

# A Broken World & A Holy God

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[ 0 : 00 ] I'd invite you to join with me in prayer as we begin. The prophet Isaiah has you, O great God, recording these words.

You're the one who declares that you form the light and you create darkness. You're the one who brings prosperity and you're the one who creates disaster.

You, O God, do all of these things. Your word to us, Lord, is that you are the one whom we are to flee in your wrath, but you are also the one to whom we are to flee too.

You are both the one who brings disaster and you are the refuge. You are the one who causes the anguish and yet you are the one who provides the mercy.

Lord, you are more complex than any God that we could possibly formulate in our own minds, offensive even to our own hearts.

[ 1 : 12 ] And so as we come to your word, give us hearts that are tender to you, that lay aside idolatry, false views of you, and that we would see you as you are in this world as it is.

Particularly, Lord, we would pray that you would help us to see our sin and Jesus Christ in the gospel as the resolution to that sin. And we ask that you would work in our hearts today as we open your word.

Amen. Friends, we have just marked the 20th anniversary of the terrorist attacks in the United States on September 11, 2001.

Do you remember where you were when you first heard that news? Do you remember how many people died on that day?

Something like 3,000 people. Most of them were in the World Trade Centers in New York City. As a shock as that was, and it's still marked into our memories, is sadly one of just a small event, really, in what some people have called the conveyor belt of corpses of human history, of depravity and atrocities.

[ 2 : 44 ] World War II, for instance, resulted in the death of between 70 and 85 million people, the majority of whom were civilians. Tens of millions of people died due to genocides, disease, starvation in those five years.

The Holocaust in Germany alone caused the death of 11 million Jews between 1933 and 1945. One and a half million Armenians died at the hands of the Turks between 1915 and 1923, as well as a further 750,000 Assyrians and one million Greeks at the same time.

Three million casualties as a result of the Cambodian genocide. Another one million dead in Rwanda in 1994. The Soviet slaughter of 250,000 Polish people in 1937 and 1938, another couple of hundred thousand Poles by the Ukrainians, less than a decade later.

Between 1824 and 1908, white settlers and mounted police in Queensland murdered more than 10,000 Indigenous members of this country.

Do you remember? Do you remember any of that? Do you remember Stalin? Idi Amin? Pol Pot?

[ 4 : 22 ] Hitler? What about the 60 million lives that were lost in the Mongolian massacre? Do you remember any of that?

What about the latest atrocity that appears on the TV? How do you respond? How quickly it is over as we move on to the next news event?

Then there are a multitude of man-made disasters like Chernobyl. Natural disasters like 250,000 lives lost in a tsunami.

Or four and a half million deaths to COVID-19. This world is a broken world. No amount of freedom days and being able to stand up in pubs and drink beers and holiday destinations can remove that fact.

It is a broken world. And we should feel it. We should feel the stunning reality that each one of those lives is no longer with us.

[ 5 : 39 ] Every time you go to a funeral, it should be a stunning reality that this is a life lost. Gone. That merry-go-round has ended.

Death is not good. No matter how many great stories you tell at a funeral, how many humorous antidotes, death cannot be made to look good.

And eternal disaster is beyond comprehension. Over 50 million people a year slip into a Christless eternity where there is no comfort.

There is just increasing anguish. Lamentations is a book that's designed to help us into that space, to feel it.

It's designed as a memorial. It helps us to remember. It helps us to process and it helps us to go to God. The source of all hope in times of despair.

[ 6 : 59 ] Now, if you've got the St. Paul's app, I'd be grateful if you could go there now. You'll see I've got three points here. The lament, the comfort, and what does it mean to lament and to be comforted as a Christian.

And Lamentations 1, it'd be great if you could open up that. Now, Lamentations is a collection of five poems. Each chapter is a poem in itself.

And four of the five chapters is composed as an alphabetic acrostic, which means that each of the poems is divided into 22 separate sections.

You'll notice that for most of the Lamentations chapters, they're all 22 verses, except for the middle one, which is 66. But they're all broken into 22 separate sections, one for each letter of the Hebrew alphabet.

And so if you like, each one, each verse starts with the first letter of the Eve, and then the next section, the second letter, and all the way through for 22 verses, or 22 sections.

[ 8 : 15 ] So Lamentations, if you like, describes the suffering of God's people from A to Z. It's the totality of human suffering.

Also, Lamentations is not just simply the cry from the heart of someone who's having a tough time in life right now.

You know, this is not for the person who's struggled with four months of lockdown and they're feeling frustrated and they're waving their fist to God.

That's not what Lamentations is. Now, I don't want to minimize that for you if that is you. I just want us to go to a much bigger picture here and to go to a deeper tragedy than four months of lockdown. Lamentations is not an emotional outburst. It is a theodicy. It's an attempt to explain the ways of God to humanity.

[ 9 : 32 ] The writer here is doing so much more than just venting their emotions and you can see that because it is so structured.

It is so clear and thought through in the way it's put together. This is not just a random bunch of ideas. The writer is seeking to gain perspective on suffering and sharing that perspective with others.

Lamentations. The other thing we should know is that these five poems are communal rather than personal laments.

And this is what makes lamentations a little bit different than Job. The other significance between Job and lamentations is that Job is about the suffering of a righteous man.

Lamentations is about deserved suffering. It's about deserved, predicted desolation. And so in a world of overwhelming human suffering this book gives voice to the deepest agonies of grief with the hope that there is some comfort when we cry out to God for mercy.

[ 11 : 05 ] Now lamentations is a response to the events that are recorded for us in 2 Kings verses chapters 24 and 25 or as Gary just read to us 2 Chronicles 36.

It's a much shorter version of the circumstances that lay behind lamentations. things 24 25 2 Chronicles 36 are the facts of the event.

Lamentations is the reflections on it by someone who was there and experienced it. And the scene is the fall of Jerusalem to the Babylonian army between 588 and 587 BC.

Terrible calamities as we will see as we go through lamentations fell upon the citizens of Jerusalem over that 18 month period. The Babylonians destroyed the temple, the palace, the walls, the city, everything eventually, but the process of the people slowly dying up to that point is just horrendous.

The Babylonian army, they plundered, they pillaged the city and its inhabitants. The elite of society were forcibly marched down to Babylon some 1500 kilometers away from their home as slaves. [12:35] And so lamentations is written in response to these calamitous catastrophic historical events. you see for the people of Israel losing Jerusalem meant losing all that represented them as a people.

Everything. The monarchy, the ruling line of David, the priests, the sacrifices, the temple, the promised land themselves, losing the land meant that they had lost God's promise and losing God's promise meant they lost their special relationship with God who made and defines all things. God is gone for them. And so this first lament is from an eyewitness perspective and a description of the terrible desolation.

The poet here presents the city of Jerusalem as a woman in the deepest depths of mourning and pain. Lady Zion.

She calls out to God. She calls out in fact even to the nations around her to look upon her and see her suffering. Her suffering was great and in her mind no one was noticing.

[14:02] God was not even looking on her and the nations ignored her. the very verse of lamentations. How deserted lies the city once so full of people.

We are told she who was a queen has become a slave. Verse 2 bitterly she weeps. All her friends have betrayed her. As you continue through the chapter we see the suffering, the mourning, the abandoned religious practices, the desolate city, pilgrims no longer flock there for their feasts, merchants no longer walk through the gates, her princes have fled the city and they have been pursued by their attackers, the palace treasures have been looted, the temple has been violated, in her streets, desperate people negotiate for their very lives, they are concerned to go out and buy food, to try and scavenge for food, lest they become food for others, her army is defeated, the princes and the leaders have all perished in their search for food, we are told Lady Zion weeps bitterly, you can see it's a little bit more than just four months of lockdown, a greater disaster is happening here, my goodness I still get cold delivering food to my door, verses 2, 9, 16, 17 and 21, we have the repetition of a statement that forms the anguish of this whole chapter, there is no one to comfort her, she cries out, she reaches out to those who pass by, she groans looking for a comforter, but there is no comfort, no one will help her, no one will restore her, all of her friends, all of her lovers, all of those who are associated with her have abandoned her, but she should have seen it coming, she should have seen it coming, the prophet Jeremiah, the poet behind Lamentations had warned, warned Jerusalem for decades and for decades the city laughed him off, God's word had been cleared of the city again and again and again and again tragedy will befall you, turn, turn back to the living God, so why has this tragedy befallen, what was the essence of Jeremiah's message, William Westmore's story was a 19th century American who carved some great sculptures and one such sculpture is of a woman sitting amongst some ruins slumped slightly to one side, her elbow rests on the arm of her throne, she gazes downward with a resolute frown, she's despondent and engraved on the sculpture is Jerusalem in her desolation, it's a fairly famous sculpture, the most significant detail of the sculpture is almost unnoticeable to the passing eye when you look at it, it's this down, right at the bottom of the sculpture near the feet of

Lady Zion is this small snake slithering along, it represents sin, Jerusalem's destruction was because of her sin, have a look at verse 5, the Lord has brought her grief because of her many sins, the word used for sins in verse 5 is a word that actually suggests outright rebellion, it's because of her outright rebellion against God that she has been ruined, grief has come upon her, that is what this lament tells us is that Jerusalem got what she deserved and in fact Lady Zion herself confesses it in verse 18, the

[19:16] Lord is righteous and yet I rebelled against his command and again in verse 20, see Lord how distressed I am, I am in torment within and in my heart I am disturbed for I have been most rebellious so if you want one understanding if you like of the book of lamentations is that it's one long illustration of the eternal principle that a person reaps what they sow the Bible gives us the Christian faith if you like gives us gives the world the bleakest most comprehensive panoramic picture of the human condition outside of God and what we have here in

Lamentations 1 is a microcosm version of that of the universal human condition Jerusalem lady Zion represents our position outside of God Ephesians chapter 2 in the New Testament makes it real clear for us it's quite blunt but it says very clearly we are all human beings every one of us are

dead in our transgressions and sins as for you you were dead in your transgressions and sins in which you used to live when you followed the ways of this world and of the rule of the kingdom of the air the spirit who is now at work in those who are disobedient all of us all of us lived among them at one time gratifying the cravings of our flesh and following its desires and our thoughts and like the rest we were by nature deserving of wrath let's be clear here in Ephesians 2 death is not a figure of speech the state of spiritual death is universal

Paul is not describing a segment of society a particular group of people you know who are decadent depraved he's describing all of humanity from bottom to top from the so-called unrighteousness righteous to the so-called righteous all of us and the key idea is in verse 3 of Ephesians 2 we are gratifying the cravings of our flesh and following its desires and thoughts literally means there it refers to self-centered human nature our hearts inside are driving us mastering us controlling us self-centeredness making ourselves the world according to the bible the reason we are dead in our transgressions and sins is because every single one of us is profoundly self-centered the 16th century reformer and theologian

Martin Luther said that the very nature of humanity is so deeply curved in of itself into itself he wrote we are wickedly curvedly and viciously seek to use all things even God for our own sake the framework for every human being begins with is you give your life for me it's me first you exist for me my interest first and that is even how we relate to our creator our sustainer our God me first and if you do not give me the life that I want to have then curse be upon you and so the consequences at the end of verse 3 of

Ephesians 2 is really shocking to our modern sensibilities we are not only dead but we are also condemned it says like the rest we were by nature deserving of wrath that is deserving of God's righteous anger see God's anger is not like human anger it's not bad tempered it's not spiteful it's not malice nor is it animosity nor is it revenge nor is it arbitrary it is God's personal righteous constant hostility towards evil injustice and sin it is his settled refusal to compromise with sin and his resolve to in fact condemn all that is evil and so we come to lamentations one and we see this played out for lady

[ 24 : 48 ] Zion it led to her destruction and it will lead to ours too is it any wonder she cries out is there anyone anyone to comfort me when the sovereign God is against me some 70 years after the devastation of Jerusalem and after Babylon itself had been conquered by the Persian empire for its sin the Jews made their way back to rebuild the city once again lady Zion returns home they promised to not make the same mistake of their forefathers they promised to walk in obedience to God and yet a mere 500 years later we see nothing has changed for Jerusalem

Jesus Christ 500 years later bursts in on the scenes of the Middle East and declares himself to be God himself amongst us son of God dwelling amongst his people and he backed up that remarkable claim by living a perfect life and performing incredible miracles bringing hope and healing to thousands thousands and so what happens when God himself rocks up to Jerusalem Luke 19 we read Jesus approached Jerusalem he saw the city and he wept he wept over it and he says if you even you had known only known on this day what could bring you peace or what could bring you comfort but now it is hidden from your eyes the days will come upon you when your enemies will and here's a replay of history will build an embankment against you they will encircle you they will hem you in on every side they will dash you to the ground you and the children within your walls they will not leave one stone on another because you did not recognize the time of God's coming to you Jesus laments for Jerusalem God laments for Jerusalem and predicts again its destruction Jerusalem will once be destroyed because they did not recognize the time of God's coming that is God turns up to his city Jerusalem and they reject him they rejected their coming king they rejected Jesus and therefore once again they reject God and this rebellion will once again reap its consequences now that seemed totally improbable to the inhabitants of Jerusalem as it did in Jeremiah's day even those who were so close to Jesus and were following

Jesus were proud of their great city Jerusalem and they were especially proud of their temple they thought that because they had their temple God was on their side they were indestructible they had forgotten their history the temple was the place where God met with the people met with God and God met with the people and their sins were forgiven they thought they could live any way they like from Monday to Saturday turn up to the temple and it's all done God relationship with God is all good one day Jesus was walking past that temple in Jerusalem and those who with him were just admired how great that building was see the great stones and the way it's put together Jesus said

it's going to be torn down and I'm going to rebuild it in three days it's going to be destroyed and I'll rebuild it impossible what a joke impossible how is that going to happen

Jesus was referring to his death and his resurrection let me just take you back to Lamentations 1 really briefly it's interesting that the structural and theological center of Lamentations 1 is the end of verse 11 and verse 12 look look Lord and consider for I am despised this is ladies iron speaking look to me Lord look and look at me I am despised is it nothing to you as well the nations as you pass by look on me look around and see is any suffering like my suffering that was inflicted on me that the Lord brought on me in the day of his fierce anger now the crucifixion is a oratorio composed by

[ 30 : 42 ] John Stainer in 1887 in one of the movements of this composition Stainer puts the words of Lamentations 1 19 into the mouth of Jesus on the cross is it nothing to you all who pass by you see no one on that day just outside the city walls of Jerusalem recognized what was being accomplished on the cross namely the redemption of sin for the world people passed by members of Jerusalem passed by the cross and they considered Jesus nothing Matthew 27 verse 39 and 40 tells us those who passed by insults at him they shook their heads and they said you you who were going to destroy the temple and build it again in three days save yourself ha come down the cross if you are the son of

God and it's because he is the son of God that he could not come down from the cross like Jerusalem lady Zion before him Jesus was not only despised and rejected but he was also ignored lady Zion cries out is any suffering like my suffering that is inflicted on me and the answer of the New Testament is yes the answer of the gospel is yes Jesus suffering on the cross was more than lady Zion suffered suffered physically emotionally relationally spiritually because he was innocent of sin he did not sin and yet he carried the sin of Jerusalem of our rebellion to the cross he bore the sin of the world lady

Zion declares her suffering is because the Lord brought on me the day of his fierce anger and the suffering of God brought on Jesus the son of God was the ultimate day of his fierce anger Jesus was devastated he was demolished for our sin Jesus turned God's righteous anger away from his city Jerusalem away from the members the people there those who despised him the sinners the rebellious away from you and me from all of humanity he took that sin and rather than Jerusalem being destroyed he was destroyed Jesus is rejected and we are adopted Jesus is cursed so that we could be blessed Jesus despaired that we might have hope

Jesus was taken so that we could live forever ever Jesus was cut off from the father and he experienced the agony that we would experience if we were cut off from God for all of eternity sin is where we put ourselves where only God deserves to be and that's on the throne of our lives salvation is God putting himself where only we deserve to be and that is under his just condemnation for sin the very next words in Ephesians chapter 2 after telling us in verse 3 that we are deserving of God's wrath we read but because of his great love for us God who is rich in mercy made us alive with

Christ even when we are dead in our transgressions it is by grace that you've been saved that my friends right there is the hope of humanity freedom day released from restrictions the ability to travel internationally on a holiday is not the hope of humanity and it's not your hope this is your hope come to Christ he is your hope in the moment of despair he's the only one who can fix your heart in a very broken and sinful world Jesus is your comforter God the father as we told in the new testament the God of all compassion the God of all comfort he is your comforter the destroyer is your comforter Jesus is your comforter now friends where does this fit for the

[ 36 : 15 ] Christian where does lament and comfort where does it work for the Christian as a pastor for over a quarter of a century now I've got to tell you I've had the front row seat to significant grief and tragedy over that time all of those moments are incredibly sad and also instructive I often will leave a funeral yearning for death to be defeated reflected on how much brokenness there is in this world how much grief and loss there is in this world and how grateful I am at the same time for the cross that because of the cross I'm in a right relationship with God and because of the cross and because of the resurrection of Jesus he guarantees my future resurrection my life forever in his perfect presence where the end story the end of the game is there is no tears no more death no more crying no more pain the good news of

Jesus Christ and what he has accomplished for me is a comfort deep in my heart even as I'm leading a funeral in tragic circumstances you see because of that hope there is a certain because of

Jesus what he's done because of the gospel there is a certain hope the hope that life's final chapter has not been written although it has been revealed it's not written yet but it has been revealed there is a great day on the horizon but not every tear has yet been wiped away not every pain has been removed on this side of that great day the Christian must lament and I want to take you theologically higher than complaining about lockdowns friends if you're someone who trusts in the Lord

Jesus you must lament sin you must lament your own sin I believe the apostle Paul does that in Romans oh what a wretched man I am who can rescue me thanks be to the Lord Jesus Christ lament we must lament lament the destructiveness of sin in this world the scale human depravity in this world is incalculable lamentation is for us a memorial that helps us remember and to feel the weight of tragedy the smoldering ruins of Jerusalem we get an insight we feel it as we come into lamentations they were a message to not just the inhabitants of Jerusalem who survived but the smoldering ruins of Jerusalem were a message to Babylon to Egypt to the whole world and the cross of

Christ is the same for us it's a warning sign that is what sin deserves those who do not take refuge in the suffering Christ will one day take his place in suffering for their sin forever and that is a tragedy my friends which is incalculable it is a holocaust beyond comprehension to which 50 million people a year move into it's lamentable I want to ask you do you lament that as a Christian the lesson of lamentations one is that God is long suffering he is merciful but rebellion against his rule has its consequences those who sow the wind of sin reap the whirlwind of eternal destruction God is in control of history and he will not be mocked four months of lockdown is just God's mercy to us like the prophecy of Jeremiah was to Jerusalem that we're not in control just a reminder we're not in control this world is not what it should be lamentations one reminds us that sin is in fact that bad and that God is in fact that holy the effect of our collective treason is the groaning of creation under its brokenness the

[ 42 : 19 ] Christians should understand that beneath every single painful aspect of our humanity is the reality of sin more than just providing comfort and help in times of trouble the gift of lament helps us to tune our heart to the pain of others and to the fundamental truths of God and his world and his eternal reality as American pastor Mark Deaver has said we watch the news so we know how to pray in a way what lament does for the Christian is it wakens our souls from apathy and our own sin we live with people we are surrounded by a community that exists in a world that is on a collision course with its creator

God the devastation the desolation the desolation and the loneliness and the anguish on that day will be eternal not just for 70 years as it was for Jerusalem the comfort is now and you embrace that comfort now and you will embrace it for all of eternity you reject it now and on that day there will be no comfort we will cry out to even the stones to fall on us there will be no comfort there will be no place to turn lament lament is a gift from God to connect our hearts with his heart for his world a heart that desires not the death of a sinner but that all should be saved from death and find life forever in their comforter Jesus Christ Amen