

In the Streets

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[0 : 0 0] This is the morning service at Holy Trinity on the 8th of May 2005. The preacher is Paul Barker.

His sermon is entitled In of the Streets and is based on Lamentations 4, verses 1-22.

I apologise for the voice, but it wasn't the football yesterday. Although there was a lot to cheer. I have open Lamentations 4, page 670.

This is the fourth of our series in the book of Lamentations. The last and fifth is next Sunday. Let me pray. God our Father, we thank you that you've caused Scripture to be written for us, for our benefit, for rebuke as well as for training in righteousness.

And we pray that your word will be effective in our lives this morning and in the days ahead. For Jesus' sake. Amen. Well, still Lamentations goes on.

[1 : 2 3] After three heart-rending, gut-wrenching, tear-jerking chapters, there is still more. More grief, more suffering, more anguish, more lament.

And I imagine there's a few people at least who think, haven't we had enough of this? I must say that thought crossed my mind during the week as well. But anyone who has grieved knows how long and how deep grief is.

It's not over the next day. It's not over after reading a few Bible verses. It's not over after a nice cup of tea. Grief doesn't pass easily or smoothly.

Grief, as those who've experienced deep grief know, goes round in circles. And it comes back and hits you, often when it's unexpected. And it keeps going round and round.

And sometimes you think that you've worked through some aspect of grief and it comes back at you again. There are no instant answers and no quick fix.

[2 : 3 3] There's no little tablet you can take or easy balm for grief. It is long and deep. And Lamentations, though not really a long book, in a sense, keeps going to draw us in to experience the depths and length of grief.

It's not a book to skip lightly through. In a sense, it's a book to sip bit by bit as we go. To keep coming back to. To digest and go through again and again.

It's a book that wants us to know how painful grief is. Not a book to skim-read, pass over and move on to brighter things quickly. It's a book that wants us to know how hard the punishment of God against sin is.

Again, not something that we can skip over or dismiss very lightly. It is a book to warn us. Not to be like the people of God in the time of the fall of Jerusalem.

But rather to turn from our sins. To repent. And to fall on the mercy and steadfast love of the Lord. Having said that, though, chapter 4 is shorter than the three chapters we've already dealt with.

[3 : 5 6] Chapter 5, the same next week. It's such a tightly structured book. It's astonishing, in a sense, that someone went to such effort to get the structure and form so right.

I've already made comment that chapters 1, 2, and 4 have 22 verses, each verse with subsequent letters of the Hebrew alphabet. Last week, chapter 3 with 66 short verses. Each three verses began with subsequent letters of the Hebrew alphabet.

Chapters 1, 2, and 3 are actually the same length. In effect, chapters 1 and 2 having three lines per verse. Chapter 3, 1. But now chapters 4 and 5 are shorter because they only have two lines per verse.

They're two-thirds the length. And in an ancient Hebrew funeral dirge, the meter was 3 and 2. So here's a book of five chapters, the first three being longer than the last two.

So the actual whole structure of the book fits a funeral dirge. In this chapter, chapter 4, there's less anguish, less obvious tears.

[5 : 01] It's a bit more detached, a bit more matter-of-fact in style. What it describes is still shocking. But it's less anguished in the words that are used about it.

The emotion is more restrained after chapters 1 to 3. Not that grief is gone, it's still there. There's still comment on it and reflection on it.

But maybe it's showing us moving on in the stages of grief. It begins with pictures of great reversal.

What was and what is now. We might summarize it as how the mighty have fallen. What was was great and glorious. What is now is much worse.

In verses 1 and 2, the gold, we're told, has grown dim. Gold doesn't grow dim. It doesn't tarnish like other metals. Here it's using figurative language to describe what is beautiful and great and glorious.

[6 : 04] How it's been sullied by human sin. And the punishment for that sin as well. The sacred stones lie scattered at the head of every street.

The gold, the sacred stones, is probably describing the temple in particular. Which was full of gold. Its stones were sacred. Now it's rubble. And scattered.

But what's happened to the temple as a building. Demolished and scattered. Rubble in the street. Is a picture of what's happened to the people. Who've been scattered into exile.

And scattered into the country as well. And that's picked up in the next verse too. The precious children of Zion. Worth their weight in gold. Like gold in a sense. High value people.

But now they're reckoned as earthen pots. The work of a potter's hands. That is, they're throw away items. Disposable, breakable. In a sense, this destruction of Jerusalem.

[7 : 03] Has exposed, in effect, the diminished value of human life. As it's been destroyed. And the people suffer the aftermath of its destruction. As a result, there is famine.

And a lack of water. Typical when a city is destroyed. And its infrastructure goes. And so in verse 3. We see an effect of that. Even the jackals.

Offer the breast and nurse their young. But my people has become cruel. Like the ostriches in the wilderness. That is, jackals and ostriches. Were animals of repute.

For lack of care for children. Scavenging nasty sorts of animals. Ostriches would often lay eggs. Then either destroy them or abandon them. Here now they're used as images.

Of what the people are like. They're not caring for their children. Either because they don't want to. Because they're looking after themselves. Or because they can't. Because there's insufficient food.

[8 : 02] And insufficient water. In the destroyed Jerusalem. So verse 4. The tongue of the infant sticks to the roof of its mouth for thirst. The children beg for food.

But no one gives them anything. Either because they won't. Or they can't. Or both. The reversal theme continues in verse 5.

We might say from palace to pauper. Those who feasted on delicacies. Perish in the streets. Those who are brought up in purple.

Cling to ash heaps. Purple was the color of royalty and nobility. It's saying here the aristocracy is not spared from this. Those who enjoyed the rich life.

The silver spoon in the mouth. Well they're now clinging to ash heaps. That is to rubbish dumps. For their existence. Scavenging for food in squalid poverty. And so on. And this description of the destruction of Jerusalem.

[8 : 59] And its aftermath. The ongoing suffering. After the Babylonians came. Destroyed and went. And the ongoing suffering of those who are left. Is even worse.

Verse 6 says. Than the destruction of Sodom. Sodom was the archetypal wicked city. Described in the book of Genesis. At the beginning of the Bible. Full of immorality.

Full of idolatry. Full of abominable practices. Destroyed by God. Without a human agent. When he brought down fire. And destroyed it all.

Quickly. In a moment. Now though we're told. That the destruction of Jerusalem. Is actually worse. Than the destruction of Sodom. Probably the reason for that.

Is in part. Because Jerusalem's suffering. Lingers on. Is drawn out. Sodom's was quick. Verse 6. The chastisement of my people.

[9 : 55] Has been greater than the punishment of Sodom. Which was overthrown in a moment. Though no hand was laid on it. The word for chastisement and punishment. Is also a word that in some contexts.

Can be used for sin. And so to say that the punishment of Jerusalem. Is greater than the punishment of Sodom. Is also because. The sin of Jerusalem. Is worse than the sin of Sodom.

And Sodom known. Throughout the ancient world. For its sinful and wicked ways. Jerusalem. We're told here is worse. Now all sin is in a sense.

Equally sinful. Before God. But there are higher degrees. Of culpability. Those to whom much is given. Much is expected. And so to Jerusalem.

To Zion. To the people of God. Much had been given. The revelation of God's word. In the scriptures to them. The law. The prophets. The priests. The sacrificial system.

[10 : 50] Revelations from God. That are recorded in the early parts. Of the Old Testament. Which they had up to this point. Of exile. To them much had been given. They were held before God. As more accountable.

For their lives. For their morality. For their faith. Than even the people of Sodom. Their sins in one sense. May be the same or equal. But they are more culpable.

Before God. And so it is. For us as well. We've received even more from God. Than ancient Israel. We have the complete scriptures.

The revelation of Jesus Christ. More fully and perfectly. In the New Testament. To us indeed. A huge amount has been given. By way of revelation from God. Our sins in a sense.

We're more culpable for. Than for the sins of those. Who have not received God's word. Or not heard the good news. Of Jesus Christ. We are accountable before God. Highly so.

[11 : 48] For our sins. As Christian believers. Some of you may remember. Back 10 or 12 years ago. When the great film. Schindler's List. Came out.

One of its. It was a heart-rending film. Of course. Of the Nazis. Rounding up the Jews. In the Second World War. One of its effective. Cinematographic.

Ploys. Was that largely. That film was in black and white. If I remember rightly. There were just a couple of glimpses. Of color. Here and there. Part of the reason.

I guess. For the black and white. Is to. Make the film. Even more gripping. In its horror. And suffering. The opening verses. Of this chapter.

Use the same. Sort of ploy. Before there was. Gold. Now it's tarnished. Before they were living in purple. Now they're not. In verse 7.

[12 : 45] At the end. Their bodies were. In the past. More ruddy. Colorful. Red. Than coral. Their hair was. Colored. Like sapphire. Often with braiding. Probably.

Rather than hair dye. That is. There are elements of color. In the pre-destruction. Of Jerusalem. But after it. Verse 8. Their visage.

Is blacker than soot. They're not recognized. In the streets. Their skin. Has shriveled. On their bones. It has become. As dry. As wood.

Colorless. We might say. From colorful. To black and white. That's the effect. Of the destruction. On Jerusalem. And so.

As a result. The writer says. In verse 9. Happier. Were those pierced. By the sword. Than those pierced. By hunger. Not meaning. Literally. Happy. Delighted.

[13 : 41] To be killed. By a sword. But probably. Happier. In the sense. Of being more fortunate. That those. Who were killed. By a Babylonian sword. Instantly. In one sense.

Suffered less. Than those. Whose lives. Were spared. But are now. Enduring. The famine. The lack of water. The aftermath. Of the city's fall.

The climax. Of this. Bleak suffering. Comes in verse 10. The hands. Of compassionate. Women. Have boiled. Their own children.

They became. Their food. In the destruction. Of my people. Notice. That these. This is what. Even. Compassionate. Women. Do. They may be.

Motivated. By. Trying. To spare. Their children. Maybe. They were. Boiling them. After they. Died. Maybe. They were. Being. Heartless. And selfish. It's hard.

[14 : 36] To know. Exactly. The motivations. It's an appalling. Thing. To imagine. Certainly. Something. That does. Happen. In siege. Conditions. Around the world. When cities. Are trying.

To withstand. But are lacking. Food. What some people. Will do. It's also. Something. That was. Anticipated. Earlier. In the old. Testament. In. Leviticus. And Deuteronomy.

As it. Anticipated. The. Sinfulness. Of the people. And the curses. Of God. That would come. Upon them. As a result. Some form. Of. Cannibalism. Killing. Children. Was anticipated.

It's anticipated. To. In the book. Of Jeremiah. Which is a contemporary. Of this book. Lamentations. It's a horrible. Description. Of what the people. Would have done. So far.

Verses 1 to 10. Is just description. Of the destruction. And its aftermath. Some of the things. We've seen. In earlier. Chapters. As well. Now come. Some. Expressions.

[15 : 30] Of the reason. For it. In verse 11. The first time. God is mentioned. In this chapter. The Lord. Gave. Full vent. To his wrath. He poured out.

His hot anger. He kindled. A fire. In Zion. That consumed. Its foundations. Strong language. Of wrath. And fury. And fire. A common image.

In the Bible. For the punishment. Of God. Against sin. It's telling us. And reminding us. That the reason. For the fall. Of Jerusalem. Is not because. Babylon. Was strong. The reason.

For the fall. Of Jerusalem. Is God. Punishing. His sinful people. The image. Of fire. Consuming.

Even foundations. Is probably. Metaphoric. Language. The foundations. Were stone. In the temple. And the city. In general. As it still is today. It's a city. Of stone.

[16 : 25] It's probably. Therefore. Using. Such strong. Language. To underscore. This is God's doing. Not human. Political. Machinations. At work.

So much. It is God's. Direct will. Why is God doing that? The verses that follow. List. Three particular. Sins. Of the people.

There were others. If you read. Other contemporary. Bits of the Old Testament. You'll find other sins. Mentioned. Jeremiah. Ezekiel. Isaiah. For example. And some of the other prophets.

Three sins. Firstly. False. Religious. Trust. In the security. Of Jerusalem. In verse 12. The kings of the earth. Did not believe. Nor did any of the inhabitants.

Of the world. That foe or enemy. Could enter the gates. Of Jerusalem. That's amazing statement. To attribute to the pagans. That they thought. Jerusalem would never fall. It reflects.

[17 : 20] What we see. In other things. Like in Jeremiah 7. And other parts of Jeremiah. That the people of Israel. Thought that Jerusalem. Would never fall. And what it shows. Is that they had shifted.

Perhaps subtly. Their trust. From God directly. Into the things. And gifts of God. Which in themselves. Are good things. But not where our trust.

Ought to be directed. That is. They trusted the city. The temple. The religious infrastructure. Of priests. And sacrifices. And so on. And they thought. We've been given these things.

From God. Therefore we're safe. And so the privilege. Of receiving the temple. The city. And all that sort of stuff. From God. Has led rather than.

To responsibility. It's led to complacency. And immorality. And idolatry. It's a subtle sin. In one sense. But one that all of us.

[18 : 15] Are prone to as well. For time and again. There's a sense. In which we. Are prone to trust. Not God directly. But somehow. The sort of.

Institutions. Around which we. Worship God. And so there are people. Who might. In some sense. Feel that they are. Spiritually safe. Because they're a member. Of a church. Or because they pray.

Or they like singing. Hymns. And songs. And so on. Or some other sort of. Religious. Trust. That is not God directly. This is warning us.

To make sure. That God. Is where we place our trust. Not in the city. Or the temple. Or the church. Or some other religious. Institutional practice. They may well be good things.

And right things. And proper things. To do. And be part of. But they're not the object. Of our trust. God alone is that. We see that.

[19 : 13] Expressed in balance. In Psalm 46. God is our strength. And refuge. And then the confidence. That the city. Will not fall. The trust is in God.

The strength. And refuge. Not in the city itself. The second sin. First was false. Religious trust. The second sin. Is false. Leadership.

In verse 13. He says. It was for the sins. Of her prophets. And the iniquities. Of her priests. Who shed the blood. Of the righteous. In the midst of her.

Probably doesn't mean. That the prophets. And priests. Actually killed. Righteous people. So much as. Through their poor leadership. Their lack of. True leadership. They misdirected.

People. So that they. Sent people. In the paths. Of death. Rather than. The paths of life. And as God makes clear. In the old testament.

[20 : 08] As well as the new. For those who are in leadership. Of God's people. In some form or other. In old and new testaments. Then in a sense. The blood. Of the people. In their care.

Are on their hands. That is. If Christian. Leaders. Or leaders. Of God's people. Misdirect. God's people. By teaching them. Untruths.

Then the sins. Of those people. Will come back. On the leaders. Themselves. When Ezekiel. Was called. To be a prophet. In Ezekiel. Chapter 3. It was made clear. To him.

That he must warn. The people. If he warned them. And they ignored him. The blood's on their hands. If he didn't warn them. And they sinned. Their blood is on his hands.

And so it remains. For Christian leaders. As well. We know. Reading the book of Jeremiah. That there were many. False prophets around. Giving false hope. To the people. Dismissing their sins.

[21 : 01] And saying. It's okay. You're safe. The temple's here. The city's here. And it's the same today. If you look around. The western world. There are church buildings. That are empty. Or nearly empty.

That are closing down. That are fairly moribund. That have become. Pancake parlors. And apartment houses. Why is that? To be honest. Because of bad leadership.

Bad ministry. Sometimes it's because of bad people sitting in pews. But on the whole. The vast majority. Is because of poor Christian leadership.

And so in effect. What's happening in our western world. Of Christian churches. Is what's happening here. That people are being misled. And in the end. Scattering. In a sense.

To spiritual exile. Sometimes. Often faithful people. Are going somewhere. Where they'll be faithfully taught. And so on. As well. It's very sad. And very serious.

[21 : 57] One of the great responsibilities. And burdens. In a sense. That I carry. As a Christian minister. Is the flock of God. That's under my care. And the anguish. When people might drift away.

From Christian faith. And thinking. Have I done enough. In this case. Or not. But also. The responsibility. To ensure. That what is preached. And taught.

Is sound. And right. It's not always easy. Because there are parts of scripture. That are hard. That are rebuking. And correcting us.

But if I fail. As a Christian minister. In teaching that. Then. In a sense. Your blood is on my hands. When I face. God's judgment throne. It means too.

For. All of us. That we must test. What leaders and preachers say. To ensure that it's right. Pray for leaders and teachers. To get it right. Not least.

[22 : 54] In the hard bits. Which it's easy to shirk. Or shy away from. False religious trust. False leadership. And thirdly.

False political trust. In verse 17. And the writer now identifies himself. With the people. As though he also has. Sinned like them. Our eyes failed.

Ever watching. Vainly for help. We were watching eagerly. Not for God. But for a nation. That could not save.

You see. If God. Will not. Help. Or save. No one else. Can. And what this is alluding to. Is the fact that. Before the fall of Jerusalem. Often. Many. Or many. Of the people of Israel. In Jerusalem. Were looking to Egypt. For help. We read that in Jeremiah.

[23 : 50] We know that's what was happening. In fact. The king himself. Was looking to Egypt. For help. Rather than. To stave off. Babylon's threat. False. Political trust.

God. Was judging. Jerusalem. And no nation. No person. No institution. Could thwart that. And come to their aid. And save them. And Egypt didn't act.

And Jerusalem. Fell. The next two verses. Sort of describe. The effects of all of that. In verses 18 and 19. They dogged our steps. That's the Babylonians.

So that we could not walk in our streets. Our end drew near. Our days were numbered. Our end had come. That's talking about the Babylonians. Arriving in Jerusalem. And destroying it. Our pursuers.

Were swifter than the eagles in the heavens. They chased us on the mountains. They lay in wait for us in the wilderness. And again. That describes what happened. Some of them fled into the mountains. And they were tracked down.

[24 : 47] Including the king. And others fled into the wilderness. That is down towards Egypt. To try and find refuge in Egypt. But they too. Were thwarted on their route. By the Babylonians.

False. Political trust. Trusting in a political nation. In this case Egypt. To bring deliverance. But Egypt couldn't do it.

God at least. Would have prevented it. And the false political trust. Is also expressed. In verse 20. This is talking about the king. Zedekiah was the king of the time.

The Lord's anointed. The breath of our life. Was taken in their pits. We know that Zedekiah. During his 10 year reign. Installed as a puppet king. By Babylon. 10 years before.

587's destruction. Rebelled against Babylon. A few years before Jerusalem fell. Turning to Egypt. For help. That never came. And when Jerusalem fell.

[25 : 43] Zedekiah fled. Into the. Mountains. And down to Jericho. Where he was caught. By the Babylonians. Had his eyes plucked out. And taken off into exile. In Babylon.

Notice here. How that false political trust. Is expressed. He's the Lord's anointed. Therefore they thought. He must save. He's the breath of our life. A very high term.

To sort of indicate. We trusted him. That we would keep living. And the one of whom. We said. Under his shadow. That is protection. We should live among the nations. They thought he would protect them.

And he couldn't. And he didn't. Some hoped in other nations. To rescue them. Some hoped in the king. And all that hope. Is misplaced. Don't misdirect.

Your hope. And trust. Either religiously. As we saw a few minutes ago. Or politically. No government. No political institution. No human institution.

[26 : 41] Not even. A political church institution. Is going to save us. Only God. Can and will do that. This fourth lament. Ends.

Strikingly. With hope. The last two verses. The tables will be turned. Is what it expects. Edom. A nation. That was a neighbor.

To the south of Israel. Descended from. Esau. The twin brother. Of Jacob. Had been. Long. An enemy. Of the people of God. And at the time. Of Babylon. Destroying. Jerusalem.

Edom. It seems. Assisted. Even though. It was a small nation. And probably. Not needed. And Edom. Was also given. Some of. Judah's. Territory. By the Babylonians.

After Jerusalem. Fell. As a result. Edom. Of course. Was boastful. And rejoicing. In the victory. That it was part of. And so. Verse 21. Is a sort of. Ironic. Sort of statement.

[27 : 35] Full of sarcasm. Really. Rejoice. And be glad. O daughter. Edom. You that live. In the land of us. Another way. To describe their territory. To the south. But.

In a sense. It's saying. You might rejoice. Now. But he who laughs. Laughs. Laughs best. To you. To you. Also. The cup. The cup. The cup. The cup. Of God's wrath.

That is. And you. Should become drunk. And strip yourself. Bare. That is. Edom. You might think. You've won. But God. Will bring you low. He'll punish you.

In his time. And the tables. Will be turned. Because as verse 22. Begins. The punishment. Of your iniquity. O daughter. Zion. Is accomplished. He will keep you.

In exile. No longer. That is. This suffering. And punishment. That Israel. Is experiencing. Is coming to an end. It's limited.

[28 : 30] As we saw last week. The wrath of God. Is limited. His steadfast love. And mercy. Continues. Forever. The chapter ends. Again. Referring to Edom. Your iniquity.

O daughter. Edom. He'll punish. He will uncover. Your sins. They are words. Full of confidence. Hope. They're not just. Wishful thinking.

The language. Is actually. Very. Expectant. And confident. That that will be. The outcome. Such hope. Is premised. On the fact. That God of Israel.

Is the God of all. He's the sovereign. God of all nations. Something that's. Important to grasp. He's not just. The God of Christians. Or the God of the church. Or the God of the west. Or the God of our country.

He's the God. Who is sovereign. Over the whole universe. And one day. All people. Will be brought. Before his judgment throne. As these verses indicate. Would happen. Even for Edom. Lamentations.

[29 : 28] Four warns us. That there is no escape. From the judgment of God. For God's people. And for all people. It's a message. We might not. Prefer to hear.

We like to sort of. Put to one side. The judgment of God. It's one part of. Doctrine. That the serpent. Put aside. In the garden of Eden. At the beginning of scripture.

On the day. You eat of this fruit. He says. You won't die. That is. Judgment is nonsense. But it's true. The whole of the Bible.

Account of the character. And purpose of God. Is nonsense. It crumbles. If we deny. The judgment of God. Against sin. The whole purpose of Jesus coming.

And living. And dying. And rising. Is nonsense. If we excise. Out of Christian teaching. The judgment of God. Against sin.

[30 : 26] It is very tempting. And very easy. To offer. False. Empty hope. That God won't judge. That you're okay. Not least.

To people who are not Christians. Unbelievers. Unbelievers. Not least. When they're dying. But it's false hope.

It's not a hope. Because it's not true. Judgment. Is real. And terrifying. As these chapters make clear.

We are warned here. To make sure. That we are right. With God. Sinners we are. Of course.

Repentant sinners. We must be. To throw ourselves. On the steadfast love. The faithfulness. And the mercy of God. That is manifest. To us.

[31 : 26] In Jesus Christ. And the cross. That is our only hope. Thank God that it is. A sure hope. Amen.

Amen. Thank you. Thank you.

Thank you. Thank you. Thank you. Thank you. Thank you. .

Thank you.

Thank you.