

Sermon 9, Your Punishment Will End, So Pray, Lamentations 4-5

Proposition: The brutality of judgment is horrific, but it will come to an end — so pray for all you're worth.

- I. The Punishment of God's People, ch. 4
 - A. Its Severity: A Punishment Worse than Sodom's, vv. 1-10
 - B. Its Limit, vv. 11-20
 - C. Its Completion, vv. 21-22
- II. The Prayer of God's People, ch. 5
 - A. Their Plea Summarized: Remember!, v. 1
 - B. Their Suffering Described, vv. 2-18
 - 1. Economic Impoverishment, vv. 2-10
 - 2. Social Humiliation, vv. 11-14
 - 3. Communal Sorrow, vv. 15-18²
 - C. Their Final Petition, vv. 19-22
 - 1. Its Foundation, v. 19
 - 2. Its Motivation, v. 20
 - 3. Its Desire, v. 21
 - 4. Its Obstacle, v. 22

Introduction

Dearly beloved congregation of our Lord Jesus Christ, we saw the hope derived from the mighty man's testimony to the character of God in our message last Sunday. But this morning, we are back once again in the smoking, ruined city of Jerusalem, experiencing the disaster and tragedy right along with our people. There is a lot in this chapter, but not nearly as much as in the previous one. Indeed, though it chronicles the pain and destruction, it ends with the clearest promise in Lamentations — the promise that this punishment will end and not be repeated. The previous chapter gave us a glimpse of Easter; this is emphatically a Good Friday chapter, closing as it does with the statement that the Lord's Anointed has been taken in their pits. Yet though it is a Good Friday chapter, it ends with the statement that Good Friday doesn't last forever. Sunday's comin', and with it, God's judgment on His enemies.

I. The Punishment of God's People, ch. 4

A. Its Severity: A Punishment Worse than Sodom's, vv. 1-10

God's people are experiencing a punishment worse than Sodom's. This is expressed in all kinds of horrid and grotesque imagery relating to the conditions in a besieged city, such as Jerusalem

² These three points are taken from Robin Parry's outline of this chapter in *Lamentations*, The Two Horizons Old Testament Commentary (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2010), 147.

was for far too long. Of course, if we remember the prophecies of Jeremiah, we remember that Jeremiah told God's people to surrender immediately and not to go through the siege; in that sense, these scenes are directly the consequences of disobeying the voice of the Lord. But though they brought it on themselves, it was still a horrible and hideous business. Babies were starving in the streets. Women were boiling their own children. We're not talking hardened women from the criminal underclass, either. We're talking about classy, well-brought-up, compassionate and tender-hearted women. Brothers and sisters, the holy stones of the holy city are piled at the top of every street. The city of God is a ruin.

I would just like to talk for a moment about the ridiculous objection of simple-minded commentators to v. 1, namely that gold does not tarnish. Of course it doesn't! That's the poet's point. Things are so bad that gold itself is dimmed.

B. Its Limit, vv. 11-20

God's fury has reached the limit. He has finished His wrath. His mercies are never finished; they are new every morning. But in the exile and destruction of Jerusalem, His wrath was finished. It came to an end. Why did God send such wrath on His people? Because of the iniquity of the leaders. The prophets and priests, aka the religious establishment, had been complicit in shedding the blood of the righteous. God's people fled, but that did not save them. Their enemies were swifter than eagles in flight. Do you think you could outrun an eagle?

The final straw was the capture of God's Anointed king, the descendant of David in whom they put their trust.

Their world was completely shattered, brothers and sisters. It had crashed to pieces. They had thought that they could live under the protection of God's anointed, but He had been captured. Have you ever felt this way? That now that you are a Christian and under the protection of the Lord Jesus Christ, you have a place in the world at last? But then disaster strikes, and you lose that confidence. Well, that's exactly how God's people felt.

C. Its Completion, vv. 21-22

But nonetheless, the penalty was accomplished. The spanking was over. The cup of suffering would pass to daughter Edom, the hereditary enemy of the people of God. God will not prolong the exile of His people, and indeed in a limited way they returned after 70 years in Babylon.

Brothers and sisters, what do we take from this chapter? We learn that suffering is temporary. That does not mean that suffering is easy. That does not mean that suffering is fake. But it does mean that you can get through it. It will end. God does not punish forever. This pandemic has been long. But it will end. And so what should we do? Immediately following the hopeful ending of ch. 4, ch. 5 launches into a prayer. And that's what we should do. We should pray. In order to see how to do that, we turn now to chapter 5, the conclusion of Lamentations. It is the prayer of God's people.

II. The Prayer of God's People, ch. 5

Again, then, let me say it: If you have reason to believe that judgment is ending, you ought to throw yourself on the mercy of God by praying to Him.

A. Their Plea Summarized: Remember!, v. 1

The chapter opens with the plea of God's people: "Remember." As the commentators did not tire of pointing out, God's people are not suggesting that God has forgotten in the sense that His people's plight skipped His mind. He was not focusing on the Andromeda Galaxy so hard that He forgot about what was going on in Jerusalem. Not at all. Rather, the point is that they are asking God to act. For Him to remember them is for Him to help them. Again and again this language occurs in Scripture, both in describing God and in describing us. We have seen over and over that Proverbs exhorts the wise son to remember the instructions of his father. Why? Because to remember them is to act on them. Similarly, if you ask someone to "Look" you're not just asking them to take a glance and move on. Instead, you're asking them to study the situation and act appropriately. I've recently installed a laundry sink in my basement. The other week I was showing it off to my mom: "Look at this sink we put in!" I told her. How would I have felt if she said, "Yep, looks like a sink" and walked away? Brothers and sisters, the Biblical petitions asking God to "remember" and to "look" could be expanded to "Remember our relationship and how you promised to take care of us," and "look on our affliction and deliver us." That is the substance of Lamentations 5, and that is a perfectly proper and necessary activity for the church to engage in. Indeed, in a fallen world that is likely going to be a substantial part of your prayer time. I would add, though, brothers and sisters, that if you ask God to look and to remember, then you better be looking and remembering too. You can't float through life forgetting what He had to say to you and failing to look at Him as He is described in His word, but simultaneously demand that He remember you and look at what's going on in your life. This is a relationship that goes both ways. And so by all means plead with God to remember. As you do so, remember the testimony of the mighty man in ch. 3, and how God rescued Him. But don't stop there.

B. Their Suffering Described, vv. 2-18

After all, God's people didn't stop there. Knowing that their suffering had an expiration date, as the end of ch. 4 promises, they sought deliverance by reminding the Lord of three different kinds of suffering that were happening in their land.

1. Economic Impoverishment, vv. 2-10

The first of these is one that you and I may become far more familiar with in the next year or two. Most of these verses deal with the loss of money, property, and status. Notice that the greatest loss, the one mentioned first, is the loss of inheritance. Why is this significant? Because God gave the land to His people! He had granted them life in the promised land. He had allotted portions to each tribe, and therefore to each family. These portions were not to be alienated. But now that Babylon owned all the land, God's promise had failed.

Have you ever felt this way? Have you had a situation where you were completely sure that God was going to come through for you in a particular way, and then He didn't? That's how God's people felt at this juncture. They lost not only property, but homes as well. Researchers these days have attempted to quantify the amount of stress that moving causes, particularly when it's a forced move because your landlord kicked you out. Let's just say that we don't need

research to tell us that being kicked out of your home causes a lot of stress. God's people had been reduced to the status of orphans. The waters and woods that had belonged to them were taken away such that they had to pay for them.

Can you imagine this? Somebody stealing your car and then charging you good money to rent it back to you? Somebody expropriating your house and charging you rent to live in it? This is the pain of judgment. This is the desolation and misery of God's people. And this is what they wanted God to see. Please notice these things, Lord, and have compassion on us! That was their prayer. From this we see that it's not wrong to pour out your miseries and woes before the face of God. In fact, it is the correct response to pain and tragedy. This is an act of faith — the first act we see Zion doing in this book, and the last one too. Do you take it to the Lord in prayer? Is prayer your default way of coping with pain? If not, why not? What is better than talking to God about it?

2. Social Humiliation, vv. 11-14

Yet God's people also suffered social humiliation. The women were raped. That's humiliating. But men, how would you feel knowing that you had let it happen? I think we all know families where the women's respect for their men is rather low, and where this would be an issue for the rest of their lives. "You let them rape me."

"There was nothing I could do, honey."

"You should have done something and died trying to protect me rather than just standing there stupidly."

I can hear the conversation now. Brothers and sisters, rape doesn't just humiliate women; it humiliates their men, too, indeed, their entire community. And though the women are the class of people first mentioned as humiliated, they are far from the last. Princes, elders, young men, boys — all groups in society suffer humiliation. They have been driven out of their normal spaces and into humiliating ones.

3. Communal Sorrow, vv. 15-18

And thus the response is communal sorrow. One study that one of the commentators cites speaks of joy as the ritual response to the presence of God, and mourning as the appropriate response to His absence. God is gone; the temple is in ruins. Zion is a place for foxes to prowl rather a place for the Almighty to live. Again, the people's heart faints and their eyes are dim. They live in sorrow because of what has happened to them.

C. Their Final Petition, vv. 19-22

So how does the book end? What is the final response of God's people to all that they've experienced? They conclude their prayer, and the book of Lamentations, by asking God to restore them and renew their days.

1. Its Foundation, v. 19

This petition is founded on God's rule. Whatever is going on down here, whatever disaster and pain and crisis you and I are going through, God is not going through it. His throne endures; He reigns.

Do you believe this? This is the only comfort of lamenting Judah, and this is ultimately the only comfort of the distressed Christian today. Jesus rules. The virus is not in charge. Political leaders and their bungling are not in charge. Bureaucrats are not in charge. God is.

If you really believed that, how would it change your life? Would you still be angry at the people you're angry at? Knowing that God rules didn't change the miserable circumstances Judah was in. But nonetheless, His rule is the foundation of any and every petition we can make.

2. Its Motivation, v. 20

That petition was motivated by the feeling that God had forgotten them. Of course, this chapter opened by asking Him to remember. But when it seems that He doesn't remember, what do you do? You remind Him! Call on Him. Give Him no rest, Isaiah says. You can only be motivated to remind someone when you believe that they've forgotten. God doesn't forget, as we said — but He does want us to remind Him. Do you pray? Jesus did.

3. Its Desire, v. 21

And what did they pray for? They asked for God to turn them back. They asked for the gift of repentance and for the healing of their relationship with Him. They wanted their old relationship with Him back.

Do you pray for this? In this time of economic and public health disaster, do you think that returning to God is the best thing you can do?

4. Its Obstacle, v. 22

But the obstacle in the way of this return is that God has rejected them and poured out His anger on them.

Has this ever happened to you? Have you triggered someone and felt the outburst of their wrath? What did you do in response? After everything they suffered, all the pains chronicled in this book, God's people still called on Him. Even though He had disciplined them so severely, they still sought to go back to Him.

Christ called on God even when He was on the cross. And you and I must call on God even when all of the evidence says that we are in trouble with Him. I want to dial in on this "even though" for just a second here, before we leave this place. Why on earth does the poet of Lamentations say "Even though you're rejected and are very angry with us, please forgive and restore us as before"? How can he pray such a thing? The answer is found in the work of Jesus Christ. That answer does not appear clearly in the text of Lamentations, other than in the mighty man's testimony in ch. 3. But that story did not clearly include sin before deliverance. But here, as you pray to God to restore our church and our land and our world, your hope is found in the perfect finished work of Jesus Christ. Because He absorbed God's wrath, you can petition Him for rescue despite your failures and sins and problems. We call on God for help because He has forgiven us in Jesus!

Brothers and sisters, the message of Lamentations is that it's okay for a Christian and a church to experience pain. But in that pain, don't give up. Call on God. Your punishment will come to an end sometime. Why? Because the wrath of God was poured out to its dregs on Jesus.

He said it is finished. And it is — but our suffering is not yet finished. Someday it will be. Until that day, keep going back to God for help. He saved Christ; He will save you. Amen.