

Sermon 7, Cast Down by God's Wrath: The Pain of Judgment, Pt. 2, Lamentations 2

Proposition: God's judgment fell in brutal violence, just as He said it would — and Jerusalem's pain in being smitten was overwhelming.

- I. God's Violent Assault, vv. 1-9
- II. Jerusalem's Pain, vv. 10-16
- III. God's Plan Fulfilled, v. 17
- IV. Zion's Cry, vv. 18-22

Introduction

Dearly beloved congregation of our Lord Jesus Christ, we looked last week at the pain of judgment as described in Lamentations 1. Our chapter this morning covers the same material, but with a different emphasis. Chapter 1 focuses on the lack of comfort, and implicitly cries out for God's own divine comfort for His people. This chapter focuses on the magnitude of the pain, and unsubtly emphasizes that God Himself is the one who inflicted this pain on His people. Over and over, it repeats the theme of falling, of being cast from heaven to earth, of sinking from an exalted place to a low place. Brothers and sisters, again, you and I must learn to fear God and cry out to Him in the midst of our pain. You can't miss the reality that God is a pain-inflicting God. You must see the brutal violence of His judgment and learn to fear the pain He can bring; that is the lesson of judgment.

I. God's Violent Assault, vv. 1-9

Before we talk in detail about any of these verses, I just want you to look at the subject of each of them. Who is the agent at work in these 9 verses? That's right. It's the Lord. He is the one who has covered Zion with a cloud and cast her to earth. He has swallowed up. He has cut off. He has bent His bow. He has become like an enemy. He has violently destroyed the Temple. He has rejected His altar. He has destroyed the wall of Zion. He has destroyed her bars. And those are just the first lines of these 9 verses.

Why does the author systematically ascribe the devastation to God? The word "Babylon" never even appears in the book. The narrator doesn't want us to fix our eyes on Babylon and long for its destruction. In his mind, the fundamental agent of Jerusalem's destruction is God Himself. His assault was not gentle or easy. There was nothing tender about how He treated His holy city. The chapter makes one short reference to iniquity (v. 14), and is very clear that listening to rebuke could have spared the city this pain. But the point of emphasis is not "We have sinned and these bad things happened to us." Nor is it "These things are part of life and we must do our best to move on." The focus is not on stopping the next Babylonian invasion, or on choosing better kings who will handle foreign invasion better. The focus is clearly on God's

violent assault. He is the one who tore into His own city. He is the one who cast her from His presence in Heaven and threw her, as He did Satan, down to the earth.

We want to know why, because our main goal is to avert this kind of tragedy. Our first thought on reading about this devastation is to fix it. What could be changed? How do we avoid this in the future? What can we do to ensure that this won't happen again? But of course, Lamentations does not directly address that question. This is not a book about preventing pain. If you want that, go read Proverbs. No. This is a book about experiencing pain, about chronicling pain, and about sobbing quietly or wailing loudly in one's pain. It does have lessons for us about avoiding pain, but the main thing it wants us to do is experience pain and to weep over it.

To that end, what we need to do is to just sit here and see what God did to His people. He poured out His wrath on them. He hurt them. He destroyed Jerusalem and His own home, the Temple. He showed Himself to be a consuming fire that devoured everything His people loved.

Brothers and sisters, is this your God? Do you recognize the deity who broke out against His own people, His own city, His own holy place? If not, then you have given the Almighty a makeover in your own image. If your God wouldn't do this, then He is not the God of Jeremiah. He is not the God of the Bible.

So let's just get this straight: God did this. God destroyed His own worship, His appointed feasts and Sabbaths. He spurned His altar. He swallowed up everything. He is a fearsome and terrible God. Yes, He is love, and Jesus is His perfect image. But don't let that mislead you or lull you into a false sense of security. This deity is not safe. He is not cuddly. He is ferocious, stern, uncompromising, and jealous. You need to fear Him, for He is a consuming fire. And by consuming, I mean that He actually consumes. He burns up all kinds of things that you hold dear, up to including His own church and people.

How many times have you thought of God as a consuming fire that never actually consumed anything, that never actually took anything and certainly never permanently took anything? I'm guilty of this false thought, this unworthy thought. But our text says over and over that He swallowed up because that's what a consuming fire does. It consumes. Their most precious things were burned up in the fire of God's wrath. He can and will consume your job, your child, your wife, your family, your health, your church, your city, your nation, and one day, your whole world. This does not negate or deny the work of Jesus to save His church and His world. But the destruction, the burning and consuming wrath of God, is every bit as much who He is as the suffering, dying, forgiving love of Jesus is who He is. In this plague time, don't let your conception of God get out of whack. You will fear Him when you arrive at an accurate conception of what He's done in history. I've said it before and I'll say it again: For those who say "God won't judge," we have one simple answer: He already has.

II. Jerusalem's Pain, vv. 10-16

The first nine verses describe God's actions. The next seven contain Jerusalem's response, her first-person statement of how it felt to be on the business end of double-barrelled divine wrath. The first response is not verbal, but physical.

In that culture, they knew and used chairs; remember how the Shunamite woman put a bed, a table, a chair, and a lamp in the guest room for Elisha? And so, in such a culture where chairs were known, what statement does it send for respected elders to sit on the ground? Especially when they're wearing sackcloth?

Can you imagine seeing the old influential men who run our country doing such a thing? Can you see Donald Trump and Joe Biden sitting together on the sidewalk in front of the White House clad in sackcloth? We don't have the vocabulary or the gestures for such an intense grief. We don't have a team of young women who show mourning by putting their heads on the ground.

But that was the only proper response to the pain of God's wrath. Judah, from the powerful old men to the beautiful young women, was saturated with pain and responded in the only way she knew how. She then opens her mouth and speaks, listing the body parts that are overloaded and failing: eyes, guts, liver. None of them can cope with the grief. The eyes are wept out; the guts churn; the liver is spilling its bile on the ground. The wrath of God has touched even the children, who are asking about the food stocks. It's not that babies want to eat raw grain and drink wine; rather, the idea is that those are forms in which food can be put in long-term storage. Is there anything in the larder, mother? And because there isn't, the children are dying of hunger. Brothers and sisters, the agony is too much. We've all seen the commercials that feature starving African children. But the pain is too raw. We can't bear to see it. We feel the need to look away. Even Zion can't linger long on this unbelievable grief.

The narrator then speaks again, asking whether there is any possible source of comfort, anything that can compare her sorrow to others' and perhaps give her a little shred of peace. And he comes up with nothing. Her misery is broader than the sea. Part of the problem here is the delinquent prophets, who never exposed her sin.

Remember what we saw two weeks ago, when Micah called out the sins of those right in front of him? There was not enough of that going on in Judah. So many of the prophets were content to expose others' sins — to, as I said, call out the sins of Trump to a progressive crowd and the sins of AOC to a conservative crowd. Neither of those is appropriate. Real prophets call out the sins of the people in front of them. If Jerusalem had listened to the words of rebuke, she would have dwelt among the wise. But she didn't listen; indeed, she hardly got the chance.

Well, the view shifts and shows passersby "hissing." This actually refers to chuffing or expelling air in astonishment. You've all done it; you know what I'm talking about. But the enemies go a step farther and rejoice in Zion's pain.

Jerusalem hurt. And rather than getting comfort, she was getting either "Wow, I can't believe how bad things are" or "Nice to see you getting what you deserve for a change."

III. God's Plan Fulfilled, v. 17

And in case you missed the first 9 verses, why was that? It was because this had been God's plan all along. He had intended to do exactly what He did to Jerusalem. Already Moses over 800 years before had said "When you go into exile" — not "if," but "when." This was not a mistake

on God's part. This was not an oversight, or even a last-minute snap decision. This was something that had been in the works for a long time — not unjustly, or foolishly, or with malicious intent, but simply because God knew His people's hearts and knew that given His holiness and their corruption, He would need to chasten them severely before they were ready to live in His house forever.

In other words, the fact that this had been a long time in coming implies that we ought to love and trust God far more than you have heretofore. He knows the medicine we're going to need. Our wickedness is no surprise to Him — and therefore our pain when He disciplines us should be no surprise to us either.

IV. Zion's Cry, vv. 18-22

The chapter ends with Zion's cry, and with some application for us. The narrator urges the wall of Zion to sob day and night, and to cry out to God. And then the last three verses of the chapter contain Zion's plea. I want to look at this plea for a second. What kind of plea is it? In other words, what does it presuppose about the one to whom it is made?

The plea, of course, is simply asking God to look, which is exactly what Zion's first plea in ch. 1 was. See, O Lord, and behold my affliction! That's what Zion asked in ch. 1. And then all these rhetorical questions about whether pain can be right, and then observations about what pain God's people are going through — what do they presuppose about God? That when He sees His people's pain, He will intervene. They don't even ask for the sake of His Anointed, or because Messiah is coming, or anything like that. They simultaneously acknowledge God's consuming wrath and look to His tender mercy. Remember, mercy means compassion on misery. Zion thinks of God as having compassion on her, even while she simultaneously acknowledges that He is the one who inflicted pain on her.

And that's the lesson for us in this chapter. When we are feeling the pain of Covid, or any other plague, greater or lesser, we need to know that the plague is from the Lord and also that if we cry out to Him about it, He cares. The book of Lamentations teaches repentance and faith, and prayer to the God who cares when He sees His people. Yes, it's true that He doesn't care in the sense of not sending the pain in the first place. But He does care in the sense of giving you His blessing, in listening to your cry — even, we can affirm, mourning with you. One commentator insists that Yahweh Himself is the speaker of vv. 12-13. Though the text doesn't actually say this, of course, and I can't say I am persuaded that we are supposed to think it, the important thing is that Yahweh *could be* the speaker. He does in fact say very similar things through the other prophets.

So do you fear God? Do you recognize His corrective discipline in the relentless assaults of vv. 1-9? And do you trust God? Do you recognize your own response to agony in the prayer of Zion at the end of ch. 2? Brothers and sisters, this is how we must relate to God. We must recognize and accept His discipline, and we must cry out to Him for help because He is only one who can help us. This is the Christian life. In a plague time, it's appropriate to mourn. But that

mourning is never apart from the God who inflicted the pain on us in the first place. Fear Him. Trust Him. And He will give you relief in His good time. Amen.