

Introduction

What's the worst day of mass suffering you can remember? Perhaps it is Haiti earthquakes of 2010, which killed somewhere around 160 thousand people and around 1.5 million were displaced.

Most would probably be old enough to remember the 2004 boxing day tsunami, which killed more than 230 thousand people across 14 countries.

Maybe it's something else. Maybe you're old enough to remember something of the terror of world war 2, which killed more than 70 million people.

Today we're moving into a short series on the book of lamentations, a book which struggles through the reality of suffering and grasps for answers and hope in the face of seemingly hopeless situations.

In the early part of the sixth century before Christ the sin of God's chosen nation, Judah, was rank and horrific, an offense to God. Their kings and people had walked away from God, openly rebelling, worshipping other God's and proudly disobeying his commands. Cults and religious prostitution ran rampant, murder without remorse was common, even their kings had sacrificed their own children to false deities in open opposition to the one true God.

And so, after much patience and discipline, God judged his people. The Bible tells us that the armies of Babylon came against the people of Judah, and climactically destroyed the city of Jerusalem. Many were brutally killed. Many more, including the king, were carried off by the Babylonians into exile. A remnant was left in the ruined city. Starving, lawless, and stricken. By all appearances, abandoned by God. And the prophet Jeremiah cried out for the suffering of the people. This is the context of the book of Lamentations.

Lamentations is a book saturated in seemingly contradictory tensions.

We even see this in its structure and form.

On the one hand it is raw and painful. The author clearly struggles to maintain any control over his emotions as he is faced with realities almost too horrible to imagine. His descriptions of the situation are gut wrenching: the city was full and great, like a princess among the nations, he says. But now it is levelled to the ground, the population is driven into slave labour, there is no food, people are starving to the point that even mothers are cannibalising their own children, and that really just skims the surface.

But in seeming contradiction of the struggle the book is heavily structured; intensely poetic. The first four chapters are formed into acrostic poems that walk through the Hebrew alphabet, although that does begin to collapse in the final chapter, chapter 5.

And so the impression we get is of a man who is overcome with the pain of what has happened, but who is determined to find hope in the mess. And so he is pressing in to the pain, seeking God in it, and hoping to find purpose where he sees only chaos.

And this book is filled with tensions:

- A. The tension between chaos and order.
- B. The tension between the desire for peace and the reality of suffering.
- C. The tension between the glory of the city in the past and its destruction in the present.
- D. And most dominantly, the big tension in this book, the tension of the city and the people's relationship with God.

And that one's the kicker, to get your head around lamentations you have to understand that at its fundamental level it is a struggle with one question:

Wrath or grace? What will God ultimately give?

Judge or comforter? Who ultimately is God for his people?

Walk Through Chapters 1-2

So today we come to chapters 1-2, and here we find the beginnings of this struggle.

In chapter one, Jeremiah laments the situation of the city, comparing her to a lonely, widowed slave. And although it's structured poetry, reading this chapter is still a bit like being in a little dingy whilst being battered by waves coming from two directions.

On the one side the author cries out for God to see the suffering of the people and act. Again and again, he points out the terrible things the invaders have done. Six times, Jeremiah calls out for a comforter, but finds no one. (Lam 1:2, 9, 16–17, 21)

Three times in chapter one he calls out to God to look and see the suffering of the people. To see that they are defeated, despised and downtrodden.

And the clear acknowledgement he's making here is that their only hope of escaping this judgement is if God acts. The nations around have either attacked or abandoned them, and only God is left to help, so Jeremiah cries out desperately for God's comfort.

But on the other hand he laments the fact that it is God who is afflicting the people. In 1:5 he acknowledges that although enemies have attacked Jerusalem,

“the Lord has afflicted her for the multitude of her transgressions”

In 1:13 we feel the prophet’s pain as he cries “from on high he sent fire; into my bones he made it descend”.

And not only is it God judging, but he inevitably concludes in 1:18 that God is right to do so. God isn’t just lashing out in unwarranted anger, but is acting out of his just character and faithfulness to the promises he made to his people. All the way back in Deuteronomy, when God made his covenant with Israel, he very clearly promised blessing for obedience but destruction and curse for disobedience (Deuteronomy 28, if you want to look it up later). And although he has been patient over a great period of time and a great weight of sin, he is now fulfilling the promise.

So he is struggling with this overwhelming tension:

God is the only one he can cry to for comfort, but God is the one justly judging the sins of the people.

Will God give his people the grace they need, or full judgement they deserve?

In the end, will he be judge or comforter?

And when he gets to chapter 2, Jeremiah hits rock bottom.

The tension seems to dissipate as Jeremiah begins face what seems to be the certain reality:
From all that he can see and feel he starts to engage with the possibility:

God no longer loves his people.

He is here to judge.

His love has abandoned them because of their sin and only his wrath remains.

The calls for God to “look and see” that we saw in chapter one evaporate for almost all of chapter two. When you become convinced that God is here to deliver final judgement on you it ceases to be in your interests for his eye to be on you.

And instead the concept of God as the wrathful judge fills chapter 2, and we just see this torrent of despair because of the action of the Lord. 33 times in the 22 verses of chapter two he desperately recognises that all of this suffering and pain is God’s doing.

Read 2:3-4 with me and listen to these words:

Lam. 2:3 *He has cut down in fierce anger*

all the might of Israel;

he has withdrawn from them his right hand

*in the face of the enemy;
he has burned like a flaming fire in Jacob,
consuming all around.*

Lam. 2:4 *He has bent his bow like an enemy,
with his right hand set like a foe;
and he has killed all who were delightful in our eyes
in the tent of the daughter of Zion;
he has poured out his fury like fire.*

Jeremiah doesn't know where to turn. It seems there is no comfort for Jerusalem. The judgement seems final. In 2:13 he looks to the city and asks this powerful question:

“your ruin is vast as the sea.

Who can heal you?”

He doesn't give a direct answer to that question. But in the verses that follow it he laments the action of the false prophets who have lied the people, the surrounding nations who jeer at the city, the enemies who rejoice in defeating the city, and finally he turns his attention back to God, the ultimate cause of their downfall, and concludes again that it must be God's will to destroy them.

And the final note of this chapter is driven by this hopelessness. He desperately calls for the city to weep and mourn for mercy:

In 2:18 he says:

“Let tears stream down like a torrent

Day and night!

Give yourself no rest,

Your eyes no respite”

The Coming Judgement

And although the book carries on with the tension and struggle we've started to see, we're going to stop and dwell here for today, because the same tension is real for every one of us.

What is our relationship with God?

You see in a real sense this world is like Jerusalem in the days leading up to this judgement. The Bible teaches us that every person is a sinner. I have turned against God, the creator of all. You have too. Paul writes that all have sinned. And then in Ephesians 2 he comes up with another term for sinners: "children of wrath".

That is to say that every single person is deserving of the wrath of God. And not only that, but the Bible very clearly tells us of a coming time when God will exercise judgement. When those who are children of wrath will receive what they justly deserve.

Like Jerusalem, God calls to us now: judgement is coming. Wrath is coming. Although not like the wrath that Jerusalem saw. In chapter three we're going to see that God's judgement of Jerusalem was limited. But on the last day every person found to be a sinner will be judged fully and justly. Revelation 20 says that on that final day God will judge the living and the dead, every person who has ever been. And it speaks of the judgement as an eternal lake of fire.

The limited judgement of Jerusalem, along with events like the flood of genesis 6-9 and the destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah, should remind us that there is a final day of judgement. A day that no one knows, and a day when sinners will be judged by the works they have.

So every person sits in a similar situation to the city of Jerusalem. We can echo the words of Jeremiah and say:

"Our ruin will be even more vast than the sea, who can heal us?"

The glorious comforter

But praise God, we have an answer to that question. You see the outworking of God's wrath should also remind us of his grace.

The painful reality of God's just anger for sin should remind us that there is a glorious comforter. That God is glorious in showing grace.

You see not only will God pour out his just wrath on sin on a coming day, but He has poured out his wrath and judgement on one day in history that the destruction of

Jerusalem just can't compare to. And it's when we look at this great demonstration of the wrath of God ... that we see his glorious grace.

In 2 Corinthians 5:21, Paul writes this to the church:

2 Cor 5:21 For our sake he (that is God) made him to be sin (remember what we've seen sin is and what it deserves. Link this in your mind to the truth we find in Lamentations) he made him to be sin who knew no sin,

so that in him we might become the righteousness of God.

AT the cross, Jesus took our terrible sin, and its terrible judgement, and gave us his righteousness.

In another New Testament letter, the Apostle John writes:

"... God put (him) forward as a propitiation by his blood to be received by faith" (In case you're wondering, propitiation means "a sacrifice that bears God's wrath and turns it to favour")

Let me say that again:

Jesus was a propitiation, a sacrifice bearing God's wrath, for everyone who has faith in him.

The wrath we see in lamentations is for one nation's sin, and not only that, it isn't even exhaustive.

But on the day that Jesus died on the cross, He was a sacrifice for every person who would believe throughout history. All of the wrath of God on our sin.

Just dwell on that for a moment.

Wrath that makes the destruction of Jerusalem, where people were starving, cannibalising, and weeping to the point of vomiting, as horrific as it is, look like nothing.

Wrath like a lake of eternal fire poured into a single man on a single day in all of its weight and ferocity.

The terror of human sin and divine wrath which we see in lamentations reminds us of the grace of God because it points us to Jesus, God incarnate, who carried

all of the sin of his people

and all of god's wrath they deserved

on the cross, to save us.

Only one factor will remove us from God's judgement and make Him our comforter. Only one factor can. GOD!

And praise to his mercy, he has! Those who have faith in Christ will still struggle with suffering, but we can have full certainty that God will show us grace and mercy. Our wrath has been taken.

Application: Believe

So I want to offer two challenges today.

First, if you don't have faith in Jesus. If you cannot look into the oncoming wrath of God and honestly say "I deserve that. But He's going to give me grace, not because of what I've done, but because Jesus took my punishment", then believe. Trust in Him, turn away from your sin, from your brokenness, and throw yourself on Jesus for mercy.

And second, if you have believed this truth, then it is transformative for your life. If you can honestly say "I know that final judgement is coming, and I know that God has showed me so much more grace than I deserve", then I'd encourage you to look at your life and ask "Am I living like I believe it?" The Bible says that faith that doesn't work out in action is dead faith. No faith. And I'd like to challenge you in two ways, which we will continue to dig into in this series:

You have been moved from wrath to grace. Your terrible sin, worthy of hell, has been wiped away by the one who took your punishment. Are you living as though sin was still the dominant power in your life? Are you fighting sin with the truth that God has saved you, that you no longer sit under its power. Now don't get me wrong, we still sin and we still have a struggle between old sinful desires and the Spirit of God living in us. But we are no longer slaves to sin. Do we live like it?

Jesus has pulled you out of the most terrible destruction the world will ever know. He has saved you with his own blood, and what's more He has chosen to give you the privilege of sharing this salvation with others. Do you believe in the pressures of today more than you believe in the reality of coming judgement and God's good grace? Are you ready to share your faith with those around you, at every chance you are given?

I understand the social pressure. I understand the possible ramifications in our society. But if we really believe in an eternal God, who has eternal and just wrath for sin, but offers free grace to all who would believe, that has to be more important to us. Because he's given it to us.

Study questions:

Encourage your people to take time to read through the book of Lamentations in the coming week. It's not long and will help them to engage with it much better.

Interacting with the passage:

1. Why do you think that Jeremiah (the author of Lamentations) focuses not just on the destruction of the city, but on the Lord's work in destroying the city?
2. Why do you think Jeremiah calls out for the Lord to "Look and see" the destruction of the city (1:9, 11, 20)? How do we balance this with the repeated acknowledgement of God as the city's destroyer?
3. When you read through Lamentations 1-2 you find descriptions of God's judgement upon the people that are nearly too terrible to bear: the city is destroyed (2:5); God has scorned the place He gave the people for worshipping Him (2:7); their rulers are either dead or exiled, and God sends no prophetic messages (2:9); and most terrifyingly the starvation of the remnant in the city is so terrible that mothers are eating their own children (2:20). Yet when we come to Lamentations 3 we will find a startling reality: this judgement has been limited by God! (3:22). What does this terrible, yet limited judgement point us forward to?
4. How does God's wrath point us to his grace? (1 John 4:10; note that "propitiation" means a sacrifice which absorbs the wrath of God and turns it to favour for us).
5. How would it damage our view of grace/the cross if we didn't have a full view of God's wrath against sin?

Applying the gospel truth of the passage:

1. What are the implications of belief in an actual God who has actual wrath on sinners, but who also openly offers grace? (tip: the answer isn't just evangelism)
2. OK, if it was me I'd have given some generalisations in answer to the last question. Now think about today/tomorrow and nothing else. How would a firm belief in God's coming and eternal wrath on sin and his incredible grace affect my actions in the here and now? (How would I have behaved differently at work? At home? Alone?)
3. Try to think of a specific, recent moment in which you did not live out the above truths: what were you believing in instead of those truths, or prioritising ahead of

them? What desire drove you in the moment, and how does the truth of the gospel replace that desire with something better?