

God in the Sorrow

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[0 : 0 0] short time to the first of our readings to Lamentations, the book of Lamentations in the Old Testament. And I want us to focus together on words you'll find in the 12th verse, chapter 1 and verse 12. Lamentations chapter 1 and verse 12.

Is it nothing to you, you who pass by, look and see, is there any sorrow like my sorrow, which was brought upon me, which the Lord inflicted on the day of his fierce anger?

I'm sure that you will have sensed the destruction that there was in Jerusalem as we read those verses together. They are not happy verses at all. They are devastating and they describe a scene of utter carnage and destruction. In one sense, the book of Lamentations, it kind of reads like a report on a news program, trying to describe the scene. Of course, they didn't have cameras in those days.

They could only convey what they saw by furiously writing down and trying to remember everything that they saw in as much detail as possible. And even without a camera, I think that we can get the vivid, horrific picture in the words that we see from this reporter in front of us. He is telling us in great detail all the awful things that he sees in a city that once thrived, like every other city, perhaps like our cities, and yet has all of a sudden become a scene of devastation and destruction.

The scene is catastrophic. The buildings lie in ruins. There is burning. There is confusion. There is silence broken only by the odd burst of sobbing every so often. Families have been separated.

[2 : 3 0] Families have seen loved ones slaughtered in front of their eyes. Women have been raped. That's quite clear in the first chapter. Although I don't know for sure what exactly was happening. Possibly people tortured. The Babylonian army who had invaded Jerusalem on that day in 586 BC were not known for their adherence to the Geneva Convention. And now after everything has happened, there is the silence in which people are trying to decide which way to go and how to think and even whether to think at all.

There's the shock and the despair amongst those who are left. There's no food. And it starts to rain and there's no shelter. And everything of value has gone. It's been taken by the soldiers of Babylonia.

There's probably disease beginning to break out in the city. And I suppose that the closest that we would have to something like this is the events of 9-11 where the two buildings in New York collapsed and the pictures, the awful, incredibly frightening pictures that we saw on TV.

A few weeks ago, this city, Jerusalem, even although it was existed many thousands of years ago, it was like any other thriving city of human activity. There was a marketplace where crowds of people thronged to buy and sell. There were families and children happily playing in the streets. The city was buzzing. And now it's all but empty because all the strong and the clever and the fit have been taken away. The young people have all been taken away. And the houses have been destroyed. The walls have been pulled down.

And the city lies in ruins. That's the scene. A scene of carnage. A scene of emptiness and destruction and sorrow beyond anything that you and I have ever experienced in this life. So that's the report.

[4 : 39] But it goes further than that because the report is written from the perspective, not of some objective reporter like we have nowadays who comes in from Britain, flies in, reports what he sees and then flies out again. This description is written by one of the residents of Jerusalem.

This is a Jerusalemite who is speaking. Someone who knew what it was like to have grown up in this very city and live here and knew the city and probably who's lost his friends, if not some of his family.

But it goes even further than that because the report is not just a description of what he sees, but it's an analysis. You get that today, of course. You get not only a reporter who tries to report on a war situation, but he tries to give some background and tries to understand why and what the events have been that have led up to the destruction of this city. And this reporter does exactly the same thing.

He gives an analysis, not just the bare details. This is no random destruction. You know, some events in this world are on a human level random, like the tsunami, for example. It was an act, a natural disaster. You couldn't predict it. But there are other events that aren't random. You could see them coming. Many people see you, many people make out that you could see 9-11 coming.

That's perhaps true and perhaps it's not true. We don't know. Or the war in Baghdad. You could see it coming. Things were building up. It was the same here. As far as God was concerned, he had said, he had promised, he had predicted and prophesied to the people of Jerusalem that these events would take place. And nobody believed him. That's the analysis. That was the background. Nobody believed.

[6 : 37] This is Jeremiah. And for many years he had stood on the street corners and he had gone to see people and he had said, I know I'm a lone voice. I know that I'm the only one that's saying this, but this is what's going to happen. And the people were looking around and saying, can you see any evidence of this? Look at what's happening in the city. Can you see this? The city is business as usual. Every day was the same. You'd get up, you'd go to the marketplace, you'd look after your family, and there was absolutely no sign whatsoever that something was going to happen. Except for one thing, that Jeremiah, by God's authority, was telling everybody that the city would be destroyed. But as far as appearances were concerned, there was absolutely no appearance whatsoever. It's hard to imagine, isn't it? You imagine someplace like Edinburgh, for example, or Glasgow, or even some of the bigger cities in the world like New York, or Paris, or Tokyo, or any of these great cities in the world. You look at them and you think they've been established and they've taken hundreds of years to establish and the buildings have become bigger. And you look at these great buildings and you can never imagine, the one thing you can never imagine about these buildings is that they will ever be destroyed. You can never imagine that. Perhaps a time will come where they will wear out and where time and the forces of nature will take their toll. But that will be many, many years. And of course, something else. You can never, you can never imagine these great cities all being reduced to rubble in one day. That's exactly what happened here. But it's more than that, even, it's more than even an analysis. It's an attempt to come to terms with what has happened on behalf of the people. It's an attempt to understand that what's important is not what appears in front of us, and in this case, the indestructibility of a city, but what's important is to listen to the voice of God.

But it's also an attempt, and I'm going to move on quickly, it's also an attempt to see beyond what has happened. If you read through Lamentations, there's this question of how to move forward.

Is there any way we can move forward? Or is this destruction going to mean the end of the people of Israel? Well, in actual fact, it did not mean the end of the people of Israel. And contrary to appearances, despite all the appearances of destruction and carnage and death, God still had a plan for his people, in which, as we know, the Lord Jesus would come into the world in years to come, in centuries to come.

But it's even more than that. It's even more intriguing than all of these things, because this book was written by Jeremiah. And this is extraordinary, because Jeremiah was the one who had spent years of his life predicting exactly what was going on. And now, the reality of all his preaching and all his warning was now taking place in front of his eyes, you would expect that Jeremiah would be standing on the street corners and saying, I told you all this was going to happen. You're a bunch of stubborn people. You have no idea. Why did you not listen to me?

You would think that he might even be gloating. I was right. I was on my own. I suffered. You threw me into a cistern. You mocked me. You tore up what I was reading and tore up the word of God.

[10:07] And you completely despised everything I said. You would expect him now to be saying, huh? I told you so. But he's not. He's actually suffering alongside the people of God as they suffer what he predicted in the first place. He's doing exactly the opposite to what you would expect him to do. He's taking his place among the mourning, suffering, sorrowful people of God.

That's quite intriguing, isn't it? There's one more thing I'd like us to see. Or perhaps I should say there's one more thing I'd like us to ask as we read those terrible chapters, this terrible account.

Where is God in all of this? What's God, what's his place in all of this? You would expect, just as I've been saying, that if God's word had warned those people in the first place as to what was going to happen, that he would have no place at all in this. That he would withdraw himself completely. After all, you could say that he had a right to do so. They had disobeyed him. They had continued to worship other gods. They had completely disregarded everything he had said to them and warned them.

You would expect that he would take a step back or turn his back on them and just have nothing more to do with them. But these very words are written by the authority of God himself. Not only so, in a strange, inexplicable kind of way, God is amongst his people. He is in the very heart of their suffering because they are still his people. Even although destruction has come upon them as a consequence of their sinfulness, and even although providentially they are suffering the wrath of God, the anger and the judgment of God in their experience, in their lives, yet he is in the suffering. He is in the middle of his people and he is part, somehow or other, he is part of that suffering because he has tied himself and pledged himself by his covenant to his own people. So God is not on the outside. God is on the inside of the book of Lamentations.

He's there. I'm sure that they were, the people themselves were hardly conscious of that presence and yet there he was. There he was in the midst. He's in the sorrow. Even although at the same time it is God who has in his judgment brought about that sorrow. And that's what I, I want to say that again. Let me tell you this because this is, this is what I'd like us to focus on and this is where the link appears between this, these verses and the cross itself. God is in the sorrow, even although at the same time it is God who has brought it about. That's what we find in verse 12, isn't it?

[13:17] Look and see, is there any sorrow like my sorrow which was brought upon me, which the Lord inflicted on the day of his fierce anger. And just as I said last night that I can't help but seeing a resemblance, a striking picture in the conversation between Boaz and Ruth of the picture of Jesus' relationship with his people and the care and the concern and the affection that he has in which he gives them encouragement to come and to serve him and love him. I can see the same resemblance in those words, a striking resemblance. This is a day of judgment for Israel.

Reminds us that there will be a day of judgment for the world and a day to come. But there was also another day of judgment. A day in which judgment was focused, God's wrath and his judgment was focused on his own son. And that's the day that we have come today to remember when Jesus himself, the son of God represented the people of God represented the people of God and he became sin for them.

And he suffered the wrath of God for them with all that wrath involved. So I'd like us to see this verse as a picture today of the suffering of Jesus Christ and particularly one element of that suffering and that is the sorrow of Jesus Christ, the sorrow which Jesus suffered. Because that's the word that we have in Matthew 26 in Gethsemane. He said, taking with him Peter and the two sons of Zebedee, he went to the garden of Gethsemane, began to be sorrowful and troubled. And he said to them, my soul is very sorrowful even to death. Very, very briefly, three things. First of all, I want us to look today at the intensity of that sorrow, the intensity as we have it here in this verse 12, but also as it prefigures or reflects the sorrow of Jesus Christ. And here's the way he describes the sorrow that he is experiencing at this moment in time. There is simply no sorrow beyond it. No greater sorrow. This is the greatest sorrow that he can even ever imagine in this world, is there? And he puts it in the form of a question.

And sometimes something, a great truth is it comes home more powerfully to us when it's put in the form of a question because it forces us to think of what the answer might be. It's what we call a rhetorical question. And here's the way it goes. Is there any sorrow like my sorrow? And he leaves it there.

Is there any? And of course, the answer is no, because he is going through something that he cannot imagine to be worse. Now, I often hear people saying, quite rightly so, when they're suffering an illness or an accident or something unfortunate that's happened to them. Well, they say there are other people in the world who suffer more than I do. And that's a great comfort to us, isn't it?

[16:24] When we go through something like that, we look at other people. We hear on the news of how people suffer. And their suffering is worse than ours. And it gives us help to be able to come to terms with what we are having to go through. It is. But here's something different. Here's a man who is suffering in a way, he can't imagine. There is no greater sorrow. And the same was true for Jesus. It was true in the ultimate sense. And that's the word I want us to use this morning for the sorrow. I was thinking about it earlier on. Earlier on, I was trying to focus on this chapter. I was thinking, what word can you use that describes the suffering of Christ? Some people try to use the word infinite. I don't like that word because I don't know what infinite means, to be honest. I don't know what it means. And sometimes we use that word infinite just for want of a better word. But we don't really know what it means. I want to use the word ultimate. It's a word that's become quite popular in modern use.

And it's a very powerful word. It means extensive. It means so extensive you can't get further than that extent. That's ultimate. That's what it means. Ultimate suffering. Now, you and I have never gone through ultimate suffering. We may have been ill. We may have suffered pain. We may have even been in agony at some point. But we have never, ever suffered ultimately. Only Jesus can ever be said to have suffered ultimate suffering. Ultimate suffering. Now, in the past, people tried to divide the various sufferings of Jesus into their various compartments. People talk about, for example, his physical pain and the pain that he suffered on the cross as he was nailed to the cross. And then they look at another compartment, his emotional suffering that took place at the same time or his psychological suffering where there was no one to comfort him. I don't need to tell you that if you're in hospital or if you're ill, your suffering is alleviated to some extent if there's somebody with you and who's talking to you and who's somebody you love and trust. And that helps. It gives you some comfort. Jesus had none of that. So people talk about his emotional suffering or psychological suffering. And then they talk about his spiritual suffering. We'll come on to that in a few moments in time. That was the spiritual suffering in which he said, my God, my God, why have you forsaken me? And we believe that that was the moment when the father himself, in making his son to be sin for us and pouring out his wrath on his son, he had to withdraw in some way. He had to turn his back, turn his eyes away from his own beloved son.

So that was the spiritual. But the mistake I think that sometimes we make is we divide these sufferings into their various compartments. And I don't think we should do that. I think we should look at it as a whole. That for Jesus, this was ultimate suffering. And I don't believe that he could divide all of these things out. They were all concentrated in one in six hours. We have no idea. No idea. No, no appreciation. And we can't appreciate. We couldn't begin to start trying to, to imagine the suffering that Jesus went through. We have to simply listen to him on the cross.

We have to, we have to think about what our sin deserves. I think that that's possibly the best way in which we can think about what our sin deserves. And I want us to go on to the second of what I was going to say this evening, this morning, and that is the source of the sorrow. We've, we've tried to mention the intensity of that sorrow, but I think we have to move on to the source of the sorrow.

Verse 12 tells us, is there any sorrow like my sorrow, which was brought upon me, which was brought upon me, which the Lord inflicted on the day of his fierce anger. The same could be said for Jesus on the cross, that Jesus suffered not just because evil men betrayed him and in hate they crucified him on a cross in order to be rid of this troublemaker who had never broken any laws and never had done anything wrong. That's the evil of man. And yet in that sinful action, there was the hand of God because it was brought about by, in God's purpose, by the hand of God in order for him to be our sacrifice. God had to pour out his own perfect, complete, ultimate, there's that word again, ultimate wrath on the Lord Jesus, his own son, his own son who he had declared some days before, some years before, this is my son in whom I am well pleased. And the son who for all of his life had depended on the strength and the encouragement that the father gave him day by day and was always conscious of the presence of his father. Now that consciousness went into darkness because he was suffering God's wrath for our sins.

[22 : 01] Again, we do not understand what that wrath is until the only hope we have is when we look at our own lives. And when we look at our own individual guilt and sinfulness, even you go back 24 hours, go back a week, one particular person, me, I don't need to go beyond myself. I don't need to look at someone else to find sinfulness. I just look at my own heart and I look at the deceit and the corruption and the darkness and the awfulness and if I'm really honest with myself and then I go back over my whole life and I try and collect, I can't do it, neither can you. You can't collect your own guilt and that, these are only the sins I know about. That's only the stuff I know about. There's a whole heap of other stuff that I've never even been aware of. And then I take all of God's people together.

Even the people here at the table. Those of you are following Jesus who haven't come to, the sins have been paid for by the Lord Jesus Christ. You think of that. And it's almost impossible to imagine, isn't it? What kind of guilt is that? And what kind of suffering would there have to be in order to take the place of what we deserve? The soul that sins, it shall die. The wages of sin is death. The Bible tells us that the punishment that we deserve is God's eternal punishment. One of the great questions of course is this, how was it possible for the punishment of our sin to be concentrated on Jesus for six or seven hours, for the six or seven hours that he suffered on the cross?

Well that's a question, I don't know the answer to that question. But it was possible. And God accepted Jesus' substitute, his sacrifice on behalf of us. He took our place on the cross. God accepted that sacrifice. And as a result, we are set free from that guilt of sin. The source of that sorrow was the anger of God. You know, the anger of God and the goodness of God have to go together. People think, well how can God be an angry God and at the same time a good God? Well think about it.

That really is not a good question at all, if you really think about it. Are you telling me that God should not be angry when he sees the atrocities that make us angry? You look at the TV and you look at some of the things that go on in the world, the suffering that takes place in the world, and we become angry. That's the way in which, how inhumane we can be, one person can be to another person.

And that's only the tip of the iceberg, what God sees into our hearts. Are you telling me that God shouldn't be angry? Are you telling me that anger is not good? I'll tell you, if God is not angry, he's not a good God. It's monstrous to think that God cannot be angry. But his anger is not like our anger. It's not kind of capricious and unpredictable and random the way that we get angry. We get angry at the wrong things. Our anger is sinful. God's anger is never sinful. He cannot be. He's only angry at what is right, and what's right for him to be angry, I should say. And the Bible tells us there is only one thing that burns his anger, and that is our sinfulness. If it wasn't for our sinfulness, there would be no anger in God. Or at least he wouldn't display that anger or exercise it in any way. And here on the cross is where the anger of God is focused, and the punishment is focused on his son, his own son.

[25 : 52] And because he accepted that anger on our behalf, we are set free from all that our sins deserved.

And that's why we can come confidently today, and we can see, verse 12, look and see. If there is any sorrow like my sorrow which were brought upon me, which the Lord inflicted on the day of his fierce anger. We are to understand today. In the light of what the Bible tells us, of the death of Christ, we are to understand. Not with a perfect understanding. I've already discussed with you questions that I can't answer, and I guess nobody can answer. But we are to understand on a personal level that it is by God's grace and by the death of Jesus Christ as the Lamb of God that we have access today to the presence of God, to the very God of the universe, the God who created the heavens and the earth. The death of Jesus has opened the door so that you and I can personally come through that door and we can know that God for ourselves. I was walking early in the morning today as the light was in the castle grounds. What a beautiful morning. I was looking at the sky and the redness and everything, and you know, it's on these occasions that the majesty of the universe in which we live comes home to you. And you think, what kind of power and wisdom and insight created all of this?

And then you think, I can actually speak to that creator. And that creator has promised me that he will listen to my voice. And it will be as if I was the only person in the world.

That's the kind of relationship that you and I have with the creator of the heavens and the earth. And it was brought about by the death, the sorrow, the pain, and the agony of the Lord Jesus Christ.

That's the kind of relationship that we have. And in that relationship, we come thankfully and joyfully and in faith to remember what Jesus did for us. Of course we want to remember it.

[28 : 39] We want to worship him by remembering what he did for us and by taking the elements in which he speaks to us and brings home to us afresh what took place and the extent to which he went to bring about our salvation. We're going to stand and pray.

We're going to... Our Father in heaven, we ask now that you will give us that understanding, give us that invitation afresh, that we will see it, that we will respond to it, and that we will come and take and eat and to do so with perception in our hearts and with knowledge in our hearts as to what we do and discernment that discerns the Lord's body.

Pray that you will take away our sin now in Jesus' name. Amen.