

Sermon 6, Widowed, Enslaved, Raped, & Left without Comfort: The Pain of Judgment, Pt. 1, Lamentations 1

Read the Beatitudes; sing them too

Proposition: Judgment produces tremendous pain, pain so bad that only God Himself can comfort His people in it.

- I. The Picture of Misery, vv. 1-11
- II. The Experience of Misery, vv. 12-22
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 - A. Lament, vv. 1-22
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Introduction

Dearly beloved congregation of our Lord Jesus Christ, do you love the book of Lamentations? I do. There's an audio performance by a British lady in the Bible Gateway app, and it is fabulous. For years now I have listened to it when I get the chance, usually late at night when I'm doing the dishes and my soul needs some refreshment. This book is one of the unknown gems of Scripture. I would rank it with the Psalms any day. And yet I have never heard a sermon on it, never had a Sunday School class on it, never seen it advertised as the topic of a Bible Study. Why not? I daresay because it's not relevant to our lives — at least, it's not relevant to the lives we imagine ourselves living, and certainly not relevant to the lives we will admit to others that we're living. This book is not about growth. It's not about overcoming. It's not about moving towards something better. It dials in instead on the moment of loss, the experience of pain, the numbness and grief left behind in the wake of terrible tragedy and divine disaster. This book is for the down and out. This book is for the hurting. This book is for those who are miserable. Its message is that judgment produces tremendous pain, pain so bad that only God Himself can comfort us.

I. The Picture of Misery, vv. 1-11

Let's dive in. The first half of the chapter describes the city of Jerusalem, personified as a woman, from the perspective of a third-person narrator. Then the second half of the chapter recounts Jerusalem's own words in the first person. In both cases, we must understand that we are not simply hearing about the misery of war per se. This book is not in the Bible to tell us "War, war, what is it good for?" This book is about Jerusalem because Jerusalem, the holy city, was the church in an important sense. It was the place where God dwelt. The church of today is similarly the place where God dwells. And thus, whatever the text says about the miseries of Jerusalem, we need to remember that they are primarily the miseries of God's people. These miseries are our miseries, just as victory in the War for Independence or the Second World War is

our victory. Obviously, none of us were alive during the Revolutionary War, and few of us participated meaningfully in WWII. Yet to this day we speak like this: “We won the Cold War.” Why do we say that? Because “we” means “Americans.” Brothers and sisters, for you to really get Lamentations, your identity as a Christian and as a member of Christ’s church has to be stronger than your identity as a citizen of the United States. You have to read Zion’s agony as our agony. You have to stand precisely where the narrator and the weeping Daughter of Zion want you to stand: With them in their pain. There is no social distancing allowed here. There is no detached observation of Zion’s misery. You either identify with the city, or else you find this book repulsive. And I will be arguing through the course of this series that there is no cheap identification with Zion. This book of Lamentations pushes our notion of the goodness of God to its limits. I said two weeks ago that the Ten Plagues teach you that God does not care about your pain, comparatively speaking. That is, He does not care that you’re hurting compared to how much He cares that you learn to know Him, to fear Him, and to trust Him despite your level of pain. In other words, God is a God who disciplines. He doesn’t care about your short-term pain compared to how deeply He’s committed to your long-term gain.

Here’s what that means for reading Lamentations. It means that you have to see terrible pain inflicted not on “them,” the enemies of God’s people, but on us, God’s people. And you have to acknowledge what the book explicitly states over and over, viz., that God has inflicted this pain. God will judge His people. How that feels is chronicled in Lamentations. Thus, to identify with Zion is going to be emotionally exhausting if we’re doing it right. We are reliving the searing pain that God sent on His own beloved city as we look at this book over the course of today and the next four Sundays.

What miseries did this raped and violated city undergo?

The first verse describes Jerusalem in terms of loneliness. She was heavily populated, and now she is widowed and lonely. Already, then, we see here in the third line of the first verse the dominant image of the book, which is of Jerusalem personified as a woman. The Bible does this so often that we probably don’t even register it. But the message here is of vulnerability, of pain, of lack of recourse. We could even say that the most acute suffering is feminine suffering — at least, the image of Virgin Daughter Zion surrounded by leering enemies, or widowed, or enslaved moves us more than the same images applied to a male personification of the city would. Of course, it also fits the Bible’s consistent way of speaking of God’s people as female, from the prophet’s picture of Israel as God’s bride to John’s picture of the Bride, the Lamb’s wife. We must, then, consider this as a picture of us, the church.

So what happened to Jerusalem? Well, she was empty instead of full. People were gone. The princess had become a slave. The wife had become a widow. And that’s just the first verse. Verse two, and all the rest of the verses, follow up on these same themes. Jerusalem is shown at night, her face wet with tears, as she weeps bitterly. This is bad. This is what happens when you have too much misery to process. You have to take time normally devoted to sleep and use it on weeping instead. And this second verse also brings up another theme: The absence of comfort.

This ends up being one of Lamentations' signature themes. People of God, when you get disciplined for your sin your pain is so bad that it requires God Himself to comfort you in your suffering. The voice of the narrator and the voice of Jerusalem are both heard in this book. But the voice of God is absent. The commentators lay great stress on that. But obviously, since the book is Scripture then in another sense it is the voice of God — the voice of God stating that Jerusalem needs Him to comfort her, that nothing less will do. The lovers of Jerusalem won't cut it. They are not interested in comforting her or able to do so if they wanted to. Her friends can't help. Of course, whether you think of these as negative lovers (=foreign gods) or as positive friends (=allies, like Hiram was for Solomon), the upshot is the same. The human comfort they can offer is no match for the experience of divine devastation. The pain God can inflict is far larger than the help man can give.

Judah has gone into exile, and conditions there are harsh. To be forced out of your own land into some foreign and strange place is a crushing blow. And then, the chapter goes on to discuss the particular pain that you and I have felt repeatedly in the last couple of months. That is the pain of being cut off from public worship. No one comes to the appointed feasts. We had joyful worship in this church week by week. We gathered here and feasted on the Lord's word and supper. We had potlucks together here on the first Sunday of the month and at Roadway on Wednesday nights. And then what did we experience? Emptiness. Negation. Nothing happening. No more worship. No more fellowship. For me, the weirdest part of the whole pandemic was switching off the camera after giving the "benediction" to it for our Facebook Live services, and then sitting there stunned and disbelieving because there was no one to talk to. The church was not gathered, and I was not catching up with God's people or doing any of the pastoring they needed. Zion mourned in loneliness.

Why? Because Yahweh caused her grief. He caused the children of Jerusalem to be carried away captive. Daniel was one of those children. How does it feel to have your children carried away from you? Worse than you or I are willing to imagine. Those of you who have been involved in the foster system in one way or another have felt this pain. Here, in the case of our people long ago, it was a deserved pain, a chastisement for their sin that was designed to make them care, to make them listen, to make them want to return to God.

Jerusalem is unclean, ritually and morally; she has fallen astonishingly. Most commentators see in the tale of the temple's defilement in v. 10 a reference to rape, where the enemy "stretched out his hand" on all her precious things and entered her holy place.

Brothers and sisters, such is the third-person description of Jerusalem's misery in the aftermath of God's judgment on her. Is this something you want to undergo? Is this something you want your church to experience? Then give yourself over to sin like Judah did.

II. The Experience of Misery, vv. 12-22

Well, in the second half of the chapter we hear Jerusalem's first-person account of her misery. She starts with a question: "Is it nothing to you, all you who pass by?" Here, of course, we have the center of the chapter and one of the key questions of the book: Are you going to care about

this pain, or not? Are you willing to stop and feel this pain, or not? Are you going to hurry on by, or not? Is it nothing to you? I sure would rather it were nothing to me. I don't want to be bothered with your pain, Miss Zion. I'd rather ignore it. I'd rather pretend it didn't happen, both because I don't like feeling pain and also because I don't like learning discipline. I know that pain is God's way of making me care about His word. I know it's His way of making me fear Him. And frankly, I'd just as soon go on my merry way and ignore Him.

But Jerusalem insists that there is no pain like the pain God inflicted on her on the day of His fierce anger. Whom the Lord loves, He chastens, and scourges every son whom He receives. Jerusalem was scourged like this because God loved her. Brothers and sisters, can you accept pain as coming from the hand of God? Our current Covid plague is bad enough. It's killed quite a few people and put millions more out of work here and around the world. It's a bruiser. And we will not have learned the lessons of Lamentations until we know that this too is from the hand of God. Has the church worshipped idols? Have we been as unfaithful as Judah was? I think the answer to that question is pretty obvious when we look at the global church.

God sent fire into her bones. He caught her feet in a net. He fastened a yoke on her neck, and it was made of her sins. He crushed her in a wine press. And the images just keep coming. Pain. Desolation. Sorrow. Misery. It's all here, in tragic and copious abundance. Again, notice the no-comfort, no-comforter theme. God's people are in pain, in trouble, in a world of hurt.

So if you think the current plague is bad, just remember that this is nothing. God has the volume at 1 or 2%. He can turn it up to 100 whenever He wants to. The chapter ends with Zion asking God to take action against her tormentors. Don't just judge your people; judge the wicked too! And of course, we know that He ultimately did, does, and will.

III. The Actions of Misery, vv. 1-22

Well, brothers and sisters, I can't pretend to speak as beautifully or as hauntingly as Zion does in her distress. I am not a poet. All of these beautiful texts simply remind me that it's my job as the preacher not to wreck the text. Don't get in its way; let it speak to the people of God. This text doesn't need a lot of explaining, and the efforts the commentators make to explain it are frankly painful. Yet at the same time, as a faithful teacher and preacher I want to just point out a few things about what we see here, aside from the obvious pain and agony. So rather than focusing on what Zion says, to which I can't add anything, let's conclude this sermon by taking a look at what she does.

A. Lament, vv. 1-22

The first and most obvious action of Zion in this chapter is lament. She mourns. She weeps over her pain. She cries out. She laments.

Is this something we do? Do we have a way of faithfully, of Christianly, expressing our pain under the chastening hand of God? Do you have a vocabulary that will allow you to say "God is really hitting me hard right now?" Are we the kind of community where you can say that? There are churches that will jump all over you if you dare to suggest that the hard things in your life are a gift from God. There are even churches that will jump all over you if you dare to

suggest that the hard things in your life are hard. Brothers and sisters, those churches don't reflect this book very well. This is a book of lamentations and mourning and woe. This is a book that talks about pain and tears because pain and tears are a big part of human life, both for believers and unbelievers. Indeed, the Bible flat-out says that we are often going to see the unbeliever living a happier life than the one we have!

So are we a community where you can say "This is really sad" and know that we will agree with you? Is pain something you can share here, or is it something you have to hide? If it's something you have to hide, we have a problem. Now, this book is not teaching us to dump all our problems on the whole church. It is specifically talking about a community problem that the whole church mourned together. Covid is such a problem. If we can't talk about it without arguments and recriminations and blaming each other, then we have missed the message of Lamentations. The pain of not meeting is something we need to acknowledge and cry about together. The pain of being cut off from each other and public worship is real and severe, and we need to lament it. The pain of job loss, the pain of social isolation, the pain of losing loved ones — all of these and more are things the whole church is feeling right now. As for our individual moments of discipline and pain, well, the church should be a welcoming environment to share those with specific individuals, including leaders. That may not necessarily be within your particular local church. But if it's not within the church at all, that's a really bad sign. If you can share with nonbelievers more readily than with Christian brothers and sisters, something is backwards. Imagine Zion presenting this narrative of sorrow primarily to the Edomites first. Something is amiss there.

B. Confession of faith, v. 18

But — and this is crucial — Lamentations does NOT confine itself to talking about how rough things are. It goes out of its way to confess faith in God, too. Daughter Zion speaks in v. 18 and affirms the righteousness of God. Have you noticed how every verse from 12-17 (except v. 16) describes some new and intense misery, and specifically credits that misery to Yahweh? He did it. He inflicted sorrow. He sent fire. He wove the yoke of transgressions and shoved it on her neck. He trampled her mighty men. He has transformed neighbors into enemies. And He is righteous.

Brothers and sisters, as we lament and express our pain and sorrow together, do we make this confession of faith? Can you list all your pain and then say "But God is still righteous!" That is the correct response to misery. Calvin over and over in his commentary points out that this book is all about repentance and faith. How on earth do you get the faith to affirm the righteousness of God in the moment of agony and disaster when you're feeling the tremendous burden of everything he's laid on you? You get it by knowing Him well before the disaster comes.

C. Prayer, vv. 9, 11, 20

And you strengthen it by keeping the lines of communication open during the time of suffering, no matter how long that time stretches. Did you notice that in her distress, Zion's first instinct is

to call on God? Her first words in the book of Lamentations are not “poor me.” They are a prayer. She calls on God to see.

Now, I want to address something here. As a guy whose first name is the German word for “death” put it, “The notion of an abused and violated woman turning for help to her abuser, and the one who abused her children, should inspire in the modern reader something less than the notion of gracious intervention.”¹ Is that how we should understand Daughter Zion’s prayer to God in this chapter? No. Not at all. You see, Linafelt has collapsed the distinction between discipline and abuse. To him, they are the same thing. This is a terrible mistake, and it is even now bearing a tremendous quantity of poisonous and bitter fruit in our culture at large.

Unfortunately, we can generally locate the root of this confusion not in angry people who hate discipline and want to live an undisciplined lifestyle as such, but rather in angry people who believe that they love discipline and want to force those under their care to live a disciplined lifestyle. In other words, generally the distinction between discipline and abuse was first collapsed by an overbearing and mean father who abused and called it discipline. People who were raised that way grow up and think that all discipline is abuse. But remember Aristotle’s definition: Punishment is administered for the sake of the one punishing, but discipline is administered for the sake of the one being disciplined. Abuse is neither punishment nor discipline; it is best defined as unjust and unwarranted cruel or violent treatment. Already, of course, I’m sure you see the problem here. The social justice warriors, exemplified by Linafelt and his quote, say “Aha! Do you see the hypocrisy? All infliction of pain is unjust and unwarranted. In other words, discipline (the infliction of pain to help someone do the right thing) is the same as abuse (the infliction of pain to satisfy one’s sadistic urges).” In other words, according to Linafelt the reason for the pain is immaterial. It doesn’t matter whether the motives are good or bad. If God did all these things to His people (and the text says He did), then He is an evil God. He is the definition of an abuser.

Brothers and sisters, in response we simply say that motives matter. There is a yawning chasm between discipline and abuse. God did not abuse Jerusalem or her children. He disciplined them. He disciplined them severely. But all of the pain was for their sake. It was corrective discipline, designed to teach Daughter Zion to stop sinning. “Your own wickedness will correct you, And your backslidings will rebuke you. Know therefore and see that it is an evil and bitter thing That you have forsaken the LORD your God, And the fear of Me is not in you,” Says the Lord GOD of hosts” (Jer 2:19). God was teaching Zion about the evil of sin. He was disciplining her for her sake. And she responded rightly by crying out to Him for comfort.

Do you turn to prayer in your pain? Do you call on God and point out your pain to Him? Brothers and sisters, if you don’t understand what God is doing, you’ll think it’s abuse. But when you know Him, you’ll know it is discipline administered out of love.

¹ Tod Linafelt, *Surviving Lamentations*, 55, quoted in Parry, *Lamentations*, 23.

So in your pain, in our pain, we need to mourn. We need to confess our faith. And we need to know that God is not abusing us, but that He sees, He cares, and He's doing it to help us share His holiness because He loves us.

Lamentations hurts, but it's plenty orthodox. It's showing us from beginning to end that the only thing that can touch the pain of God's chastisement is the comfort that He alone can send. Have you asked Him to look at your pain? He sees. He cares about you, not in the sense that He will stop the pain immediately, but in the sense that He wants what's best for you. You too are part of Zion. You know her pain — and her blessing too. That blessing ultimately comes through Christ, who took a worse penalty than Zion in order to save her — to save us. That doesn't make the pain any less in the moment. But we know that afterwards, those who mourn shall be comforted. Amen.