

“When God Feels Like An Enemy” ~ Lamentations 2
March 19, 2017 ~ New City Church of Calgary ~ Pastor John Ferguson

Intro: Os Guinness, *Unspeakable*, “The events of September 11 hit America and the West at a time when intellectual and moral responses to evil are weaker, more controversial, and more confused than they have been for centuries. Put simply, we no longer have a shared understanding about whether there is any such thing as *evil*. Some even question whether it is proper to speak of anyone as our *enemy*.”

Today, we continue our study in Lamentations, which is a sort of funeral dirge for a city that died—poetry in mourning.

Jeremiah the Poet was the last in a long line of prophets sent by God to Jerusalem to call the city and the nation to repentance and true faith in God, only to have the urgent message ignored. Israel became exceedingly corrupt, full of oppression and murder, even sacrificing her children in the fires of Baal worship. Hardened in her sin and rebellion, God had no choice but to let the consequences of her choices play out on the international stage.

Put simply, if Israel no longer thought there was such a thing as evil, her eyes were opened to it in an undeniable shocking way—so much so that she felt God to be her enemy.

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Jeremiah witnessed the devastation, and the weeping prophet became the weeping poet, and as Septuagint says, “And it came to pass after Israel had gone into captivity, and Jerusalem laid wast, that Jeremiah sat weeping and composed this lament over Jerusalem....”

I. The Report: “The Lord has become like an enemy...,” 2:1-10.

Wright, “The first eight verses pound our ears with a relentless salvo of twenty-eight verbs portraying destruction on a blockbuster scale, and every one has God as the subject.”

1. Recall the special relationship that Israel had with God for the sake of the world.

- (1) Israel’s self understanding about her own formation as a nation was the fulfillment of an old, old promise God made to Abraham, that through him and his descendants, God would bring about worldwide blessing.
 - Ex. 19:5-6, “Now therefore, if you will indeed obey my voice and keep my covenant, you shall be my treasured possession among all peoples, for all the earth is mine; and you shall be to me a kingdom of priests and a holy nation.”
 - Ex. 24:7-8, “Then he took the Book of the Covenant and read it in the hearing of the people. And they said, ‘All that the Lord has spoken we will do, and we will be obedient.’ And Moses took the blood and threw it on the people and said, ‘Behold the blood of the covenant that the Lord has made with you in accordance with all these words.’”
 - Lev. 18:26-28, “You shall keep my statutes and my rules and do none of these abominations...., lest the land vomit you out when you make it unclean, as it vomited out the nation that was before you.”
- (2) Instead of being a light to the world and a blessing, she became an exceedingly dark and a curse to the world.
 - Jer. 18:11-12, “‘Return, every one from his evil way and amend your ways and your deeds.’ But they say, ‘That is in vain! We will follow our own plans, and will every one act according to the stubbornness of his evil heart’”
 - Jer. 7:9-10, “Will you steal, murder, commit adultery, swear falsely, make offerings to Baal, and go after other gods that you have not known, and then come and stand before me in this house [i.e., the Temple], which is called by my name, and say, ‘We are delivered!—only to go on doing all these abominations?’”

2. Reflect on the dilemma before God: do I allow evil to flourish, or do I put it to an end?

- (1) When we see atrocious acts of evil, crimes against humanity, we often cry out, “Why doesn’t God do something about that?” A bystander could watch the Israelites burn their children in the fires for the pagan god, Baal, and ask, “Why doesn’t God do something about that?”

- Miroslav Volf, *Exclusion & Embrace*, “But how patient should God be? The day of reckoning must come, not because God is eager to pull the trigger, but because every day of patience in a world of violence means more violence and every postponement of vindication means letting insult accompany injury.... ..God’s patience is costly, not simply for God, but for the innocent.”

(2) Wright, “For forty years [Jeremiah] had painted in advance and in detail the very scenes described in this chapter (to his own weeping agony in doing so) — for the purpose of urging Judah to take a different path and avoid such a fate. The point is: *Lamentations 2 need not have happened.*”

3. **Realize the gravity of our warfare: we are the ones who have declared war on God as our enemy.**

(1) Romans 5:10 NIV, “...we were God’s enemies...”

(2) RC Sproul, *The Holiness of God*, “The slightest sin is an act of defiance against cosmic authority. It is a revolutionary act, a rebellious act where we are setting ourselves in opposition to the One to whom we owe everything.”

- Wright, “...the city that had forsaken God was now itself utterly God-forsaken.”

II. The Grief: “My eyes are spent with weeping...,” 2:11-12.

Is this Jeremiah grieving or God grieving? Yes.

- Jeremiah 8:21; 9:1, 3, “My joy is gone; grief is upon me; my heart is sick within me.... Since my people are crushed, I am crushed; I mourn, and horror grips me.... O that my head were a spring of water and my eyes a fountain of tears! I would weep day and night for the slain of my people... They go from one sin to another; they do not acknowledge me,’ declared the Lord.”

III. The Diagnosis: “Your ruin is vast as the sea, who can heal you...?” 2:13-19.

1. **Lam 1:12, “Look and see...is there any grief like mine?”**

- 2:13, “What can I say for you?” The Poet wants to speak up for her, but what can he say? “How can I comfort you...for your ruin is vast as the sea; who can heal you?”

2. **Who can heal you?**

- (1) Not your prophets, vs. 14.
- (2) Not your neighbours who are passing by, vs. 15.
- (3) Not your enemies, vs. 16
- (4) But what about the one who has become like an enemy, vs. 17

- Could the God who had “thrown down without pity” turn once again and have pity? Where else can you go? When God feels like your enemy, cry out to him. Lament to him? Who knows, perhaps he will have mercy?
- Perhaps the Poet remembered the words of God himself, “...if my people who are called by my name humble themselves, and pray and seek my face and turn from their wicked ways, then I will hear from heaven and will forgive their sin and heal their land” (2 Chron. 7:14).

3. **“Arise, cry out in the night.... Pour our your heart like water before the presence of the Lord... Lift up your hands...”**

- Passionate pleading by the Poet to get Lady Jerusalem to cry out, and at last she does. But if we thought she might repent of her sins, cry out for mercy, and see a happy ending to all this, we will be severely disappointed.

IV. The Sentiment: “My enemy has destroyed...,” 2:20-22.

1. **The Poet urged her to cry out to the Lord, but all she can do is question God, vs. 20.**

(1) Question #1: With whom have you dealt thus?

- NIV, “Whom have you ever treated like this?” IOW, You have treated us in such a way as you would never treat anyone else.
- ESV, “With whom have you dealt thus?” How could you treat us of all people like this?

(2) Question #2: Should women eat their children? Where is God when this kind of suffering happens? If God is in control of all things and rules this world, then why would such horrors occur? God has allowed what should not ever be allowed.

- God remains silent, at least for now, as these uncomfortable questions linger in the air.

2. The accusations flow...

(1) 2:21, “...my young women and my young men have fallen by the sword; you have killed them in the day of your anger, slaughtering without pity.”

(2) 2:22, “...those whom I held and raised my enemy has destroyed.”

- God is not just *the* enemy, but has become *my* enemy.
- God remains silent, at least for now, as these uncomfortable accusations linger in the air.

Wright, “It is a standard part of the genre of lament to cry out to God: ‘God, this suffering is intolerable! This evil is an atrocious, violent offence against your whole created order! Why do you allow it? Why do you inflict it?’ God has broad enough shoulders to cry on and a big enough chest to beat against. God even provides words in his Scriptures to permit us, indeed to encourage us, to do so.”

Conclusion: How do we process what we are reading? How do we make sense of extreme suffering, the horror of human brutality, and the question of God?

Christian answer: God doesn’t get off the hook for suffering and evil, but puts himself on the hook—or rather, the Cross, in order to take evil and suffering upon himself.

- John Stott, “I could never myself believe in God if it were not for the cross. In the real world of pain, how could one worship a God who was immune to it. I turn to that lonely, twisted figure on the cross, nails through his hands and feet, back lacerated, limbs wrenched, brow bleeding from thorn-pricks, mouth dry and intolerably thirsty, plunged into God forsaken darkness. That is the God for me. He set aside his immunity to pain. He entered our world of flesh and blood, tears and death.”
- DA Carson, “The God on whom we rely knows what suffering is all about, not merely in the way God knows everything, but by experience.”

And that’s true. But for now in Lamentations 2, Lady Jerusalem cannot see past her pain; she cannot see how God could possibly undo the mess of the world she made for herself. She cannot grasp the future promise of God when he says, “For I know the plans I have for you, declares the Lord, plans for wholeness and not for evil, to give you a future and a hope. Then you will call upon me and come and pray to me, and I will hear you You will seek me and find me. When you seek me me with all your heart. I will be found by you, declares the Lord” (Jeremiah 29:11-14).

But for now, she feels that God is her enemy and her pain is so raw that all she can do is to wail and rage and lament, and that’s okay.

His shoulders are broad enough for her to cry upon, and his chest big enough to beat against.

And God is telling us we can do that to. Not only do Scriptures like these permit it, but it encourages us to do so.

Even when God feels like an enemy.

For this God is the One who—in the person of Jesus Christ—died for his enemies rather than leave them utterly forsaken.