

Lamentations 1: The sinful world and the Holy God

Introduction:

Imagine with me this evening a war-torn country. Imagine cities alight with fire, blood everywhere, swords and spears. Bodies cut up, burnt. Men, woman, children raped. Families torn apart. Husband, wives, children taken away into slavery. Once beautiful buildings now destroyed. Leadership overthrown. Food and resources raided. Precious gold and silver, stolen. How does that make you feel? Kind of hard to imagine that here in Australia. The closest thing we get to picturing an image like that is in movies, or online with pictures of other countries torn apart like that. But if you imagine it for just a moment, or if you think about some of the describing words I used, it might make you throw up. It might make you feel disgusted. It might make you feel angry and sad. Shaken. You see the book of Lamentations was written with a historical setting like this. And it is with a reality like this which makes the book of Lamentations so important for us as Christians to read. Because the reality is we all face sufferings and hardships. We might in the future experience something like this. As we become more global, you will definitely meet people who come from nations which have a similar setting like it. And that makes what the book of Lamentations has to say about the sufferings of this world and the hope that there is so important.

Historical context:

You see, after the reign of King David and Solomon, the nation was divided into two kingdoms. 10 tribes were called Israel and they followed Jeroboam (1 Kings 12:20). The other 2 tribes, Judah and Benjamin followed the house of David and they were the southern kingdom known as "Judah". (1 Kings 12:21-23)

The problem with both these kingdoms is that as time progressed they increasingly disobeyed God and worshipped other things. And if you read through 2 Kings and 2 Chronicles, although there were some Kings who walked in the ways of the Lord, many were characterized as doing "what was evil in the sight of the Lord". One key text is in 2 Chronicles 36 and it describes the decline of Judah. It gives us the historical picture of what happens between Judah and the Babylonians under the reign of King Nebuchadnezzar.

Before we look at chapter 1 of Lamentations and the rest of the book I think it is so important for us to glance at 2 Chronicles 36 for a moment. You will see that there are five kings who are mentioned in this chapter. King Jehoahaz was the son of King Josiah who was the last godly king who reigned in Jerusalem. Under his leadership there was great spiritual and social reform (2 Chronicles 34-35), but after his death, the nation began to turn upside down. His Son Jehoahaz, did what was evil in the sight of the Lord (2 Kings 23:32, "And he did what was evil in the sight of the Lord, according to all that his fathers had done.") and was deposed and carried into Egypt (36:4). Jehoiakim his brother was the next king and "did what was evil in the sight of the Lord". In Jeremiah 25-26 we are told that he led the people into further idolatry, refused to listen to God's word and persecuted the prophets. 36:6 tells us King Nebuchadnezzar went up against him and bounded him in chains to Babylon. He also plundered the house of the Lord. This was also the time where Daniel and his three friends were deported to Babylon (Daniel 1:1-2). Every other king mentioned in this chapter was characterized by the same phrase we see constantly, they "did what was evil in the sight of the Lord". It records that God continued to persistently send messengers to them because "he had compassion on his people and on his dwelling place" (36:15), but they continued to "mock" God's messengers, "despising his words" and "scoffing the prophets". It ends that section by saying the "wrath of the LORD rose against his people, until there was no remedy". (v16) The picture we are given is that God's people continue to reject and do what was evil in God's eyes and God continue to pour out his compassion on his people and dwelling place. But they are so bad, so sinful that God in his justice and holiness must judge. The result is that "the King of the Chaldeans killed their young

men with the sword in the house of their sanctuary and had no compassion on young man or virgin, old man or aged.” (36:17). They plundered all of the treasures. Everything they had was brought up to Babylon. They burnt down the house of God and broke the wall of Jerusalem. Everyone who escaped the sword was sent into exile to Babylon and became servants to him and the next generation. It was in a state of desolation. Complete destruction. (36:18-21). Let me draw your attention this evening to the fact that the word of God records the fact that although God was steadfast in his compassion, this was the point in time where there seems to be no remedy. (v16) The nation had strayed away long enough.

This is the sad picture. The temple that used to be the dwelling place of God’s people, the city and people who were to be the light to the nations was now in ruins. Because of the people’s sin, because of their rebellion against God, there was only widespread destruction, death and ruins. Instead of being glorious and amazing, it was now filthy and dead. That’s the historical back background. We will see that in the book of Lamentations.

The book of Lamentations was probably written by Jeremiah, the weeping prophet, after the fall of Jerusalem. It was written poetically following what has happened in 2 Chronicles 36. This first chapter introduces us to the theme and tone of the book. Each chapter is an independent lament, and the book reaches its climax in chapter three. However, the last two chapters aren’t positive. Instead the pain and misery is still there.

I want to draw your attention to the fact that Chapters 1,2 and 4 have 22 verses each beginning with the 22 letters of the Hebrew Alphabet. It is as though Jeremiah wants us to see the misery from A to Z, the fullness of all the pain and suffering. Chapter 3 has 66 verses, following the same idea in the other chapters but instead it is every three verses. Chapter 5 also has 22 verses but doesn’t follow the acrostic poem. The book is therefore poetically designed to emphasise the comprehensive nature of Jerusalem’s destruction.

I want to look at this text in two parts, **Misery Observed (v1-11) and Misery experienced (v12-22)** which is the response of Jerusalem.

Text:

From v1-11 we have the “**Misery observed**”. And the reason why there is great misery is because there is a **great reversal** of what Jerusalem once was.

How lonely sits the city that was full of people! How like a widow has she become, she who was great among the nations! She who was a princess among the provinces has become a slave. 2 She weeps bitterly in the night, with tears on her cheeks; among all her lovers she has none to comfort her; all her friends have dealt treacherously with her; they have become her enemies. 3 Judah has gone into exile because of affliction and hard servitude; she dwells now among the nations, but finds no resting place; her pursuers have all overtaken her in the midst of her distress.

The first 3 verses of Lamentations 1 introduce the main theme of the book and opens up questions for us. Jeremiah observes what has happened to Jerusalem. The poetic picture we get here is a city that was once full of people, was once full of life is now lonely and sits by herself. (v1) She is personified as a widow, someone who has lost her husband, who used to be great but now is a loser. She was once a princess, someone of royalty, someone who once had an inheritance but now she has become a slave. By implication she once was full of life and joy, but now she weeps bitterly in the night, tears on her cheeks and all her lovers have deserted her. None of her lovers comforts her. In fact, all her friends have now become enemies, and deal with her treacherously. Verse 3 expands the misery and introduces the title Judah. Not only is the capital city in trouble, but the whole national name has been personified. The people of her nation have been exiled and are in

affliction and work in abundance for another nation. And although the city still exists, there is no rest. Her pursuers have conquered her. She is totally shattered. What we have here is a reversal. A once glorious city and nation, a once blessed and powerful character, has now become completely obliterated. It has been completely desolated. You see, Jeremiah observes what has happened historically. There is great reversal. And I asked you how you felt. How you would you react. And this is how he reacts. He cries out to express the misery, grief and pain that he sees. **HOW! OH HOW LONELY, HOW TERRIBLE IS THE SIGHT I SEE BEFORE ME.**

And that's the cry we see throughout the rest of this chapter and book. It is a book about the pain, and reversal that has happened. And the question we ask then is, how come? Why? Why is the city of Jerusalem, why is the people of Judah in the situation they are in. Why, why why? And that is the question we ask when misery comes along in our own life and when we observe all the tragedies around the world. We ask why? And we will see why in the passages to come.

But before we look at why, not only does Jeremiah observe the reversal of identity and status, but he continues to observe the **Reversal** as well as the **Emptiness**. Instead of speaking about the city and nation broadly, in verse 4-6 he zooms in to the specific sights and people. The roads and gates, the priests, young women, the people and nobility.

4 The roads to Zion mourn, for none come to the festival; all her gates are desolate; her priests groan; her virgins have been afflicted, and she herself suffers bitterly.

5 Her foes have become the head; her enemies prosper, (because the Lord has afflicted her for the multitude of her transgressions;) her children have gone away, captives before the foe.

6 From the daughter of Zion all her majesty has departed. Her princes have become like deer that find no pasture; they fled without strength before the pursuer.

There is not a single person who is not affected by what has happened. I want to draw your attention to some of the key words. Verse 4 uses the word Zion which is not simply a synonym for Jerusalem but points to the temple city, the dwelling place of YAHWEH. This is the holy place. The place and people which God sovereignly chose and loved. This is the place which is supposed to be blessed and majestic. Full of splendour. This is the place where God's covenant people were to dwell and worship. But all her majesty has been departed. The roads which lead to the place of worship are empty. No one comes. Instead of being glorious, her foes have become their master and they prosper. And we ask the question again why?

At this point in time, Jeremiah gives us the why. In the middle of verse 5, the reasons why there is a reversal, the reason why she has become desolated, the reason why she has become empty even though she is supposed to be the dwelling place of God. Even though she is supposed to shine bright in the darkness, it is because, verse 5b, "because the LORD has afflicted her for the multitude of her transgressions." The irony behind all this situation is that the reason why the beautiful city of Jerusalem, the reason why the chosen people of Judah has faced all this misery, is because the one who chose them, the one who blessed them, the one who loves them, has decided to bring judgement upon them. The LORD has afflicted her. Although directly it was the Babylonians, Jeremiah observes that it was the LORD. YAHWEH who loved them abundantly has now judged them, because of the multitude of her transgressions. It is not just one or two sins. But it is a multitude. They were so sinful. And to be honest, Jeremiah foreshadows it by what he observes in verse 2. Although she was supposed to look innocent, she has lots of lovers. Lots of idols. She has been unfaithful. She has cheated on her husband YAHWEH with foreign idols and sin. God in his holiness, God in his perfection, God in his majesty and glory must judge sin. And that is why what Jeremiah has observed has happened.

Verse 7-9 further develops the why. Jeremiah describes the **reversal** and how **Unclean** she had become. It describes for us the problem with sin.

(the reversal in verse 7) 7 Jerusalem remembers in the days of her affliction and wandering all the precious things that were hers from days of old. When her people fell into the hand of the foe, and there was none to help her, her foes gloated over her; they mocked at her downfall.

8 Jerusalem sinned grievously; therefore she became filthy; all who honored her despise her, for they have seen her nakedness; she herself groans and turns her face away. **9 Her uncleanness was in her skirts; she took no thought of her future; therefore her fall is terrible; she has no comforter.**

Because of sin, Jerusalem has become filthy. Using the picture of Jerusalem as a woman, she is naked and she has become forgetful of her appearance and has not noticed the lower parts of her clothes. This impurity gives us a very shameful picture. You see sin is shameful. Sin is dirty and disgusting. And the affects of sin become obvious. The people who once honoured and adored her, has now despised her. Sin has led her to fall, terribly. And there is no one to comfort her. And at this point in time I think the obvious application is that you need to take sin seriously. Sin is disgusting before God. Sin is deserving of judgement. Sin will lead to your fall.

Jeremiah continues to describe the misery that has happened in verse 10 and 11. **10 The enemy has stretched out his hands over all her precious things; for she has seen the nations enter her sanctuary, those whom you forbade to enter your congregation. 11 All her people groan as they search for bread; they trade their treasures for food to revive their strength.**

They have been raided and lost all their precious things, not only the things in her temple but also throughout the nation. There is no more food and they need to give up their treasure to have food. There is a great famine.

I am not sure about you but how would you feel if you observed this misery. How would you feel if you saw a glorious nation, full of splendour and greatness, fall to the hands of the enemy in a horrible way? How would you feel if you saw the destruction of a nation, a once spiritual nation, become so filthy and unclean in sin and empty? How would you feel if you saw people being sent to exile, many killed, raped, plundered? How would you feel. How would you feel if it happened to you? Wouldn't you want to know why? Well we have touched on the why. The why is because of sin. Sin has penetrated and affected not only individuals but nations. The consequences of sin are horrendous. And God has judged his chosen people. But the next question I would ask is what next? What do I do in response to all the suffering and hardships. How do I respond to the misery observed?

Jeremiah inserts in verse 12-22 the response of Jerusalem. So, in v1-11 we had **Misery observed (the reversal, emptiness, uncleanliness)**, and in v12-22 we have **Misery experienced**. Jerusalem speaks and shows how she feels. She responds to all the misery.

Already in the first half of verse 7, and the last part of verse 9 and 11 we have a snippet of how Jerusalem has responded. She remembers the goodness of the past, and she cries out to the Lord, the God of Israel for help.

7 Jerusalem remembers in the days of her affliction and wandering all the precious things that were hers from days of old.

(v9c) "O Lord, behold my affliction, for the enemy has triumphed!"

(11c) "Look, O Lord, and see, for I am despised."

And I think that is in essence what we are to do when misery comes along. Remember God's infinite goodness, all the blessings he has blessed us with and cry out to him, lament, to the one who can save and comfort. There is no one else who can.

The issue with those statements is that, Jerusalem did not look to God alone at first. In verse 12-16 we have Jerusalem first responding to their misery by seeking **Sympathy from others**.

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

She looks for help elsewhere. She looks to her lovers. She wants help from other people. Anyone that passes by. She is crying for help. And she describes to them what she has experienced and felt. She describes to them the fierce anger of the Lord.

13 "From on high he sent fire; into my bones he made it descend; he spread a net for my feet; he turned me back; he has left me stunned, faint all the day long. 14 "My transgressions were bound into a yoke; by his hand they were fastened together; they were set upon my neck; he caused my strength to fail; the Lord gave me into the hands of those whom I cannot withstand.

In verse 13-14 She feels like God's anger is crashing down like fire, it is going into her bones metaphorically and for some literally. The LORD inflicted his anger by catching her with the net, leaving her stunned and faint all the time. The punishment and consequence of her sin is heavy, and because of that she has no more strength. She can't respond to her enemies. In fact, in verse 15-16 they feel divine rejection. They've been crushed, have no comfort and weep.

And you know it is easy for us to judge them, but very often we and others are like them. We look to other sources for help when only God can. We feel the weight of misery on our life and it feels so heavy.

Jeremiah inserts and affirms what has happened by saying

17 Zion stretches out her hands, but there is none to comfort her; the Lord has commanded against Jacob that his neighbours should be his foes; Jerusalem has become a filthy thing among them.

God has temporarily turned against his people.

But in verse 18-22, I think we have the turning point and the appropriate response to misery. A cry to the single person who can help. A cry to the single person who can save. We have the **Cry to God**.

Verse 18-19 Jerusalem affirms and reiterates the LORD's righteousness and the things that has happened to her and how she has responded thus far. *18 "The Lord is in the right, for I have rebelled against his word; but hear, all you peoples, and see my suffering; my young women and my young men have gone into captivity. 19 "I called to my lovers, but they deceived me; my priests and elders perished in the city, while they sought food to revive their strength.*

And in verse 20 they cry.

20 "Look, O Lord, for I am in distress; my stomach churns; my heart is wrung within me, because I have been very rebellious. In the street the sword bereaves; in the house it is like death. 21 "They heard my groaning, yet there is no one to comfort me. All my enemies have heard of my trouble; they are glad that you have done it. You have brought the day you announced; now let them

be as I am. 22 “Let all their evildoing come before you, and deal with them as you have dealt with me because of all my transgressions; for my groans are many, and my heart is faint.”

Can you see how hopeless they feel? How much pain they are going through? What they ask from God is that God would bring judgement to their enemies as well. “let them be as I am”. “deal with them as you have dealt with me”. That’s their cry. Justice. Justice towards the enemy. Now it might sound very repetitive. The themes and points are repetitive to emphasise the pain and agony. Calvin says, that although Jeremiah’s aim is to show the complete desolation of the land, the temple, the covenant people and his covenant with them, and even though there seems to be no hope of salvation.... “yet hope still remained”. Although it was God who brought Judgement, it is to God they lament to because he is only one who can save. He is the only who can bring justice. And we will see why YAHWEH is worth lamenting to. But there are a few points of application I think is worth mentioning.

Application:

I read recently that crying is an expression of sadness. It is a response to suffering and pain. When we cry we recognise the realities of the difficulties of life and that not everything in this world is perfect. It is an emotional response in the form of an outward and physical expression. Everyone can cry. Everyone suffers and experiences loss. The greater the pain and loss, the greater the cry. Lamenting on the other hand has a deeper and more meaningful focus. Biblical lamenting starts asking questions on the pains and sufferings one might feel and look deeper to find an answer and solution. Ultimately a lament is a cry to God. It is crying out to the one who is able to bring a promised solution. It is crying out recognising there is hope and someone on the other side to hear it. Lamenting is a Christian act. It is a response to all the affects of sin. And we as Christians can do that. We can cry out to God and bring all our petitions to him. We can cry out to the one who can comfort. Sin and all its companion can’t and won’t last- her lovers deceived her, idols she worshipped failed her. “There is none to comfort her”. But in 2 Corinthians 1 we have the God of comfort. “3 Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of mercies and God of all comfort, 4 who comforts us in all our affliction, so that we may be able to comfort those who are in any affliction, with the comfort with which we ourselves are comforted by God.” (2 Corinthians 1:3-4). Paul tells us something, God comforts us and we in turn can comfort others by his comfort.

I think practically in our own lives as well as when we care for others we can learn a few lessons.

1. Always affirm God’s righteousness, even in the midst of all the miseries of life.
2. Recognise sin when it is there. Take sin seriously.
3. Know that only God is able to comfort and save
4. Therefore, look to the one who can, and know that he has already won the victory over sin and will one day bring justice. That is Jesus Christ. Look to Jesus, who on the cross took the just punishment for sin. John 1:29, “The next day he saw Jesus coming toward him, and said, “Behold, the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world!” You see now when we experience suffering and hardship, it is not necessarily because God is punishing us for our sins. We are affected by the sinful environment we live in. And we also need to take the consequences of our sins. But the wrathful just punishment of our souls, the eternal condemnation we deserve no longer applies for those who are in Christ Jesus. Can you see how amazing the gospel is then? The wrath of God satisfied by the blood of the Jesus, the work on the cross. 2 Corinthians 5:21, “21 For our sake he made him to be sin who knew no sin, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God.”

When we experience ourselves, when we meet others who are suffering, we should lament. Lament with them. Apply this personally, but more importantly apply this corporately.