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lessons from laments for those living after Christ

“Lamentations is a dark place against which Christ shines all the more brightly” but it sure is a hard book to understand! BRYSON SMITH shows us how he deciphered the exilic puzzle of Lamentations ...

The anguish is crippling. The pain is all encompassing, dark and suffocating. Life has collapsed. Priests and prophets blindly wander the streets. Famine ravished mothers devour their own children. Everyone is alone. There is no comforter. And worst of all, there is no escape because God himself has become the enemy. Welcome to the world of Lamentations. What on earth could we possibly learn from a place of such terror?

Lamentations is a book of ordered grief. Set within the tragedy of the Exile, tradition holds that Jeremiah authored the book although no direct claims of authorship occur within the text itself.

Lamentations comprises five poems each of which are based (to some extent) on the twenty-two consonants of the Hebrew alphabet. Within this highly organised structure, emphasis falls on the third poem by way of its central location and its extended form. Poem 3 contains 66 verses (unlike the 22 verses of all the other poems). This longer length is the result of three verses being devoted to each Hebrew consonant rather than only the one verse as in all other poems.

The structural importance of Poem 3 also serves to highlight the central theological idea of Lamentations. Surrounded as it is by poems of despair, the dominant contribution of Poem 3 is its stress on hope. “Yet this I call to mind and therefore I have hope. Because of the Lord’s great love we are not consumed, for his compassion never fail” (Lam 3:21-22).

Here is the keynote message of Lamentations. It is a book that confronts Israel with the terrible reality of the wrath of God so as to force her to recognise that when God is against you only God can save you. When divine justice condemns only divine

mercy can rescue. In this respect Lamentations is an excellent book for pointing the reader to Christ.

Lamentations is a dark place against which Christ shines all the more brilliantly.

Preaching Lamentations

One of the challenges of preaching Lamentations is that there are no quotations from Lamentations within the New Testament. We are therefore without any direct assistance as to how to apply the book to us. A way forward then is to consider the general patterns with which the New Testament treats the Old. In this respect three related but distinct approaches to the themes of Lamentations would seem valid.

A Christotelic Approach

In this approach Jesus is seen as the end result of the Old Testament. He is the one towards whom all the events of the Old Testament are heading. Jesus is the solution of every problem and the fulfilment of every promise within the Old Testament. In terms of a book like Lamentations, Jesus is therefore the one who ultimately brings about the true spiritual return from exile.

A Christotypic Approach

This approach is distinguishable from the previous one in that it highlights the way the Old Testament events foreshadow and model what Jesus will ultimately achieve. In terms of a book like Lamentations, Jesus then is the one who experiences God’s judgment on the cross, in a similar way that Israel did during the Exile. The Christotypic approach therefore emphasises that Christ suffers as Israel, rather than suffering for Israel. The latter is the emphasis of the Christotelic approach.

An Exemplary Approach

The New Testament often draws on Old Testament characters and events so as to either warn us (e.g. Heb 3) or spur us on (e.g. Heb 11) through their example. In terms of a book like Lamentations, this approach would cause us to be warned about the seriousness of sin and to learn from Israel's mistake (in a similar way to passages like 1 Cor 10).

In terms of the preaching program detailed in this series, no talks took the exemplary approach primarily because the series was given immediately after a series on Hebrews 1-6. It seemed that to take the exemplary approach would be repetitive of warnings already sounded in passages like Hebrews 3.

This series was given over the Easter period with the first and second talks given on Good Friday and Easter Sunday respectively.

Resources

This series was very much indebted to Barry Webb's book *Five Festal Garments* (Appollos). It is an illuminating, inspiring read which both prompted me to preach on Lamentations for the first time, and also helped me immensely in shaping the individual talks.

Talk 1—Good Grief (Lam 1-2)

"Sally was screaming ..."

"One second I was asleep in bed with Sally beside me, the next there was this explosion. Instinctively my head came up off the bed and I remember moving as if to roll out of the bed onto the floor. Almost simultaneously the windows at the front of the apartment smashed in as though someone had fired a machine gun at the building. As the windows came in, I fell back onto the bed and everything collapsed around us. It was pitch black and everything was choked with dust. Sally was screaming. I tried to reach out to her but she seemed isolated from me. At that stage I thought we were going to die. I was crying. I could hear Sally saying that she was

trapped.

Suddenly the air began to vibrate, followed by a rumble. It was water. I could hear it coming, rolling down the hill like a train. As it closed on us I started to pray that it would just pass by. 'Please God,' I thought, 'just let it pass by.' But the water hit us. It was freezing. It started to rise. Sally was screaming and screaming. I pushed at the bed frame and told her everything would be all right, that it would be okay. Then there was nothing, just the sound of the water as it swept past me. There was nothing I could do."

I am of course reading the words of Stuart Diver, the sole survivor of the Thredbo landslide disaster. Can you imagine the terror of lying there in the dark for three days, thinking that you probably weren't going to be rescued? Can you imagine the waves of panic and shock and confusion that would sweep up over your body? That is the level of grief that the Old Testament book of Lamentations wants to take us to.

Lamentations was written at a time in Israel's history known as Exile, when the world empire of Babylon sweeps down from the north and swarmed through the nation like a locust plague. Israel was crushed beyond recognition. It was the horror of ethnic cleansing and the stolen generation all rolled up into one.

Pictures of Grief

You can get an insight into the horror of the exile by virtue of the pictures of grief that are piled on top of each other in the first chapter of Lamentations. Images of a war torn city (1:1,4,6), a distraught widow (1:1-2), a mother torn from her children (1:5), a homeless old woman, dressed in rags (1:1-7). And all these images are made all the worse because we are repeatedly told that there is no one to comfort (1:2, 7, 16, 17, 21).

The Reason for Grief

I find one of the most disturbing advertisements on television is that one in the drink driving campaign in which a fellow is in court because he has killed a little girl while driving over the limit. And you see the confusion on his own little girl's face about what's happening to her dad, and you see the anguish on the face of the parents of the little girl who was killed, and you see the flash back to the hysteria of the mother of little girl at the accident scene. But almost the most chilling thing of all is the anguish in the bloke himself because he is horrified at what he's done.

He's going to have to live with this for the rest of his life, he's going to have to deal with the ramifications of his actions and he's got no one to blame but himself. That's Israel at the Exile. She has no one to blame but herself, which only serves to make the grief worse.

A Cry of Grief

We started out having the pain of Israel being described to us. But now we hear the cry of Israel herself, between the sobbing and the tears we hear Israel's own words (1:14-16). It's a pitiful scene. And that's what makes Lamentations such a good book to think about on Good Friday, because just like Israel during the Exile, Jesus during his crucifixion felt the full crushing weight of the anger of God.

Jesus' Cry of Grief

There is one very big difference between Israel in the Exile and Jesus on the cross, is that Jesus hadn't done anything wrong. Israel by her own admission deserved the exile. Jesus didn't deserve the cross. But Jesus willingly went through the horror of God's punishment so that those who follow him wouldn't have to. That's what makes Good Friday good. It's a hideous day in one respect, but in another respect, it is a wonderful day. For if you follow Jesus you will never have to go through the sort of terror that Lamentations describes.

Talk 2—Hope for the Hopeless (Lam 3:1-42)

Who are you going to call?

In a recent newspaper report that the famous heart surgeon Christian Barnard, is claiming that Lady Diana could still be alive today if she'd gotten the correct surgical help on that fateful night when she was killed in a car accident in Paris. She actually survived the crash, the trouble was she never received the right sort of help soon enough after the accident. And tragedy resulted. All goes to show that a rescue is only ever as good as the ability of the rescuer. So, if you're in trouble you will only ever be saved from it, if someone with the ability to save you arrives on the scene. Which is why Israel is in such desperate trouble during the Exile. If God himself is against you, how do you escape that? How can you possibly be rescued from Him?

The Pain Becomes Personal

In chapter 3 it's as if the writer of the previous 2 chapters now steps forward and gives full vent to his own personal grief. The big picture crisis of national Israel is now lost entirely and instead we all become aware of this man's own individual pain and his personal struggle to come to terms with it (vv 1-2). He gets a very intense, very personal, very emotional, very violent picture of what it's like to be under God's judgment. Yet all of a sudden the personal pain gives way to a much more positive mood (vv 19-21).

The Pain Becomes Positive

In verses 22 and 23 hope comes to the writer in two main ways. Firstly, through the realisation that he hasn't been wiped off the face of the earth and therefore it is actually an act of God's mercy that Israel has not been completely consumed already. Secondly, through the realisation that God's judgment is measured and controlled and therefore there is still hope because even within his punishment there is the chance of mercy. God is no bully and, therefore, His punishment is always only so that people might turn back to him (vv 31-33).

Here then is the answer to the question: "Who can rescue you from the judgment of the Almighty God?" Answer: only God can. When God's judgment falls on you, your only hope is in God himself and to wait quietly for the salvation of the Lord.

Easter Sunday, Lamentations and Us

God compassion is exactly what Easter is all about. The death and resurrection of Jesus has shown us that God's compassion has made it possible to be saved from his punishment.

In Brazil there is a story about a missionary who was working amongst an Indian tribe, who were suffering from a desperate illness. A contagious disease was ravaging the population and people were dying every day. Their only hope, the missionary decided was for the tribes' people to trek through the jungle to reach a neighbouring hospital for treatment. Trouble was in order to reach the hospital the Indians had to cross a river that they refused to cross. They thought evil spirits inhabited the river, and that to enter the water meant certain death. The missionary explained at length that that wasn't the case. But they refused to believe him. He led the tribe to the bank and placed his hand in the water, still they wouldn't believe him. He walked out into the river and splashed water on his face. Still they refused. Finally he turned and dived into the water, swam beneath the surface until he emerged on the other side. At which point he punched the air with his fist to show he'd done it. And the Indians cheered and followed him across the river.

We are trapped in a life in which because of our sin, we deserve God's anger. The most vivid symbol of God's anger being the shadow of death that hangs over every one of us. But by dying on the cross Christ took our punishment for us. And to show us that, Christ submerged himself in death, and then on the third day he re-emerged. He did it to show us his power and to show us that for those who follow him there is a rescue possible from God's judgment.

The question is: have you taken advantage of the rescue that only God can give?

Talk 3— Every Move You Make (Lam 4)

Big Brother is Watching

Would like to be living in the Big Brother house, a house containing 23 cameras inside it, recording everything that happens 24 hours a day? And so every whispered conversation, every argument, every shower, every visit to the toilet is filmed for all to see. In the Big Brother house there is no privacy. With God there is no privacy. God is very intrusive. That is made very clear in Lamentations 3, which is all about the exhaustive nature of God's judgment.

God's Scrutiny: Bad News for Israel

a) The Intensity God's Punishment

Lamentations 3 starts like all the other poems: it's about the tragedy of the Exile and the terrible intensity of God's punishment. In this respect much of the chapter is similar to themes we've already seen. But there is something new to notice here.

b) A New Theme: The Extensiveness of God's Punishment

It's not just the intensity of God's punishment that we're seeing here. We're also seeing the extensiveness of God punishment. You see this by the way that every segment of the population of Jerusalem is specifically mentioned now. Young men, the precious sons of Zion are mentioned in verse 2, infants in verse 4, the pampered upper class in verse 5, the nobility in verses 7 and 8, nursing mothers in verse 10, prophets and priests in verses 13 and 14, even the king himself in verse 20. No one escapes. There is no place to hide.

The Mention of Edom

This point is really drummed home in verse 21 with the mention of Edom. Now even gentiles are being included all to make the point that

God's punishment of sin, his scrutiny, his judgment is inescapable. Unavoidable. No matter who you are, you will have to face it.

The Structure of the Book

Even the structure of the entire book serves to emphasize the comprehensive nature of God's scrutiny and judgment. (The acrostic pattern of the book was now explained). Lamentations is a very, very structured book. It's a set of poems all about the grief of being under God's punishment and it is quite literally the A to Z of being under God's judgment. For God's judgment does not miss anything. No Hebrew letter is missed out in the book and no segment of the population is missed out in Jerusalem, not even the non-Jews like the Edomites are missed out.

The Sunday Telegraph ran a story in which they estimated that Sydney commuters are being photographed more times in one day than their grandparents were in a lifetime. Security experts are estimating that any one person is probably being secretly being caught on electronic surveillance 20-40 times a day. That by the time you factor in the 51 street cameras that Sydney City Council alone has, the 5000 cameras that City Rail has, as well as the thousands of other privately owned cameras in shop security, taxis, schools, ATMs, office foyers, elevators; that Big Brother really could be watching us almost all the time, whether we're in a television show or not. The New South Wales Council for Civil Liberties is voicing some concern over our privacy is being intruded on too much.

Well when it comes to God, the New South Wales Council of Civil Liberties would have a melt down. Because God's scrutiny is very, very intrusive no one escapes it at any time of the day. For Israel at the time of the Exile that's bad news. This side of the cross it can actually be very good news.

God's Scrutiny: Good News for Us

a) Comprehensive Justice

God's comprehensive scrutiny of everything means that we can have confidence that justice will be done by him. That's the big problem with our justice system. We don't know everything and we can make mistakes. Like Frank Button who was released from jail after serving 10 months of a 6 yr jail sentence because DNA tests had shown him to be innocent. An innocent man had been locked up in a Queensland jail for almost a year. That's the problem with human justice. But with God justice will always be done for his scrutiny is all-pervasive.

b) Comprehensive Forgiveness

God's comprehensive knowledge of us also means that he give comprehensive forgiveness to us. God will never discover anything that will jeopardise your relationship with him. There's simply nothing new about you for him to discover. You've got nothing to hide from God because you've got nothing you can hide from him. And still he forgives us.

Talk 4—The Release From Grief (Lam 5)

The Dream Becomes a Nightmare

"Under a vast night sky of sparkling stars, on the slopes of the Franz Joseph Glacier in New Zealand, I was kissed by Mr Right." Maybe I should point out that these are not my words. I'm reading an article from the Sun Herald, by Kathy Evans. It's entitled *The Search For Mr Right* and it's all about why an increasing number of women are choosing not to marry. But, that aside, let's rejoin the story. Remember we left Kathy Evans kissing Mr Right in New Zealand.

It was like a scene right out of Hollywood. I was Meg Ryan; he was Russell Crowe - a fabulous Mr Right. As we kissed, I could feel the eyes of others boring into me with empathetic jealousy. We had after all, been building up to this moment. Ever since we laid eyes on

each other when he first boarded the adventure bus in Auckland three weeks ago, the clock had been ticking. And so after a roller coaster ride of emotional troughs and peaks against the spectacular backdrop of the South Island, our faces melted into each other on that romantic night.

A month later, we said our goodbyes at Auckland airport with a promise to keep in touch. There followed for me a harrowing two months trudging through India with the pain of parting still burning inside. Meanwhile he trekked through the United States, experiencing the same mental torture of our separation.

We were eventually reunited in the less than glamorous surroundings of his shared house in Dublin. It was terrible. The man was a complete slob. In New Zealand he had jumped out of aeroplanes and bungee jumped over roaring rivers but here, he couldn't even raise himself to turn off the telly. And while you don't mind slumming it when you're travelling, it came as a nasty surprise to discover that this was his natural state of being. And so in a long and drawn out rainy weekend, the dream melted to find me standing in a muddy puddle. Mr Right was Mr Wrong. The dream had become a nightmare.

Most of us have had some form of experience where a dream has become a nightmare. In many ways, that sort of experience is pretty much what happened between God and Israel through out the Old Testament. Things started out great but very quickly Israel showed herself to be a self indulgent, bitching whore. And so we come to Lamentations - the point at which the nightmare has reached its worse.

A Plea for the Nightmare to be Over

a) A Description of Their Distress (vv 1-15)

This poem opens with Israel calling out to God to listen to their plea. So far not a lot different to the rest of the book.

However it's at verse 16 that something important happens.

b) A Confession of Their Wrong Doing (vv 16-18)

Earlier this year Ronald Regan's daughter, Patti Davis wrote a letter to the Washington Post owning up to things she had pilfered from the White House when her dad was the President. Really strange stuff some of it, a man's black sock left in the Lincoln Bedroom because she thought it might be from some famous, a bowling ball from the White House bowling alley. Ronald Regan's daughter came clean about all this stuff because of fear of a congressional hearing in the wake of the Clinton debacle. Evidently when the Clintons moved out earlier this year they took heaps of stuff. Bill and Hillary actually had to return over \$28,000 worth of furniture after donors said that

they were not intended as personal gifts. Anyway Regan's daughter wrote: "I am disclosing this now because, with all the attention on the Clintons and the furniture items in question, Congress might start looking at others. I suggest that others who found themselves straying within those hallowed walls follow my lead: Come clean, confess, and appeal to America's forgiving heart. And pray for a pardon."

In some respects what Israel are doing in verse 16 is exactly what Ronald Regan's daughter recommends. They're praying for a pardon. That prayer actually comes in verses 21 and 22.

c) A Cry for Help (vv19-22)

This appeal for a restored relationship rather than simply for a change in circumstances. It's as if the penny has finally dropped and Israel now realise that the biggest tragedy is not the

physical exile from the promised land but their spiritual exile from God himself. So Lamentations finishes with a question rather than an answer. Will God answer their plea? Will the nightmare ever end? It's a question that takes us straight to the New Testament.

The End of the Nightmare (Luke 2:25-32)

Simeon recognises that Jesus has come to a close the spiritual exile that has been in place ever since the book of Lamentations. It's a solution for Israel that also includes gentiles (v 32). Do be included its simply a matter of genuinely doing what Israel superficially (history shows that it was superficial) do in Lamentations. Confess your sin and pray for a pardon.

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