

# Lam 1

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Date: 03 January 2016

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[ 0 : 00 ] So, Lamentations. Now the Bible is full of songs, and for example the book of Psalms has 150 of them. The Song of Solomon is a very well known love song. But the book of Lamentations is also a song.

But it's a song of suffering. It's a dirge. It's what you would sing if you went to a funeral when everyone wears black. And it was written when the city of Jerusalem was destroyed in the year 586 BC by the Babylonian army.

And you can read the events a bit more in 2 Kings chapter 25, where it's all quite matter of fact. You read that King Nebuchadnezzar came and destroyed the city. But in the book of Lamentations you hear what that felt like from the inside.

And the suffering was horrific. So there was a two year siege, which led to famine. And as a result, the people ran out of food.

And you can imagine the situation grows desperate. You actually see in chapter 2, verse 20, there are cases of cannibalism. As mothers are forced to eat their dead babies.

[ 1 : 15 ] And eventually the situation gets so desperate that the king is forced to flee one night. He's captured. And as a result, the city is taken. And it is systematically destroyed.

So priests are slaughtered in the temple. Leaders are killed. And buildings are just deliberately destroyed. It is the willful, systematic destruction of an entire civilization.

And this song of Lamentations is divinely inspired to articulate the grief they felt at that. So it's actually a very carefully composed book.

Chapter 1, we can't see it in English. But it's actually an acrostic. So every verse begins with a different letter of the Hebrew alphabet. So verse 1, A, verse 2, B, etc. And at one level that probably just helped people to memorise the poem.

But there's a sense in which this is giving us the A to Z of suffering. It's giving us the totality of it.

And if you look at chapter 1, the song is about a woman crying.

[ 2 : 22 ] Verse 2, she weeps bitterly in the night with tears on her cheeks. In verse 16, we hear her speak. She says, I weep, my eyes flow with tears.

So you've got a picture of a woman sitting out in public somewhere on a park bench maybe. And she is sobbing in full view of everyone.

This isn't just a kind of tear in the eye. And she is utterly inconsolable. Nobody can stop this woman crying. So listen to some of the things she says. Verse 2, she has none to comfort her.

Verse 7, there was none to help her. Verse 9, she has no comforter.

Verse 17, there is none to comfort her. Verse 21, there is no one to comfort me. Now, I don't know you, but I have had some low points in my life.

[ 3 : 26 ] But thankfully, I have never been able to say that. And then in verse 12, which is what I want us to focus on, this woman dramatically calls to us.

As we walk past her, she asks for our pity. So have a listen. She says, is it nothing to you, all you who pass by? Look and see if there is any sorrow like my sorrow.

So suddenly, she starts talking to us. She talks to the passers-by. In verse 12, I think it captures a moment that we can all relate to, can't we?

So haven't we all had this experience where we're walking somewhere, and we approach someone sitting on the street who we know is going to ask us for money, and they look at us, and we've got that split-second decision, haven't we?

What are we going to do? Are we going to pass them by, or are we going to stop and give them our attention? And it is something that we can, yeah, we do lots of.

[ 4 : 32 ] It struck me, sitting on a bus recently, we're bombarded, aren't we, by needs, by calls to us to pay attention to suffering. So there's the effort, isn't there, if you text this number to donate £5 to help Sharif have a blanket for winter.

And I know if I stop and think about Sharif and the £5 in my wallet for too long, I will sort of feel some compulsion. And so we develop coping strategies to try and avoid it.

We become experts at passing by. Apparently the charity sector has a name for it. They call it compassion fatigue. They know that if we have, if we're exposed to too many examples of suffering, we just sort of psychologically switch off.

We shrug our shoulders and get used to it. But that's the picture in verse 12. A woman is sobbing, she is in great distress, and she cries to us, Is it nothing to you, all you who pass by?

Look and see. And so really that's what I want us to do this morning. I want us to look and see. I want us to slow down and to peer at this woman and see what we can learn here.

[ 5 : 46 ] Please don't pass this woman by in verse 12, I want to say. Please listen to her. She invites us into her grief. I'm going to ask three questions. Firstly, whose grief is this?

Secondly, why is it unique? Thirdly, will you pass it by? So as we look at this woman, it's important that we don't misidentify her.

So we may be tempted to think that we know who she is. After all, her city has been destroyed and her children have been killed. And so we think, well, this is the victim of war.

This woman represents the suffering people that we meet all around us. And so we may conclude that verse 12 is really a call for us to kind of step in towards the world's sufferings.

And if that was the case, then this woman's face is the face of the refugee on the 10 o'clock news. And it's the mother who lost her children in the Paris attacks. It's the Syrian refugees who are going to be spending this winter in a huge camp, separated from loved ones.

[ 6 : 52 ] And so verse 12 would then be telling us, don't pass by their suffering, give to Oxfam, and so on. But I want to say no, that is not who this woman is. This woman isn't any old woman.

And the book of Lamentations isn't describing any old suffering. This woman is God's people. She is Jerusalem. Not any old city, but the city that God chose.

And the book of Lamentations describes the sufferings of God's people. But we need to say even more than that, because this woman is experiencing a very particular kind of grief. Now, as God's people, we can face all kinds of suffering, can't we?

Loved ones can die. We can be made redundant. Our children can walk away from the faith. We can get attacked on the streets. All kinds of sufferings can come into our lives.

And yet, the wonderful thing is, as believers, is that in those times, we can know God close to us. And God, our Heavenly Father, caring for us. But that is not what this woman is describing here.

[ 8 : 01 ] Look at what she says. 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.

This woman's sufferings actually aren't caused by Nebuchadnezzar and the Babylonian army.

They are inflicted by the Lord himself on the day of his fierce anger. This woman is under the curse of God.

God is angry with her. This woman is voicing for us what it feels like to be God's chosen one, but cursed by God.

The cry in verse 12 is the cry of someone suffering under God's curse. And when we realise that, we begin to hear another voice here in verse 12, don't we?

[ 9 : 10 ] There is another speaker here. This verse is not just articulating the trauma of the Jews in 587 BC. It is voicing for us a deeper trauma.

A deeper judgement. And it is the trauma that is at the heart of the Bible's entire message. In which God sends his son to suffer for the sins of his people.

To bear the curse on their behalf. And in, not 587 BC, but in AD 30 something, the son of God bears the curse on the cross.

And so in the destruction of Jerusalem, we have prefigured for us the destruction of our Lord Jesus Christ. So whose grief is this? This sobbing woman actually becomes for us a window into the sufferings of Jesus Christ.

In her sobs, we are meant to hear the experience of someone being cursed as a covenant breaker. And so they are best heard on the lips of Jesus Christ as he hangs on the cross.

[10:20] So, this woman isn't an advert for Oxfam. This isn't the voice of a refugee on our TV, as needy as those causes may be. This isn't even Christians being persecuted in Syria.

This is Jesus speaking to us this morning in verse 12. And he says to us, Is it nothing to you, all you who pass by, look and see if there is any sorrow like my sorrow?

So secondly, why is this unique? So as Jesus calls for our attention here, you can see, can't you, that he is accenting the uniqueness of his suffering.

Look and see, is there any sorrow like my sorrow? He's asking. And the assumed answer is no. No, there is no sorrow that can be compared to the sorrow of Jesus Christ.

The prophet Isaiah has a title for the Messiah. You may remember it. He calls him the man of sorrows. And this verse calls us, in this verse, Jesus calls us to explore this.

[11:31] What is it that makes Christ's suffering so unique? And let me flag up four areas. Let us try and think. How can we calculate and compute what it was that Jesus suffered?

So firstly, think of the how of his sufferings. So I hope you know some of the basics. Christ's sufferings involves a violent and a bloody death.

He died by crucifixion, not by electric chair or by lethal injection, which would be very smooth processes. It was a form of death that the Romans developed to maximise the pain, to horrify people, to emphasise the pain and the shame of death.

Death and crucifixion becomes a long, drawn-out affair. And we shouldn't gloss over the real, physical dimensions of Christ's sufferings.

His body was broken. His hands and feet were pierced through with nails. A crown of thorns dug into his forehead.

[12:45] He experienced the stigma of having spit in his face. He was offered sour wine to drink. That wasn't to relieve him of his pain. His ears heard the taunts of the crowd.

His eyes saw people gaping at him. His beard was plucked. His back whipped. His clothes taken from him.

His friends utterly deserted. And we could go on, couldn't we? That's a little bit of the how. But think next of who it is who is suffering here. The person hanging on the cross is no ordinary person.

This is an eternal person. This is a divine person. This is God the Son, who from before the foundations of the world enjoyed blessed fellowship with God the Father and the Holy Spirit.

This is God the Son, who made everything. This is God the Son, who stands at the centre of angels' worship, who is hanging here.

[13:58] This is the perfectly blessed Son, without any needs, without any wants, incapable of suffering in himself. That is who is suffering here.

This is happening to him. These are the sufferings of a person of infinite glory. And when you begin to appreciate that, you start to feel like we're just floating over 70,000 fathoms of suffering beneath us.

Kids, you know sometimes when you're using calculators, and you do a sum, and you keep multiplying it, and it ends up with that letter E on it, because it can't compute the figure that you've come up with anymore.

Well, it's like that, as we try to add these things together, because we can go on. Think of why it is he is suffering. The answer scripture gives is he is taking the punishment, not for his own sins, but on behalf of others.

He is receiving the punishment that others deserve. And so this opens up again another whole dimension of his suffering. So he is an innocent man. It is an innocent person suffering. Now we may know examples of someone suffering innocently for a crime they didn't commit, but actually no one has ever suffered completely innocently.

[15:20] They may not be guilty of the crime, but they're guilty of all kinds of things ultimately. Jesus is completely perfect, with no corrupt desires. Sin never had the slightest influence over him.

Think how that must aggravate his sufferings, as he has made sin for us. And when you put the how and the who and the why together, and think of the what of his sufferings, our minds begin to boggle.

Now sometimes memorials can be designed, can't they, which powerfully convey the sort of scale of suffering. I remember going to Washington DC, and seeing the Vietnam Veterans Memorial in DC.

I don't remember that much about it, other than being impressed by the number of names on there. So there were 58,000 Americans who died, and they're listed there.

And the way that they're all kind of written, and the kind of quality of the stone, really leaves you feeling, wow, that was a large loss of life. And I'm sure there are ways in which we could convey what it was for 6 million Jews to die in the Holocaust.

[ 16 : 29 ] But we forget, or we can easily forget, that each individual American war veteran didn't experience 48,000 deaths. No one Jew experienced 6 million deaths.

But Christ shouldered the deaths of a crowd that cannot be numbered. It is as though a whole holocaust of suffering fell upon his shoulders.

The sins of the world are intensified and focused on that one person. And what's more, his sufferings are so great that they satisfied divine justice.

No one has ever suffered in a way that has actually satisfied divine justice. He drank to the bottom, the bottomless cup of God's wrath.

Even the damned in hell do not know what it is to suffer and satisfy God's justice. For all their suffering, they will never quench it and exhaust it.

[ 17 : 46 ] But Jesus Christ did. It is finished, he said. That is why Christ's divinity is so important to understanding his sufferings.

His divinity bore up his humanity. We mustn't think that Christ's divinity made his sufferings easier. No, his divinity bore up his humanity so that it was capable of absorbing that much suffering.

I mean, a normal, a human nature without that strength of the divine nature would just disintegrate at all this judgment. His divinity doesn't lessen it, it actually heightened it so that he was capable of bearing more.

His divinity made his suffering much, much worse. When any other man would have had to stop and been unable to take any more, Jesus Christ took more and more and more.

So look and see, is there any sorrow like Christ's sorrow? Is there anything anywhere in this world remotely close to what the man of sorrows endured on the day of the Lord's fierce anger against him?

[ 19 : 05 ] The sorrow of Christ is truly unparalleled. Similes and metaphors don't get us close. No martyr, no warrior, no Hollywood story that they tell us gets us close to what is taking place on Calvary.

It will always remain a holy mystery for us. And yet all this, the Son of God voluntarily undertook to suffer. He was not obliged to do this.

He was not forced to bear this heavy load. He freely chose to do so. So thirdly, let me ask you, will you pass it by? Will you pass it by?

There is a tragedy in this verse. And there is a tragedy in the book of Lamentations. But the tragedy in this verse is not where we might think the tragedy is not the sufferings of Christ.

Yes, there is no sorrow like Christ's sorrow which the Lord inflicted on him in the day of his fierce anger. But that is not the tragedy. The tragedy is there in the first line of the verse.

[ 20 : 15 ] Is it nothing to you or you who pass by? That's the tragedy, isn't it? It's the tragedy of people passing by these sufferings.

Treating them as nothing. Being aware of them. But them having no effect. And the Gospel writers described it, didn't they? So in the reading from Matthew 27 you may have noticed as Jesus was crucified we're told about passers-by who derided him wagging their heads and saying if you're the Son of God come down from the cross.

So these men saw the sufferings. They were with an earshot. But they saw him hanging there. They saw the sky go black.

They felt the earth quake. But these passers-by didn't stop and take in what was happening. Jesus tells a famous parable about passing by, doesn't he?

The Good Samaritan remember the man lying on the road to Jericho a Levite and a priest come along and they see the need and they pass by onto the other side of the road.

[ 21 : 26 ] And when you pass someone by it implies being close to them doesn't it? So it assumes that there's some proximity. So it's one thing, isn't it?

To see suffering on your television and to kind of not really do much about it. But there's another thing to have someone on your doorstep suffer and not do something about it. You're passing them by them in a different kind of way. And the tragedy described in this verse isn't just a one-off back

then.

It is a tragedy repeated in the millions across England today. It's a tragedy that can be taking place in this very room. You see, you pass by the cross of Christ when it means very little to you. You hurry on your way and you treat what Jesus did there like it was nothing. And there may be tribes in the Amazon rainforest somewhere who aren't passing by Jesus' death because they've not heard of it.

But that is not true for us in England, is it? We have Bibles galore. We know this story very well. We may be forgetting it gradually and gradually but it's not forgotten.

[ 22 : 35 ] If anything, it is still too over-familiar. And Jesus says to us in England, is it nothing to you, all you who pass by?

And yet, here's what's really tragic. Every one of our reasons, every one of your reasons this morning for passing by these sufferings is utterly illogical.

We avoid Christ because, just like the beggar, we think he wants something from us. If I stop and hang around thinking about Jesus for too long, he's going to start making my life awkward and he's going to start messing up the things I really like and taking my money and making me rather boring, we tell ourselves.

And so I'm too busy, I'm too busy to think about Jesus. I've got bills to pay and I've got a family to bring up and there's all these things I've got to get all my house sorted, I've got friends to see, I've got enough sorrow of my own to worry about, thank you, without inconveniencing myself by thinking about these sufferings and that is where the tragedy really lies.

Why is Jesus calling to you this morning from verse 12? Jesus isn't trying to get something from you this morning.

[ 24 : 01 ] Jesus isn't asking for your help. He's not asking for your money or your time. These sufferings aren't calling for you to come and do anything, for you to come and fix or for you to come and solve.

He is calling out to you to help you. He wants you to look at these sufferings because these sufferings alone can rescue you and can fix all the problems that flood our lives as humans. these sufferings alone are what can cure you this morning. And so He wants you to pay attention to them because these alone will fix you.

And even as Christians this morning we are quite capable of passing by the sufferings of Christ, aren't we? when we sin, when we deliberately, willfully indulge in sin, when we lose our temper or when we indulge in lust, Christ's sufferings are of no consequence to us.

When we're flooded with fears, when we find ourselves fretting and fretting about certain situations, or we are hypersensitive and self-absorbed about how others are thinking of us or how we're perceived, it is as though we are treating the cross of Christ as though it's nothing.

[ 25 : 36 ] Look and see what Christ has done for you. What are you worrying about? When we can't be bothered to show up to things, the cross is nothing.

When we're, when we're, all kinds of Christian conditions in our lives and sinful conditions show this. And I'm sure the people at the cross rationalised why they were passing by.

I'm sure the Levites and the priests in the Good Samaritan rationalised why it was they had to pass him by. And we likewise develop all kinds of good reasons to justify what it is we're doing.

And I wonder what it is for you this morning. I wonder how you rationalise passing by Jesus' death on the cross. Can you see how irrational those reasons are?

It is irrational to devote your life to trivia and to the minutia of things that you do while this account of God the Son becoming flesh in order to suffer on the cross is ignored.

[ 26 : 46 ] And so Jesus calls us to resolve to resolve to stop passing him by. Martin Luther said I feel like Jesus died only yesterday.

And that's what we need to cultivate isn't it as Christians we need to find ways of cultivating that we need to develop ways of taking these sufferings in that is what the Lord's Supper regularly celebrating the Lord's Supper is designed to do.

we need to meditate on that more we need to reflect in our prayers and delivery and pause to think and to thank Christ who was crucified for us.

Friends these sufferings of Jesus Christ under Pontius Pilate outside Jerusalem are everything.

These sufferings give us everything we need as Christians. Peace with God a clear conscience the Holy Spirit.

So let's stop passing them 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.  
[ 27 : 53 ] Let's pray together.