists the amazing privileges that Israel had enjoyed in their relationship with God. Sacrificial love, redemption from slavery, protection in the wilderness, the gift of the promised land, a rich inheritance.
- Instead, as Jeremiah 2.5 tells us, they followed worthless idols and they became worthless themselves. Why are they now broken pots?
- Because of idolatry. There is a sober warning here for God's people in any generation.
- When we fail to hold on to the preciousness of what we have in God's word and what we are in Jesus Christ and fail to live in accordance with that word and that status, then we are in danger of becoming worthless to God.
- No matter what our religious pretense is, no matter what we say with our mouth, we are in danger of becoming worthless to God, worthless to His world and worthless in His mission.
- [15 : 18] So make no mistake, Lamentations does give us a language to express our sorrows and our struggles in life.

It does do that for us. But it does so much more than give us language for sorrow. fundamentally more than language of sorrow.

It helps us to see the world and it helps us to see ourselves through very different lenses. Lament helps us uncover the idolatry of our hearts.

Lament mourns the effects of suffering on a society, but not simply because of the losses that we've experienced. It's a memorial to the futility of trusting in anything but God.

That's lament. So friends, think of your life as a glass of water with the sediment at the bottom.

[16 : 36] I'm sorry, I actually put the stuff in there too late this morning. I should have put it in last night. It would have looked like pure water by then. Hopefully. But forget that.

Imagine it's a, your life is like a glass of pure water. Sediment at the bottom. Or let me just put it like this, a good bottle of wine. If the glass remains stable and you don't shake the bottle, the sediment stays at the bottom.

The sediment is not activated. But bump the glass, shake it up, shake the bottle up, and all of a sudden, what used to be pure realizes actually it wasn't pure in the first place.

suffering bumps the glass of our lives. It stirs up the sediments we forgot, the ones that we tried to hide, the fear, the pride, the greed, self-sufficiency, the things that are lying dormant, the idols of the heart, the pursuit of comfort, the pursuit of security.

Whatever it is, it bumps the sediment, it stirs it up, it brings it to the surface. That's what suffering does. That's what hardship does. That's what lockdowns do. That's what GFCs do.

[18 : 04] That's what the death of a loved one does. That's what droughts do to farmers. It bumps the glass of our lives and shakes it up and helps me to see where is my trust?

What are the idols in my heart? What are the idols in my heart? In the Bible, an idol is simply an object of trust that takes the emotional and practical place of God in our lives.

Timothy Keller in his book Counterfeit Gods provides a great definition of idolatry. He says, It's not sorrow, it's despair.

As you think about loss in your life or as you consider a season when tears and sadness were a daily experience, what did you learn about yourself? What lesson did you discover as you stood over the rubble of your life in that moment?

What idols were surfacing in your heart at that moment? What repentance was needed in that moment? These moments of sediment coming to the surface are a gift from God to see what idols are in the heart.

[19 : 44] And perhaps you are in that season of sorrow right now and my heart bleeds for you if you are. Maybe your glass has been bumped right now. What you need to know in amongst everything else is that there is an important lesson to learn.

I want to encourage you to allow your grief to show you what is surfacing in your heart. Let God uncover it layer by layer the things which you perhaps place too much trust in.

In the same way that pain can be a platform for worship, it can also be a very significant if not the most significant conduit for spiritual growth and repentance.

Lament mourns the idols upon which we have placed too much hope. And so in this way lament not only expresses sorrow over loss, it also laments misplaced trust.

trust. And so here we are, Jerusalem is destroyed, the society is destitute because of idolatry, their misplaced trust led them into ruin and it is a comprehensible ruin.

[21 : 14] one reason for the judgment falling upon Jerusalem in Israel is given to us in verse 13.

It's failed leadership. It says it happened because of the sins of her prophets and the iniquities of her priests who shed within her the blood of the righteous.

Now it's clear when you look at the book of Jeremiah from the prophet of Jeremiah who also wrote Lamentations that there is a breakdown in social morality throughout the whole community of God's people.

But the religious leaders should have been doing the most to preserve the nation in covenantal faithfulness. Instead we are told here that they led the nation in corruption and idolatry.

Again priests and the prophets the leaders of God's people we see reversal of fortunes. Verse 14 those who were meant to be the eyes of God for the nation are groping blindly through the streets.

[22 : 31] Again verse 14 those who are meant to be holy and pure living as examples of covenant faithfulness are defiled filthy black.

Verse 15 those who used to decide the fate of the lepers are now treated as lepers themselves. Verse 16 those who lived in God's presence are finding no respect on the earth.

This is the consequence for 40 years the prophet Jeremiah pleaded pleaded with them to away from their wickedness to lead God's people in covenant faithfulness to the word of God.

For 40 years they spurned repentance and the grace that was they just preaching preaching so far from stopping the national decline they helped it they hastened it all that was left for them was the bleakness of judgment by God and society itself.

They were the most despised in Jerusalem on this day. There is something very significant here about the importance of leadership and the importance of leadership of our churches and the importance of leadership of this church.

[24 : 04] The leaders in Jeremiah's time were not condemned for their inexperience not condemned for their inefficiency not condemned for their personalities not condemned for their ineptitude they weren't judged because their sermons were too long or because they weren't strategic enough or because they didn't put on the programs that the people wanted or that their personal care they weren't the personal caregivers and the counselors for everyone they would judge because their hearts went after the wrong gods sin was what characterized them their hearts were bad and the people became bad they starved the people of the word of God and now the people are starving for food itself one thing led to another friends it is so easy for Christians to blame society to blame governments to blame social media for the decline of the church and the

Christian faith in this country and throughout the west maybe instead we should look to the preachers and the pastors for the moral decline in our country too often and for too long we have stood in pulpits and we have compromised the gospel we have cared for ourselves more than our flocks we have cared for our retirement packages more than our sermons our own peace rather than the good of the church or the advancement of God and his mission without a vital relationship with Christ and communing with Christ how can we expect the members of our church to be any different apathy breeds apathy sin breeds sin lack of discipleship breeds lack of discipleship if your pastors and leaders are not seeing much growth in faith in

Jesus Christ and communing with God in his word how on earth will you ever do it believe it or not for especially for those of us in the individualistic independent west with that mindset believe it or not you are dependent upon your pastors and your leaders you may have access to the word of God but our job is a prophetic access to the word of God you are dependent upon us and where we go so you go God's judgment will fall hard on pastors who preach falsehood who give permission for sin to reign in the church who are more caught up in their social media profiles and the greatness of God who are more interested in the approval of people than the approval of

God who submit to the worldview and ethics of society rather than submit to the word of God when we skew the scriptures to make it fit with our idols our opinions our passions our desires we kill God's sheep and God will not stand for it we might be the shepherds but he is the chief shepherd and he will fire his pastors and so may God forgive me for in any ways in which I have been guilty of these things and may he deliver you from following me into any way of unrighteousness and apathy but there's one more leader here in this text that has failed it's not just the priests and the prophets it's also the king it's verse 20 stark the

Lord's anointed our very life breath was caught in their traps we thought that under his shadow we would live among the nations this is referring here to king Zedekiah the lord's anointed direct line from great king David the one to lead God's people with the prophets and the priests in covenant faithfulness Zedekiah was meant to rule the nation with loving mercy instead Zedekiah had established unholy alliances with godless nations like Egypt hoping that Egypt would come to their rescue in this moment and they look for the nations to come and they don't come the idolatry of Zedekiah the hope of

[29 : 41] Zedekiah was in greater nations than Babylon and in this moment they were gone false hope he was a weak and a treacherous king who condoned the religious corruption and the moral degradation of Israel he ignored the advice of God's prophet Jeremiah again and again and again and again he was meant to be the hope of Israel the very life breath in verse 20 instead of bringing life to the city he ran for his life and he is caught he's blinded he's imprisoned and all of his sons are killed in front of him see the significance of that the line of David is ended and so verse 20 expresses the utter despair of Israel prophet priest king they've all failed they've all failed all three branches of their leadership system have failed

God gave his people prophet priests and kings to lead them both spiritually and politically they all failed and so is there any hope is there any hope and if you read this text you go there is no hope for Israel it's all done it's dusted it's gone except in the very last verse there is this whisper of hope this glimmer of hope what we see here is a surprising leadership and a great reversal I always thought chapter three was the most hopeful bit of lamentations but this is actually the most hopeful bit your punishment will end daughter Zion the story does not end in this moment for Israel there is another reversal to come in mocking derision the poet here tells nearby pagans

Edom read the book of Obadiah and you see what Edom did in this moment to Jerusalem as people tried to flee the city the people of Edom were cutting them down in the crossroads killing them by the sword as they tried to get out of there and coming in the back door and trying to loot what they could out of Jerusalem and Israel at the same time these are their half brothers and sisters and the poet says here you Edom successful at the moment enjoy it delight in it but the reversal is coming for you your turn will come God's justice will be imposed on them as well as on Israel and one day God's people though afflicted now will put behind them every single trace of the exile and you know what's amazing here what's amazing is it's the Lord's anointed is the one who will give them rest who will restore everything the one who at the moment has been imprisoned blinded put into slavery captured is the one who will bring them rest and healing and hope and restoration in Luke 4

Jesus turns up to the synagogue in Nazareth he grabs the portion of the scroll of Isaiah and he reads this the spirit of the Lord is on me because he has anointed me anointed me to proclaim good news to the poor he has sent me to proclaim freedom for the prisoners recovery of sight to the blind set the oppressed free to proclaim the year of the Lord's favour you see ultimately what Jeremiah was looking for here was the kind of leadership that could only be found in Jesus Christ he is the prophet the priest and the king Jesus Christ is the true prophet he not only speaks the word of God but he is the word of God that is he reveals to us the word of the will of God the purpose of God the salvation of God he's not only the holy priest who is blameless before God and man but able and therefore able to mediate between God and man he is himself the perfect sacrifice he does not he is the perfect sacrifice in that he satisfies the divine justice of God for our sin he went to the cross he died under the wrath the fierce wrath of God and in so doing what he does is he turns the anger of God away from us 2 Corinthians tells us he who was rich beyond imagination became poor in the dust destitute so that we who are in the dust and destitute because of our sinfulness because of our idolatry we are deserving of God's judgment so that we might become spiritually rich what a reversal we get a glimpse of this in the very first

Hebrew word in the last verse of Lamentations 4 it is a word that is best translated it is finished it is your exile is over it is finished the last thing that Jesus breathes the last thing he says is he breathes his last on the cross in John 19 30 it is finished one of the wonderful and great paradoxes of history is that here is the helpless powerless broken devastated Jesus dying on the cross and his very last words are I did it I've triumphed

[36 : 16] I've accomplished it and what he accomplished is described for us a little later in the New Testament 1 Peter 3 18 Christ suffered once for sins the righteous for the unrighteous to bring you to God it's a surprising moment of leadership by the flawless prophet the flawless priest the flawless king that produces the great reversal there is an infinite chasm between God and us and Jesus has done everything that's required he has paid every debt we owe he has dealt with every bit of shame every bit of guilt every bit of sin he has accomplished it all there is nothing more that we must do to bridge the gap between us and God Jesus last word was I've done everything necessary to bring you to salvation

I've thirsted so that you might be satisfied I've been trapped so that you can be set free I've been emptied that you might be filled I've been covered with your dust and filth so that you might be pure I've been killed and devastated and destroyed that you might live forever seen could be devastated tomorrow by 40 millimetres of rain and they can't even get the headers in to get it off just like that the hope the things that we look to will abandon us on the day of despair allow the hard times to show you where your heart is where your trust is but also that's the first thing second thing we must as the people of

God we must lament the decline of this church in this country the decline of the morality and the rejection of the word of God in our society and we must take responsibility for it we must lament the biblical illiteracy in the church and in society we must lament it we're responsible for it and Edom might be smiling right now but there is a great and eternal tragedy around the corner and what part have we played in that anyone who does not take refuge in God's anointed will face the judgment of God and they will do so alone and that is a prospect more terrible than slow death by starvation it will never end it will never end you will never reach the satisfaction of death the hope of death and so

I want to ask you church in all seriousness if we are not lamenting this is the question I want to leave you with if we if you are not lamenting the degradation in church and in society if it does not break your heart and the judgment of God that is coming what does it say about the vitality of your relationship with Christ and to have known in so you well