

Lamentations 1:1-2

Disclaimer: this is an automatically generated machine transcription - there may be small errors or mistranscriptions. Please refer to the original audio if you are in any doubt.

Date: 01 November 2015

Preacher: Martin Fox

[0 : 0 0] Well, it's easy to take things for granted, isn't it? So, I'm not a big social media person! But I know that one of the big things that's trended on Twitter in the last year is hashtag! First world problems. And if you don't know what that means, they're kind of problems that we have in our kind of comfortable first world lifestyle that actually aren't really problems at all. So let me give you a few examples. Most of my favourite ones are about food. So the problems like my brie is too hard. First world problem. Very practical problem, I want to eat my packet of crisps, but if I do, I can't hear the television. If you've experienced that. Or one, so this is a serious frustration for me, which is if I put my two wheat a bits in a round bowl, they go up on their sides and you get one half is soggy and one half is crispy on the top. Then, first world problem, I know. We live in a prosperous country and it's easy to take for granted the privileges we have. So privileges of freedom, of running water, clean toilets, shelter, washing machines, breakfast. And if you speak to people who've visited third world countries, who've maybe just come back from a gap year or a mission trip, often they come back with a kind of fresh perspective, don't they, on what we have as they compare our situation to situations of people who maybe food is hard to come by or clean water just isn't easily available. But as we, as we live our clean, healthy, first world lifestyles, it's easy to take all those things for granted. And it's the same way with our faith, isn't it? So it's easy to forget the huge privileges that we have as followers of Jesus. So we can be so flippant in saying things like, I'm forgiven, or God is my father, or I have hope.

Lives like that, they can slip off our tongues as we sing them in our songs, as we read them in creeds, as we pray about them. And it's so easy for that to happen without us really even thinking about them, let alone actually having any kind of emotional response to them.

So I think my main hope as we look at this passage this evening, which contains, I think, some of the most emotive poetry you find in the Bible, my hope is that it will help us not to take for granted some of the wonderful blessings that we have as followers of Jesus.

And instead of going to a third world country, we're going to travel back to Jerusalem in 587 BC. It's my hope, yeah, that journey will give us a fresh perspective on salvation. That's what I found from reading this little book in the Old Testament. So I hope that that will be your experience too.

So let's think, before we actually get into Lamentations, what this passage is writing about. Let's think a bit about the background. As I said, it refers to one point in history, 587 BC, 587 BC, when Jerusalem and the majestic temple that was in the centre of Jerusalem had just fallen to King Nebuchadnezzar. And it was a terrible time for the Old Testament Jews.

[3 : 1 6] So I'll read you a couple of short excerpts. You can tell them if you want. It's 2 Kings, chapter 25, to page 333. You want to call it 332. It's 2 Kings, chapter 25.

So starting the first one. And in the ninth year of his reign, in the tenth month, on the tenth day of the month, Nebuchadnezzar, king of Babylon, came with his army against Jerusalem and laid siege to it.

And they built siege walls all round it. So the city was besieged till the eleventh year of King Zedekiah. On the ninth day of the fourth month, the famine was so severe in the city that there was no food for the people of the land. Then a breach was made in the city, and all the men of war fled by night, by way of the gate between the two walls, by the king's garden. And the Chaldeans were round the city. And they went in the direction of the direction of the Arabah. But the army of the Chaldeans pursued the king and overtook him in the plains of Jericho. And all his army was scattered from him. Then they captured the king and brought him up to the king of Babylon and Riblah. And they passed sentence on him.

They slaughtered the sons of Zedekiah before his eyes, and put out the eyes of Zedekiah, and bound him in chains, and took him to Babylon. So Zedekiah, the king of Judah, the last thing he

sees is the slaughter of his sons. And it carries on. In the fifth month, on the seventh day of the month, that was the 19th year of King Nebuchadnezzar, king of Babylon, Nebuchadnezzar, the captain of the bodyguard, a servant of the king of Babylon, came to Jerusalem. And he burned the house of the Lord, and the king's house, and the houses of Jerusalem. Every great house he burned down. And all the army of the Chaldeans, who were with the captain of the guard, broke down the walls around Jerusalem. And the rest of the people who were left in the city, and the deserters who were deserted to the king of Babylon, together with the rest of the multitude, Nebuchadnezzar, the captain of the guard, carried into exile. But the captain of the guard left some of the poorest of the land to be vinedressers and ploughmen.

So Jerusalem has been enslaved. And it's been destroyed. These people are either dead, they're in exile, or they're enslaved. And we could read on if we wanted more detail in this passage about how the temple was destroyed, and how the priests of the temple were round up and put to death. It's a bleak situation, isn't it? You get that as you read through this. It's completely bleak.

[6:15] And it seems to be a situation that the writer of Lamentations, which is probably the prophet from Jeremiah, speaks. So turn back there. Turn to Lamentations. It's page 685. And while you're turning there, let me give you a bit of a kind of overview of what Lamentations is. So there's five poems here that reflect on this tragedy. We're reading the first one today, which is chapter 1. And if two kings is like the history textbook of this tragedy, Lamentations is the hymn book.

These poems, they tell of the tragedy, but much more than that, they give the emotion that the people then felt about the situation. And let me say, and I'm sure you felt this, we read it earlier, it's not cheerful reading. I'm sure you've got that. I said to a few people this week that I'm going to be looking at Lamentations this evening. And in most cases, they kind of look at you and give you a response and kind of, okay, and then say something along the lines that we could have chosen a more cheerful passage. But let me encourage you to stick with me on it. Because actually, I think the more we understand the kind of emotion that was felt at this time, I think the greater appreciation and gratitude we will have for what Jesus has done for us on the cross and what he's rescued us from. And we will get there. There is an happy ending coming to this moment, let me reassure you of that.

But I do want us to get into this poetry. And so for the next 10-15 minutes, I want us to just look through it, look at some of the themes that come in it, and really internalise it together to feel the force of what Jeremiah is saying here.

So let's look a bit together. And first notice the reversal and the loneliness that's expressed in verses 1-2. How lonely sits the city that was full of people. How like a widow has she become. She who is great among the nations, she who is a princess among the provinces, has become a slave. So this great city of Jerusalem, the promised land, the city that showed God's blessing to his people, now lies destroyed. And whereas before there were people bustling about their business, now there's a tumbleweed that blows silently through the streets. How lonely it lies, like a widow has she become. I'm sure there's some here who will know the grief of losing a spouse, of being one half of a partnership, that death is divided. And that's what it compares this situation to. There's been a complete reversal in what's happened.

A reversal from community to loneliness. From greatness to loneliness. From intimacy to separation. From prosperity to poverty. From freedom to captivity.

[9:10] And verse 2 again picks up on the theme of loneliness. But now there's a kind of personal rejection included. Those who could have been faithful in God's city previously, they've rejected it.

So verse 2. Among all her lovers, she has none to comfort her. All her friends have dealt treacherously with her. They have become her enemies. And this theme of Jerusalem being alone, it recurs again and again in this poem. Verse 7 says, when her people fell into enemy hands, there was no one to help her. Verse 16, this is why I weep and my eyes overflow with tears.

No one is here near to comfort me. No one to restore my spirits. Verse 17, Zion, which is another name for Jerusalem, stretches out her hands, but there is no one to comfort her.

Verse 21, people have heard of my groan, but there is no one to comfort me. But there's not just loneliness and rejection, there's direct affliction. We saw that in that King's passage, didn't we? The passage from two Kings. And we see that again here. So verse 3, after affliction and hard labour, Judah has gone into exile. She dwells among the nations and finds no resting place. So those in the city, they've been driven out. Driven out from Jerusalem, which is the place of rest, the promised land. And now they're restless, with nowhere to settle. So you think of those images that we've seen

in the news recently, the migrants fleeing from Syria, desperately travelling across Europe. That's the kind of situation you've got here. These people are fleeing from Jerusalem, and it's a hopeless situation for them. So you look at the end of verse 3, they can't even get away from the people who are persecuting them. It says, all who pursue her have overtaken her in the midst of her distress. And with the people scattered and wandering, Jerusalem is nothing but memories here. So in the past, it was the centre of these great feasts and festivals to the Lord. But now, look at verse 4, no one comes to her appointed feasts. The past people would have travelled from far around, but now, it says, the roads to Zion mourn. Verse 4 says, her gates are desolate. A priest who would have been leading the feasts and festivals, they groan. But the theme of defeat through here. Verse 5, her foes have become ahead, her enemies prosper. Verse 9 says, O Lord, behold my affliction, for the enemy has triumphed. Verse 15, he has summoned an army to crush my young men. There's mockery, being a spectacle to those around. So verse 7, her enemies looked at her and laughed at her destruction. Verse 21, all my enemies have heard of my distress, and they rejoice. We could go on. But I hope you can see, and I hope you can begin to feel a bit as we read this, the bleakness of the situation and the dire emotion that these people are feeling. And yet, perhaps the hardest, the unmistakable truth that is throughout this poem is the cause of the situation. So look at the middle of verse 5.

Verse 8 says, Jerusalem, Jerusalem sinned grievously, therefore she's become filthy. Then all through 12 to 15, it says, is there any sorrow like my sorrow which was brought upon me, which the Lord inflicted on the day of his fierce anger. From on high he sent fire. Into my bones he made it descend. He spread a net from my feet. He turned me back. He left me stunned, faint all the day long. My transgressions were bound into a yoke, and by his hand they were fastened together. They were set upon my neck. He caused my strength to fail. The Lord gave me into the hands of those who I cannot withstand. The Lord rejected all my mighty men in my midst. He sung an assembly against me to crush my young men. The Lord has trodden as in a winepress, the virgin daughter of Judah. So unmistakably in this passage, in this poem, God is sovereign. He didn't because of their sin. The passage is not just about the bleakness of suffering. It's about the bleakness of judgment.

[14:07] And thank goodness God is slow to anger. When you read the Old Testament, this judgment here is hundreds of years coming. The people rebelled against him for hundreds of years, and with only a few exceptions, but leaders of the people were people who sinned against God and who rebelled against him. So Zedekiah, the king we read about earlier, like so many of the kings before him, he is described as having done what is evil in the sight of the Lord. But being slow to anger doesn't mean that God ignores sin and rebellion. God cares. And he is just.

And he can be rightly angry. And his judgment is terrible. For most of us, certainly for me, I find God's judgment, it's a really hard thing to kind of get our head around. We can rationalise it. So as the writer does here, if you look at verse 18, it says, the Lord is in the right, for I have rebelled against his word. If we're Christians, we know that. We know in our heads God is righteous. We know that he's just. We know he can't look on evil and let it go unpunished. But I find it really difficult to imagine what does that judgment look like? What does that feel like? And that, I think, is why this passage is so helpful. Because we can actually, we can feel that judgment here. We can feel what that's like firsthand. We hear it from the horse's mouth. So again, when you think of the migrant crisis that we've seen on the news, there was that one picture, it wasn't there, which kind of stuck in everyone's memory of the guard holding the little, the dead boy in his hand. And it moved people to react. There's something about that picture that turned it for me, a problem that was out there, to be a problem that was very real and very awful. And here we have a similar picture, a similar kind of verbal picture that's painted.

And it's designed to make us grasp this bleak situation and to be moved by it, to be grasped by the bleakness of God's judgment. But so what? So how are we to react to this today? Now that we've kind of felt this. We've felt what this writer is saying. We've felt what the situation was like then. How are we to react? Well, firstly, I think it's right to say the passage could be a bit of a wake-up call. For most people in London, the thought that there is a God who judges and that that could affect how we live is completely alien. There's a verse in the little book of Zephaniah, which was written about the same time as this passage, and it's written about one of the cities that surrounds Jerusalem, which I think really captures what the mood is in most of London today, even though that's talking about a city 2,500 years ago. It says this. It says in the city, this is the exultant city that says in its

heart, I am, and there's no one else. I am, and there's no one else. I want to do recognise that in the attitude of the people that you spend time with throughout the week. I certainly do. It's a culture of independence, isn't there? Life is about what you can get out from it, and no one's going to tell me how I should live, what I should be doing. I am, and there's no one else. Perhaps you see that in how you choose to live your life. So look at verse 9 in our passage. Her uncleanness was in her skirts, and she took no fraud of her future. Perhaps you find it easier to live as if there was no God, and no judgements.

But the clear warning of this passage is that to do that is to set yourself up for a fall. See here, because she wasn't watching where she was going, because she wasn't looking to the future. Her fall was terrible. That's what first night says. Therefore, her fall is terrible. She has no comfort. That verse of Zephaniah enters a similar way. It says, this is the exalted city that says in its heart, I am, and there is no one else. But it continues, what a desolation she has become. The higher you climb away from God, the longer you ignore him, the further you have to fall. The passage is certainly a warning to us and to those around us. But, and this is where you can kind of breathe a bit of a sigh of relief, there is encouragement for us here. Because as a follower of Jesus, as a believer in him, this desperate situation, this bleak situation, is not our situation. And it will not be our situation. For the follower of Jesus, the bleakness of God's judgment is not something that we are ever going to experience. In fact, even in this book, when this was written, there are glimmers of hope. Not because of the situation at the time. That situation was truly bleak.

[19:17] But there's glimmers of hope because of the God to whom the writer is calling out. The God who we follow today. In fact, the fact that he even calls out to God here, it shows that there's at least a hope, isn't there? There's at least a hope that God is going to hear. And then we flick on just a couple of chapters, sandwiched in the middle of this book, which is all about grief. There's some of the most famous verses in the Bible, some of the most comforting verses. So look, just flip with me to chapter 3 and verse 21 and we'll read it in the next few verses. They're the kind of verses that you see printed on the calendar with kind of pictures of lakes and mountains behind them. Famous verses. It says, but this I call to mind. This is after 64 verses of grief. He says, this I call to mind and therefore I hope the steadfast love of the Lord never ceases. His mercies never come to an end. They are new every morning. Great is your faithfulness. The Lord is my portion, says my soul. Therefore I will hope in him. The Lord is good to those who wait for him, to the soul who seeks him. It is good that one should wait quietly for the salvation of the

Lord. It is good for a man that he bared yoke in his youth. So even in his suffering, even in the immense suffering that this writer is under, he knows that God, in the depths of his character, yes he is a God, he is a just God. He is a God of justice and of judgment, but he knows that he is a God of salvation, a God who is faithful to his people. And we, as New Testament believers, we know how he can hold these characteristics together, how he can be both a just God here and this God of salvation. He achieves it through one man undergoing this judgment. So just flick back to chapter one of Lamentations and I want us to see the echoes of the cross that come through here. So think of the loneliness of verse one, the loneliness of a widow, the loneliness of royalty who has lost her majesty. Doesn't that echo of the loneliness of Jesus, the king on the cross, as he cried out, my God, my

God, why have you forsaken me? In verse two, among all her lovers she has none to comfort her. Again, wasn't that the experience of Jesus? The disciples all left him at the end.

The hour of his need. Verse seven, her foes gloated over her. They mocked at her downfall. Can you hear there the echoes of the words of the chief priests and the elders at the cross?

He saves himself, he saves others, but he cannot save himself. At the cross, Jesus faced the bleakness of God's judgment in all its fullness for us and he overcame it. So the temple, the temple that we read about, it was rebuilt later on, but it was then destroyed. It was never rebuilt permanently. In 1870 it was ransacked by the Romans and it's never been rebuilt. But Jesus is the living, risen king today. He overcame, he overcame the bleakness of judgment. And so as Christians we no longer live in the fragility of that statement saying I am and there is no one else. The statement of Christianity is to say he is, he is the living king and there's no one else. Our identity is in him. And in him we are 100% secure because he has faced the father's wrath and he's overcome.

[23:11] And so I hope that as you think on this passage, as you read the rest of the book, that your appreciation for what Jesus did on the cross will be deepened. Overfeeling what this book

says, the judgment of God feels like, I hope it helps us to understand the depths from which we've been rescued. Because the Bible's clear that without Jesus, what we read in Lamentations and in Kings, that would have been the end for all of us. Romans 3.10 reminds us of that.

It says, there is no one righteous, no not one, no one who does good, no one who understands. And that would have been a shock for the people who heard that at the time. They would have looked back to this passage in Lamentations and said, yeah, well that was then then, but we're better now. But the Apostle Paul says no. He says you're not better. He says Jesus is better. And he has overcome this bleakness for us. So what depth of gratitude we owe to him.

So this passage is a warning to us that God judges. It's an encouragement to us of the depths from which we've been rescued. But finally, it's worth thinking, what does this say to us as we suffer today? As we thought, when we suffer as Christians, we're not suffering the judgment of God. Jesus has taken that judgment for us. But we do suffer today. In fact, as we identify ourselves with Jesus, the Bible tells us that we are likely to face suffering as he faced suffering. And there will be many here today who do experience loneliness, rejection, persecution, affliction, mockery. And while Lamentations is speaking specifically about suffering that is a result of God's judgment, I think it is helpful for us as we deal with suffering in our lives. It's helpful to notice that it's okay to call out to God in those times as the writer does. Verse 9, O Lord, behold my affliction. Verse 11, look, O Lord, and see. Verse 20, look, O Lord, for I am in stress. Off the map will be the natural and the right response to situations in our lives. We know too, don't we, from what we've seen of this passage and what we've seen of how it's fulfilled in Jesus, that God can empathise with our difficulties because in Jesus he's experienced the suffering. As we've seen, Jesus has experienced these emotions that we saw in Lamentations firsthand. Finally, knowing that Jesus has overcome the suffering of judgment that is described here should give us confidence that while our suffering in this life is very real, it is only temporary. That's really the conclusion of Romans 8. Who shall separate us,

Romans 8 says in its famous passage, who shall separate us from the love of Christ? Shall tribulation or distress or persecution or famine or nakedness or danger or sword? As it is written, for your sake we are being killed all the day long. We are regarded as sheep to be slaughtered. No, says the Apostle Paul. In all these things we are more than conquerors through him who loved us. Jesus has overcome the suffering that he experienced on the cross. How much more will he overcome the suffering that we experience in our lives? As he puts elsewhere in Romans, if we have been united with him, with Jesus in a death like his, we shall certainly be united with him in a resurrection like his. We have a life to look forward to with Jesus and we can be certain that he has overcome suffering and that that life with him will not include that.

[27 : 17] Suffering as a Christian is a very real thing, but it's a temporary thing. There's a future hope with the wisdom, Lord Jesus. So to return to where we started, it's easy to take things for granted in the Christian life, isn't it? Forgiveness. Hope.

The chorus of the song we're about to sing says this, This is the power of the cross. Christ became sin for us. He took the blame. He bore the wrath.

We stand forgiven at the cross. I hope this passage in Lamentations helps us to sing those words with a fresh appreciation of what Jesus has done for us. I hope in a minute as we come to the Lord's table and we eat of the bread and drink of the cup, I hope we're able to acknowledge at a deeper level what Jesus achieved.

Not so much that we would lament at his suffering, but that we would marvel at the depths from which he saved us. And that we rejoice that he, the risen Lord Jesus, has overcome.

Let me pray. Heavenly Father, we are sorry that we so often take for granted the depths of your love for us and the depths from which you have rescued us in the Lord Jesus Christ.

[28 : 45] We do praise you that you are a God who is both loving and just. And we thank you so much that we can know you as that God. We can know you as the loving, just God because of Jesus and in him.

We pray that we would know that, that we would remember that, that we can take refuge in you through Jesus.

And we pray in his name. Amen.