

# A New Year's Lament: 1. Sin, Solitude and Slavery

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[ 0 : 0 0 ] Well, if you've let your Bibles close, then turn back to Lamentations chapter 1. I'll give you a minute, followed up between Jeremiah and Ezekiel, page 685.

And we'll have a moment of prayer. Our loving Heavenly Father, we know that you who created us also understand the workings of our hearts.

And we thank you, Lord, that you speak to us with the rich variety of your word, in ways that can pierce even our dull consciences and stubborn hearts.

And we pray, Lord, that you would speak to us now, to teach us to lament our sin and turn to you. We pray that as we open your word, it would do your work, in the power of your Spirit, and for our eternal sakes, for the glory of your Son, in whose precious name we ask.

Amen. If Scrooge was to choose a reading for the first Sunday of the new year, I don't think he could have done much worse than pick Lamentations 1.

[ 1 : 1 0 ] So my apologies if you're still enjoying the festive season. But frankly, after getting through umpteen different carol services, I thought this book was quite an effective antidote to Christmas.

But why does God speak to us with books like Lamentations? I know some of us have a naturally poetic mind, but equally there are plenty of us who just can't stand this stuff.

Maybe if it's all poetry of butterflies and sunshine, we'll put up with it for a little while. But look at verse 2. This is a poem about tear-stained cheeks, churning stomachs, and broken hearts.

And if we were honest, wouldn't we rather that we didn't have books like this to worry about? Maybe that's why I've never heard a sermon on Lamentations.

I wonder how many of you have. So why is it in our Bibles? Why does God speak to us with poetry like this? Well, poetry is able to reach that little bit of us that straight narrative writing can't.

[ 2 : 2 5 ] If you travelled to the deep south of the United States in the early 20th century, you might well have seen groups of prisoners chained together, singing, as they worked to dig a ditch or lay a new road.

And a few decades earlier, on either side of that road, you could have seen fields full of black slaves, picking cotton, or working on the corn plantations, and comforting themselves by singing spirituals and gospel songs.

And those songs provided a soundtrack to suffering. When we hear them today, those Negro spirituals or chain gang songs, they evoke strong emotions of an era that we can scarcely imagine.

And just as the chain gang songs give us a soundtrack to segregationist America, so the five short poems, five psalms really, that make up this book of lamentations give us a soundtrack to the exile.

A soundtrack to the exile. They're not here primarily to teach us doctrine, although they are rich with teaching. The purpose of this book isn't just to teach us that the exile happened, or even why the exile happened.

- [ 3 : 51 ] The Bible does that in plenty of other places. No, the reason God speaks to us with poetry like this is to teach us something else, to grab hold of our dull, desensitized emotions, lamentations, and to reshape them, to sharpen them.

Lamentations helps us grasp the painful cost of the exile. It shows us how desperately sad it is when God's people reject his gracious love.

And it shows us what the bitter consequences of that spiritual adultery are. So as we read, we need to let the poetry do its work.

We can't analyze the logic of this writing in the same way as we would a letter like Romans. Instead, we need to listen to the lament.

Let it move us. Now, it might help briefly to ask how we got to this point in our Bibles. If the poetry we're dealing with is so desperately sad, then something must have gone badly wrong in the story of God's people.

- [ 5 : 11 ] Long before this anonymous poet, maybe Jeremiah, wrote Lamentations, God had chosen Israel to be his own special people.

He promised to be with them, to protect them, and to use them to bring about his purposes, to restore the rest of the world.

The Bible often talks about Israel, God's people, as a bride. And God himself was their faithful husband. But look at verse 1.

That bride has become a lonely, despairing widow. God, of course, isn't dead, but a great divorce has taken place between God and his people.

And the reason for that divorce is that Israel, God's people, God's bride, refused to stay faithful to her husband. Israel treated her marriage vows, the covenant, like we would treat our New Year's resolutions.

- [ 6 : 22 ] The real tragedy of this book is that it shouldn't have needed to have been written. God gave his people chance after chance to turn back to him, to repent.

He sent prophets who warned them that if they continued to flirt with false gods, then the one true God would have to reject them. And because of sin, Israel, God's special people, split into two nations.

And eventually, when they refused to come back to him, God did judge the northern kingdom. He sent the Assyrians, they were the superpower of their day, to turf them out of the family home, send them into exile.

But still, despite the warnings, Judah, the southern kingdom who we're dealing with tonight, didn't learn her lesson. God sent more prophets, hoping to woo her back, but still she refused.

And so, eventually, just as men like Jeremiah had warned, Judah too was invaded, this time by the Babylonians. And that is where we are now, in exile in Babylon.

- [ 7 : 37 ] If you're taking notes, jot down 2 Kings, chapter 25, 2 Kings 25. That's the solid, official footnote that anchors these verses firmly in real human history.

2 Kings tells how Jerusalem, the city of King David, has been reduced to rubble. King Zedekiah, David's heir, was caught running away from the invaders and his eyes were put out by his captors.

He was dragged off to Babylon. The last thing Zedekiah saw was the Babylonians slaughtering his own sons. Judah's best men and women have been dragged away to foreign lands.

Verse 3 of our chapter for affliction and hard servitude. And then in 587 BC, as 2 Kings tells us, the captain of the Babylonian imperial guards had the temple itself destroyed.

The temple was the place where, until Jesus would come in person, God would meet with his bride, with Israel. maybe you're married and you can think of a special restaurant or perhaps the place where you met or spent your honeymoon together.

[ 9 : 04 ] Now imagine that your husband has discovered that all along that marriage has been one-sided. all the love and patience and faithfulness have been his.

And all the lies, cheating and false promises have been yours. And when that husband finally accepts that you refuse to change, your faithful husband turns his back and changes the locks.

And as for the temple, that restaurant where you spent so many false evenings in each other's company, well, he sends the bailiffs around to tear it down brick by brick.

If you can imagine how that would feel, then you're beginning to get your toes into lamentations. Now, each chapter of this book is a very carefully written, individual poem.

It's not the sort of poetry that rhymes, so most of it translates very well into English. But it does have its own rhythm. Not the sort of polished meter that you'd find in Shakespeare, but something far more fitting with this painful subject.

[ 10 : 29 ] These poems limp along. They limp from one line to the next. It's a rhythm called kina, where the second line seems to miss a few beats. Almost fizzle out.

So it has got its special rhythm. And also, most of these poems are acrostic. Acrostic. That means that each verse takes the next letter of the Hebrew alphabet in turn, from the beginning to the end.

So an acrostic is not a stick of wood that's rather angry. I'm sorry about that. An acrostic is a carefully constructed literary device that brings order out of the grief and chaos of the exile.

Lamentations brings order out of grief. They give Israel a language to express their suffering. But these are big chapters, and they're obviously meant to be taken as a whole.

So we're going to just get a flavour of this book by looking briefly at chapter 1 tonight. Very briefly in broad brush strokes. And then we'll do the same next week with chapter 3.

[ 11 : 39 ] So let's look at this chapter under three headings and try to submit our emotions to the poet's pen. Firstly, in verses 1 to 6, we have bitter tears.

Bitter tears. Early on, in Lewis Carroll's book Alice in Wonderland, Alice is nearly drowned in a pool of her own tears. She escapes, of course, but it seems for a moment as if it's going to be a very short story.

And as Lamentations opens, it looks like we might go the same way. The poet hits us with a flood of tears, but not the tears of a lost schoolgirl.

No, these are serious tears. The tears of a widow. Weeping, so bitter that it stings the cheek. And this opening picture of a lonely, weeping widow is how the poet chooses to introduce us to the city of Jerusalem.

Verse 1, how lonely sits the city that was full of people. How like a widow she's become. She who was great among the nations.

[ 13 : 00 ] She who was a princess among the provinces has become a slave. we're looking at the capital city of God's people, royal Jerusalem.

A city with a wonderful, glorious history. But now, history is all that's left. Jerusalem has crumbled harder and faster than any other ancient ruin.

Where once she thronged with the sights and colour and bustle of people, now she sits alone with no one left to comfort her. Where once she wore the jewels of a princess.

Verse 1, now she wears the chains of a slave. She was the centre of the promised land, the land of God's rest. But now, verse 3, in exile in Babylon, God's people have no rest.

Just affliction and hard labour. A little while ago, Terry preached through some of the psalms of ascent. The songs that pilgrims would sing as they climb the hill to Jerusalem, to Mount Zion, to celebrate the festivals.

[ 14 : 16 ] But look at verse 4. Verse 4 undoes all that. Now no one comes to her festivals. The rose to Zion mourn. Verse 4 is like a miniature psalm in itself.

A psalm of descent. Instead of joyful singing, all you can hear is the occasional sob. The city gates where trade and commerce took place are like a desert.

Verse 4, all her gates are desolate. Buchanan Street is bulldozed. That's what he's saying. Just picture the road outside with about three days to go until Christmas and not a single soul running about.

The temple's demolished, the corrupt priests are out of a job, and even the virgins have been dragged away at the mercy of savage invaders.

This is desperately sad stuff, isn't it? And in verse 5, we get the first solid explanation as to why this has happened.

[ 15 : 27 ] God himself has afflicted her because of the multitude of her transgressions. And suddenly, you see, we understand something.

This is no ordinary lament. Lament. This is not a poem about suffering in general. So this is not a psalm for you to sing if you've been bereaved, or if you're facing illness, or any other normal human suffering.

No, this is about suffering in particular. Suffering because of sin. Judah has sinned. This widow hasn't lost her husband.

She's driven him away. And now, once we've worked that out, we can trace back the clues that litter this passage. Her lovers, in verse 2, weren't innocent schoolgirl crushes.

No, they were the adulterous lovers that she was warned against so many times by the prophets. All those nations, those powerful nations that she trusted in, rather than her husband, the one true lord.

[ 16 : 46 ] Powerful countries like Egypt and Lebanon, whom she tried to woo with money, hoping that they would protect her when this day came. Invasion. And that wasn't all.

There were many other lovers, weren't there? Strange, made-up gods, like pagan Baal. But where are they now? verse 2 drips with irony, doesn't it?

Among all her lovers, she has none to comfort her. They're nowhere to be seen. The time of need came, and her friends dealt treacherously with her.

And because she flirted with exciting alternatives, rather than trust her rightful lord, she's been left with nothing. No lovers, no friends, and verse 5, no children.

Bitter tears. This is the desperately sad story of what happens when God's people reject him. When they trash the marriage vows that he so lovingly made to them, and walk away from his covenant.

[ 17 : 58 ] When they water down his word, and flirt with exciting alternatives, powerless people. And the reason that this is in our Bibles is to show us how desperately sad it is when the marriage between God and his people breaks down.

Some of us here will come from broken homes and know all too well how painful that is. But the rest of us need to be shown.

Well how do we see that sort of breakdown today? Who are God's people in 2011? And do they still treat their relationship, their marriage vows in this way?

I think sadly, you don't have to look too far to see that they do. Think of the current state of the great established Western denominations.

Even the church in this, our own country, our established churches are perilously close, aren't they, to this sort of unfaithfulness. And the consequences of that spiritual adultery are always devastatingly sad.

[ 19 : 19 ] solitude, the loneliness of being abandoned by our loving God and slavery, the dreadful punishment that God inflicted on his people.

Now you and I tend to think of ourselves first. We're individualists, don't we? So when I hear the word you, I immediately think me.

And if I hear the word sin, I immediately think my sin. And we know that our individual sin can have terribly painful consequences.

Human individuals can do great damage. Every individual broken marriage bears witness to that, doesn't it? But lamentations is forcing us to think slightly differently, to think corporately.

When we hear about Israel's sin, the direct parallel isn't my sin, or your sin, but our sin. You and I are each part of God's people in Glasgow.

[ 20 : 34 ] St. George's Tron is a family of God's people in Scotland, and our sin, together, as God's covenant people, has the potential to shipwreck a far greater relationship, with far more tragic consequences for the gospel in Scotland.

Bitter tears. And secondly, briefly in verses 7 to 11, an appalling triumph, an appalling triumph.

And I think it's possibly the most terrifying thought in this book. We'll get there in just a second, but first, just notice how this section rubs our noses in the shameful reality of Israel's sin.

These verses here are fleshing out that critical omission in verse 5, that it was Jerusalem's own sin that caused all this mess. So far, the poet has used all sorts of different pictures to paint his message.

The lonely widow, the empty city, a childless mother, in verse 5, and in verse 6, a prince, maybe even King Zedekiah, like a frightened deer trapped in a net.

[ 21 : 53 ] And those are all powerful pictures that tug at our hearts, that show up the consequences of sin. But now, in verses 8 and 9, the image changes again to expose the shameful reality of human sin.

This time, Jerusalem is a disgraced and defiled woman. Her shame is evident for all to see. She's been caught in the act of this spiritual adultery and exposed to public and open disgust.

just sometimes, very occasionally, you might come across a young girl like this on today's streets, and there's nothing more heart-wrenching. You can still make out, although only barely, that once this was a beautiful young girl, that now all of that is hidden under those telltale marks of abuse and neglect and misuse of drugs.

And if someone she knew were to pass by, all she could do was to turn her face away in shame. That's the reality of our proud defiance of God's rule.

Exposure, humiliation, and shame. But back to the main point, that appalling triumph that I found so chilling. This little section here introduces us to one more figure.

[ 23 : 23 ] So far we've met the bride, Israel, and the groom, God himself. But there's one other key player in this book. One person who always seeks to come in between the two.

And we meet him at the end of verse 9. The enemy. In this instance, that enemy means Babylon. The human enemy of God's people.

Yet behind Babylon, Babylon, behind every human enemy, of course, lies the great enemy, Satan himself. And his aim is to thwart God's plan, to keep his grip on this world, and to prevent God's mission to redeem it.

And to do that, it means that Israel, God's people, the key agents in God's plan, must be destroyed. So what a shock it is in verse 9, when we hear these words.

Oh Lord, behold my affliction, for the enemy has triumphed. It comes again in verse 16, a devastating hammer blow.

[ 24 : 38 ] The enemy has prevailed. God's people, the people of promise, have lost their land, lost their reputation, and lost their king.

Surely, God's plan must now be in tatters, and all hope lost for mankind. This seems like the end of the story. Just as when Satan looked on at the cross, at a dead Christ.

It seemed as if he had struck a mortal blow to God's plan, of grace. It's hard to miss the parallels between the two, both times, here at the exile, and at the cross.

The temple, the temple is destroyed. First here, the physical temple, in Jerusalem, where God and man met. And at the cross, of course, the living temple, Christ himself, the true meeting of God and man.

And both times, here and then, the enemy taunts and mocks. Lamentations drips with the cruel taunts of Israel's enemies, the ones in verse 11, who look on and despise her.

[ 25 : 57 ] There is no note of hope here. No hope. Huge questions are raised by this chapter. Is there any hope left for God's plan?

Has the enemy really won? But the poet doesn't give us any answers. Not yet. An appalling triumph.

The triumph of the enemy over God's people. But in the very last section, believe it or not, it gets even more bleak. Verses 12 to 22, we have a dreadful truth.

A truth that makes those Babylonian attacks look like children with pea shooters. The dreadful truth that this poet wrestles with here and throughout the book is that the true enemy of God's people is God himself.

They're faithful, covenant-keeping, gracious God, has become their prosecutor and examiner. Look at the second half of verse 12.

[ 27 : 11 ] It's the Lord who's inflicted this sorrow on his people on the day of his fierce anger. Sure, Babylon was his weapon, but it was he himself who wielded it.

Just look how many times that point is made in this little section. Verse 13, from on high he sent fire, he spread a net.

Verse 14, the Lord gave me into the enemy's hands. Verse 15, the Lord rejected my mighty men. The Lord summoned the nations, this assembly, to crush them.

And on it goes until the key verse of this section, verse 18. The Lord is in the right. For I have rebelled against his word.

The message is very straightforward, isn't it? God is absolutely just to punish his people's sin. There are absolutely no questions, no ifs and no buts.

[ 28 : 18 ] If you give your heart to any lover other than the one true God, then God himself becomes your opponent.

That's true whether those lovers be the pagan gods of Israel's time or the more sophisticated gods of 2011. Family, money, or the god of a compromising church, a popularity obsessed church.

So the poet ends with a reminder. All of those lovers, you see, will happily share our beds. But look at verse 19.

They will deceive us. The consequences, verse 20, will be the same stomach-churning, heart-wringing consequences faced by God's people of old.

So what are we to make of all of this? Maybe we just accept that this poet is a miserable pessimist, a Scrooge from a bygone age who raises huge questions yet never answers them.

[ 29 : 29 ] The last verse seems to be going that way at first glance, doesn't it? It seems as if all he's concerned with is revenge, retaliation to the Babylonians.

But you see, the writer of this book has grasped something that you and I also need to be forced to recognize. That when God himself has become your enemy, God himself is your only hope.

Only God can save you from God, from his own righteous, just anger. God's people. And that is why Israel looks to God now to provide justice and rescue from their human enemy.

And what about the bigger questions? What is left of God's plan for his world? Well, the Bible does provide an answer to the problem of human sin, to the faithlessness of God's people.

people. We know, of course, that at the cross, the problem of God's righteous anger does meet with his faithful covenant-keeping love.

[ 30 : 47 ] But, it isn't the purpose of this chapter to explain that solution. We'll get some glimpses of it next week in chapter 3 and we'll begin to see how those two might be reconciled.

But it wasn't by mistake that the writer left it out here. His purpose in this poem wasn't to comfort us, but to leave us mourning for sin, to force us to recognise that dreadful cost of rejecting Christ, the true lover of our souls.

I don't know about you, but I can look back on 2010 and confess with absolute certainty those words of verse 18.

The Lord is in the right, for I have rebelled against his word. And there is a time to mourn for sin.

The Apostle James tells us, be wretched and mourn and weep. Let your laughter be turned to mourning and your joy to gloom.

[ 32 : 08 ] Listen to the lament. Feel the horror of what that rejection truly means. Hollow, lonely, bitter slavery.

Look at verse 20 again. My stomach churns, my heart is wrung within me because I have been very rebellious.

And friends, that is a safer way to enter 2011 with our stomachs churning and hearts wrung all too conscious of what we're truly like.

But James adds this, humble yourself before the Lord and he will exalt you.

Amen. Let's pray. Our merciful and loving God, we confess that you are in the right to judge us for we too have been very rebellious.

[ 33 : 20 ] but we thank you Father for the grace offered to us by the punishment of your son. And we pray Lord in those words we sung earlier, now Lord move us to repent, let us now our sin lament, now our proud revolt deplore, weep, believe and sin no more.

For we ask it all in the name of your son Jesus Christ, our eternal hope. Amen. Amen.