

No Comfort

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[0 : 00] This is the morning service at Holy Trinity on the 17th of April 2005. The preacher is Paul Barker. His sermon is entitled, No Comfort, and is based on Lamentations 1, verses 1-22.

Heavenly Father, speak to us now from your word we pray, that we may be not only believers and rather hearers of your word, but believers and doers of it, for Jesus' sake. Amen.

It's six o'clock at night. The news is on. And as you watch, the TV camera pans around slowly over the devastated scene.

An eerie silence hangs in the air as you watch. Bombed and burnt-out buildings still smouldering.

Empty streets. No moving vehicles. Wrecks of cars on the side of the road. Doors hanging off hinges.

[1 : 29] Shattered windows with a few shards of glass left in them. What was once a bustling thoroughfare, now bereft of life. What was once the centre of the town's activity, now devoid of people and trade.

Where there were honking horns and traders' shouts, now just distant memories. Pictures like that enter our lounge rooms on a regular basis.

Sarajevo, Kabul, Baghdad, Aceh, all around the world, periodically, year by year.

Scenes of devastated cities and towns. Where once there was life, but now just an eerie silence. Depopulated.

And often we look on with little concern. places, in many respects, we've never heard of, probably, until they come onto the news, like that.

[2 : 38] Sometimes, of course, the emotional cords get tugged a little when they're places that we've heard of. And the emotional cords get pulled a bit tighter when they're places that we might have visited once, on holidays or in work.

But imagine if it's Melbourne that you see. Bourke Street, Mal. No people. No trams.

Myers windows. Shattered. Empty of produce. Burnt out cars. St. Paul's Cathedral. Ruined.

I might rejoice at that. But imagine if it's your city. Your home city. Imagine the emotional turmoil within you.

And not least, if it's your home city, where, not just that you were brought up and that you've lived for most of your life, but your home city, where all your identity derives from this being the city.

[3 : 39] God's dwelling place. Well, that's how it was when Jerusalem fell in 587 BC to the Babylonian Empire led by General Nebuchadnezzar.

Not just a city of the ancient world. Not even just a glorious city, Jerusalem of the ancient world. Not that big by population stakes, certainly, even then.

But the city where God's temple was. For after a few skirmishes and many threats and a couple of sieges, eventually in 587, Nebuchadnezzar was fed up with the prevaricating leadership of the Jewish people and he came.

And Jerusalem's walls were breached, broken, shattered. Every main building demolished. The temple raided and ransacked. Ransacked. And raised to its foundations.

The leaders, the priests, the wealthy people, the business traders, the king, carted off into exile. Imagine an ancient version of the picture of Jews being rounded up onto those train carriages and hustled off into concentration camps during the Second World War.

[4 : 59] Others, of course, fled before the Babylonians could get them. Fled to Egypt, up north perhaps to Lebanon, Tyre, Sidon and so on.

Others fled to the country. And so the city that the psalmist describes as the joy of the whole earth is joyless, peopleless, a ghost town, a ruined rubble.

The book of Lamentations laments the fall of Jerusalem. It's not just about the fall and about the destruction of Jerusalem.

It's an expression of the grief and lament at the fall of Jerusalem. It's a book about grief and suffering, bereavement, shock, and trauma.

And the words of the book of Lamentations as we'll see this week and the next four Sunday mornings are full of tear-jerking, gut-wrenching, heartbreaking language.

[6 : 08] It is a person who is breaking out in tears almost as each verse unravels and unpacks the grief and the lament at the fall of such a city.

And for us sensitive readers, if we are sensitive, then we will feel the emotion of this book welling up within us. The book of Lamentations expresses bereavement and desolation, despair, hopelessness.

And yet it's not just a spontaneous outburst, a torrent of words that just sort of tumble disorderly because grief is so often full of disorder and chaos, but Lamentations surprisingly is the most tightly ordered and structured book probably of the Bible.

Chapters 1, 2 and 4 each with 22 verses, the number of letters of the Hebrew alphabet is tight poetry. Every verse begins with the next letter of the Hebrew alphabet.

So verse 1 begins with the equivalent of A, verse 2 with B and 3 with C and so on through the 22 letters of the Hebrew alphabet. That's not too hard to do to be honest, but each verse with a few exceptions here and there is tightly governed by the same meter and rhythm as well.

[7 : 30] That's harder to do if you were trying to write poetry. That is, somebody has taken time and effort and concentration to order their expression of grief.

Chapter 5 doesn't follow the alphabetic sequence, but it's got the same number of verses in the same rhythm and chapter 3 has got the same length and rhythm but for each letter of the alphabet so to speak there are three lines beginning with A, three with B, three with C and so on, 66 verses although the verses are much shorter than in the other chapters.

So we get here in one sense some have called an A to Z of suffering although it's particular suffering. It's really an A to Z of grief and lament at the fall of Jerusalem.

We'll open your Bibles again at page 666. If you haven't got them open you may need the page number to find it. It's not a big book buried in the midst of the prophets from Jeremiah and then on to Ezekiel.

And the opening verses, the first half of this chapter are a bit like a television report. That is, we're given picture language to envisage the scene, the aftermath of the devastation at first.

[8 : 52] And the person who speaks is like the commentator, the voiceover on the newsreel. But in the city itself it's virtually silent.

And so there's a sense in which as we pan around we see scenes that are silent but we hear the voice of the commentator telling us in effect what we're seeing and why we see it.

But the commentator is not dispassionate. He's not unmoved by this. Verse 1 he says how lonely sits the city.

That is the commentator himself or herself is full of emotion as well as he surveys the smouldering ruins of Jerusalem.

How lonely. An expression of shock or disbelief of horror or incredulity really as he sees this once great city brought to ruin.

[9 : 53] And what a reversal it is. The city that was once full of people bustling a thriving place now empty of people. A ghost town.

A city that was once great among the nations verse 1 goes on to say and indeed it was but now in fact like a widow.

That is it was great among the nations in that had alliances and trade and other nations and their cities they would come to Jerusalem to meet people and do their business and so on but now widowed. No one wants to have a thing to do with Jerusalem left alone.

She that was a princess among the provinces now a vassal. From being one who exercised some authority over other nations at different periods of their history now the tables have turned and Jerusalem is just a vassal state a subservient province of the Babylonian empire deserted bereaved enslaved.

And the commentator notes the trauma of the grief that now exists in the aftermath of its destruction. She weeps bitterly in the night with tears on her cheeks.

[11 : 10] There's no rest at night. It's the sleepless tossing and turning of grief and the wet pillow from the tears of the night.

Among all her lovers she has no one to comfort her. All her lovers there is probably a slightly subtle way of in a sense directing us to the problem that will become explicit later.

Jerusalem, the people of Jerusalem, Judah, God's people, they've gone after other things than God. Other gods or perhaps what a reference here is other political alliances, other nations in order to find security.

They're the lovers, but they're not there to comfort her. They've wiped their hands of their relationship. Perhaps they fled from Babylon, perhaps they've joined forces with Babylon as Edom did, for example, to destroy Jerusalem.

They've betrayed her. They're not there to comfort her. All her friends have dealt treacherously with her. They've become her enemies. She's left alone, deserted, bereaved.

[12 : 28] Judah, we're told in verse 3, the people that is, have gone into exile with suffering and hard servitude. Not onto a holiday camp in Babylon, but rather to some form of hard labour.

Indeed, that servitude began before the exile. The language of servitude and suffering probably reminds us, it echoes the struggles that Israel had as slaves in Egypt before the plagues that brought Israel's liberation out of Egypt in the time of Moses.

That is, they've gone full circle back to slavery in a foreign land. All the promises of God come to naught. She lives now among the nations and finds no resting place.

the people may be alive in exile, but it's not a restful existence. It's not a peaceful or desirable existence there.

Her pursuers have all overtaken her in the midst of her distress. And at the heart of this lament of chapter 1 comes the chilling refrain. We saw it in verse 2.

[13 : 41] She has no one to comfort her. And four or five more times in this chapter, the same statement occurs. Deserted by God, man and friend, no one to comfort her.

For grief is agonizing at the best of times, even with many friends and family around. But with no one to comfort, grief is doubled in intensity.

Verse 4, as the camera pans around, we see the streets that approach Jerusalem. The roads to Zion, they mourn, we're told in verse 4. For no one comes to the festivals.

For those roads used to carry crowds of pilgrims up to the festivals of Passover and tabernacles and so on. Just like in the days of Jesus 600 years later, but not now.

Not here. Those roads are empty. No one's coming to Jerusalem. Probably now they've all gone from Jerusalem already. The gates are desolate, we're told.

[14 : 42] Not so much a gate with a catch, but the gates were the little squares or public places as you entered through the wall. Often there were little meeting places inside the wall itself as you walked through into the city, but just inside the gate would be a little square usually or an area where people would do their trade and their business.

That would be the thriving place of the city. Desolate now, we're told, as we see the camera panning around. No one there, no buildings left standing.

If you'd been there, you would have said, that's where that used to be, that's where Myers was and so on, but all gone now. Desolate. The priests, they groan, they've got nothing to do, those that are left, for no one's coming to the festivals, and the young girls grieve.

Her lot is bitter. Probably referring to a specific group of young girls who would sing the songs of joy and so on at the various festivals that would occur.

Gone now, from joy to grief. And though the enemies prosper, as the beginning of verse 5 says, all the way through this book of Lamentations, it is very clear, very explicit, that Israel or Jerusalem has fallen, not because the enemies are better than they are, or bigger or stronger than they are, but because it is God's hand at work.

[16 : 07] Because the Lord has made her suffer for the multitude of her transgressions. It is God's doing. And it is God's doing because, as verse 5 said, the multitude of her transgressions have brought about this suffering.

The fall of Jerusalem is due to Judah's sin. And God is punishing Jerusalem for its sin. more of the reversal comes in verse 6.

From daughter Zion has departed all her majesty. She was majestic, full of glory. The temple in Jerusalem was one of the great buildings of the ancient world. The largest temple or religious building or edifice for one God alone of the whole entire ancient world.

Full of gold, very ornate, gone. Totally gone. Indeed, also her princes have become like stags that find no pasture. If literally it's referring to the fact that the king has been taken off into exile and unable to eat as well as he used to and those sorts of things.

Indeed, one of the interesting archaeological finds of recent decades is the rations that were given by the Babylonians to King Jehoiachin in exile, something that's in the British Museum now.

[17 : 31] Jerusalem remembers in the days of her affliction and wandering all the precious things that were hers in days of old.

It's just memory. She may well remember them, but they're no longer there. When her people fell into the hand of the foe, there was no one to help her.

Left isolated again, the foe looked on mocking over her downfall. Oh, grief is hard at any time. It's doubly hard with no one to comfort.

Treble hard when people just mock, as happens here. There are many causes of suffering.

Some suffering is in a sense inexplicable, random. the result of a world that is fallen, as the Bible describes it.

[18 : 34] A world that is, in some senses, dysfunctional. Someone suffers, this person doesn't. Inexplicable. Why that person? Why not this person?

There is, in the end, not always an answer. Some suffering is random, or appears to be that way. Some suffering is disciplinary, God's doing to train us, to refine us, to purify us, to discipline us, to become more like Jesus Christ.

It's for our good, for our benefit, and the Bible teaches that as Christians, we can expect some sort of suffering like that from time to time, to teach us. Some suffering is persecution, enemies opposing God and therefore opposing God's people.

Again, as Christians, we ought to expect that from time to time we may face such sort of suffering. Some suffering is the just punishment for our sin.

That's this suffering in the book of Lamentations. Lamentations is not the answer to all types of suffering. We need to read all the way through the Bible to get a robust view of suffering.

[19 : 47] The book of Job is a different form of suffering from the book of Lamentations. And there's all sorts of other sufferings in both Old and New Testament. We hear and glean from verses here and there.

But in Lamentations, the suffering of the people is because of their sin. God is punishing his own people for their steadfast rebellion against him.

Not unexpected, not out of the blue. It was all there threatened and warned 800 years before in the law given to Israel through Moses. that now is coming into existence in the fall of Jerusalem.

In verses 8 and 9 it's made clear Jerusalem sinned grievously. Therefore, she's become a mockery. Exactly what the book of Deuteronomy predicted would happen if Israel rebelled against the law of God.

All who honoured her despise her for they have seen her nakedness. She herself groans, she turns her face away, her uncleanness was in her skirts, she took no thought of her future, her downfall was appalling with none to comfort her.

[20 : 59] It's a picture not only of punishment but of shame and disgrace. Again expected in the laws of Moses early in the Old Testament. Here now is high shame embarrassment that Jerusalem the great has fallen so far.

Mocked, humiliated, shamed. So far the narrator alone has spoken and what we've seen is in effect his description of the aftermath of the destruction.

The pictures if you like are silent but they speak very loudly. And now like a TV news report now we hear Jerusalem speak.

just a couple of words. The end of verse 9. Oh Lord look at my affliction for the enemy has triumphed. There's the anguish just a short sentence.

And we cut back then to the narrator. A plaintive cry full of grief. The narrator explains further about the enemies. Enemies have stretched out their hands over all her precious things.

[22 : 15] she has even seen the nations invade her sanctuary. Those whom you forbade to enter your congregation. The sanctuary is the most holy place in the midst of the Jerusalem temple. And not any Israelite could enter there.

Only priests could enter into there. And indeed into the temple precincts itself. No Gentile non-Jew could enter. Expressly forbidden in the laws of Deuteronomy 23.

But now breached. As the Babylonians and other pagan nations have come in. Even into the sanctuary of the temple and ripped off all its gold and its cups and its Ark of the Covenant and all the precious things that are part of that Jerusalem temple.

Destroying the building in their wake as they leave. And as a result, verse 11 tells us that her people groan as they search for bread. Famine conditions existed.

As is so typical when a city falls and is destroyed. All the infrastructure gone. All the means of production for food gone. They trade their treasures for food.

[23 : 20] Not just their personal treasures of valuables in their home, but the word itself is broad enough probably to include even children. Trading your children so that you don't have to feed them and you might get a bit of money so that you can feed yourself.

That shows the depths of desperation after Jerusalem was destroyed. You can imagine an interviewer asking then Jerusalem, well, what happened?

What happened to bring about all this devastation? And in effect, that's now how this chapter goes because now Jerusalem starts to speak for herself for the rest of the chapter with one little change.

the end of verse 11, Jerusalem herself now takes over the commentary. Look, O Lord, and see how worthless I have become.

So there's an appeal firstly to God to see, and then secondly an appeal to anyone else around about to see. Here, of course, is Jerusalem who's left alone with no one to comfort her, calling in effect on God, at least pay me some attention, and you out there, pay me some attention.

[24 : 37] So, look, O Lord, and see, in verse 11, and then in verse 12, look and see you who pass by, if there is any sorrow like my sorrow which was brought upon me.

And if there was a television camera, of course, speaking anachronistically, she'd be appealing to the screen. Look and see my devastation. Pay attention.

Have some sympathy for me. But of course, through this chapter, we keep getting told, there is no one to comfort her. In answer to a hypothetical question, well, what happened, Jerusalem now describes the actual destruction.

We've seen the aftermath, what happened. And she describes it with picture language, metaphors, illustrations, vivid, stark, terrifying, a fire, a net, a yoke, a wine press, all images of God's punishment and destruction of Jerusalem to show its severity, its extent, its seriousness in the language of the next three verses.

Fire, at the beginning of verse 13, from on high he sent fire, it went deep into my bones. A typical illustration or image of God's judgment all the way through the Bible.

[25 : 57] Fire. Secondly, a net, to make sure that no one would escape. He spread a net for my feet, he turned me back, he's left me stunned, faint all day long. Then thirdly, a yoke.

Here now their own transgressions or sins of Jerusalem have become a yoke, a burden of control, enslaved is the idea. And so often the scriptures tell us that when we sin we become slaves to sin.

That's the picture of verse 14, my transgressions were bound into a yoke. By his hand, they were fastened together, they weigh on my neck, sapping my strength. The Lord handed me over to those whom I cannot withstand.

And then the fourth illustration is of a winepress, treading down the grapes, cracking them open so that the juice of the grapes will flow out to make wine. Verse 15, the Lord has rejected all my warriors in the midst of me.

He proclaimed a time against me to crush my young men. The Lord has trodden as in a winepress the virgin daughter Judah. Very bleak picture indeed of the judgment of God.

[27 : 01] One picked up in the New Testament book of Revelation as well. It's as though the Lord now is the enemy commander. He looks on the army of Jerusalem. He says they're nothing against me.

He rejects them all. And now he's proclaimed a time against me, against Jerusalem and crushed them. As a result, Jerusalem who's been describing what happened in effect breaks down in tears in verse 16.

For these things I weep. My eyes flow with tears. This is very moving language full of pathos.

My eyes, my eyes cry is in effect what she's saying there. She can't stop her tears at her grief and lament at what happened to her.

And almost as though to give her space to grieve, the commentator himself then speaks in verse 17. Zion stretches out her hands but there is no one to comfort her.

[28 : 11] It's as though it's a typical picture of somebody who's grieving and their hands are out as they're staring at the destruction and the rubble and the ruin and they're full of grief.

The arms are stretching out but there's no one holding her hand. There's no one reaching out to comfort her. Not God, not friend, not lover, not nation, not onlooker, not inhabitant. They're not there.

She's alone in her grief that is not relieved and not assuaged. There is no one to comfort. Here is what happens when God becomes your enemy.

Not because God is fickle and unreliable. Not because God betrays us. Not because God is treacherous. But because humans rebel against him. This is what happens when God is your enemy.

It's not a pleasant sight. It is a fearful thing to fall into the hands of the living God. Don't just think and dismiss this as this is the Old Testament, all full of judgment and gloom and doom.

[29 : 14] For in the New Testament as well, there is as much picture of God's judgment and punishment as there is in the Old. It's just as severe if not more so.

And it remains post Jesus, a fearful thing to fall into the hands of the living God, the God who is a jealous God and a consuming fire. Jerusalem knows that she is suffering for her own sin.

That doesn't ease the grief, it doesn't take it away. She makes in a sense a sort of confession in the next verse, 18. The Lord is in the right, for I have rebelled against his word.

God's right about this. I deserve this punishment, that doesn't make it easy though. God's become my enemy, not because he's changed, but because I've rebelled, is what Jerusalem is in effect saying.

Knowing you're in the wrong doesn't make the grief easy to bear. God's love. And chapter one goes on to finish with more heart wrenching expressions of grief and lament.

[30 : 23] Again, there's a call for the peoples and then God to hear and see and pay attention. Here is someone with no one to comfort her. She's desperate that somebody, people out there, God up there, pay attention to this.

See what the second half of verse 18 says? But hear all you peoples and behold my suffering, my young women and young men have gone into captivity. I called to my lovers, but they deceived me.

My priests and elders perished in the city while seeking food to revive their strength. And then to God, see, oh Lord, how distressed I am. My stomach churns, my heart is wrung within me.

The language that expresses the greatest depth of emotion that you can have probably because I've been very rebellious. Yes, no excuse.

I've been rebellious. But there is no one to comfort me. In the street the sword bereaves. See, the bereavement is as bad as the death.

[31 : 27] And in the house it is like death. They heard how I was groaning with no one to comfort me. All my enemies heard of my trouble. They're glad that you've done it. They're mocking and exulting.

There's no comfort, no sympathy. Jerusalem is desperate for help from any quarter. But none, it seems, comes.

The last part of the chapter is like a desperate plea, at least for something to happen from God's hand. Not for the grief and lament to be assuaged and relieved for Israel, for Jerusalem.

But at least let the enemies suffer like I suffer. Because though they have defeated me, Jerusalem is saying, they still are sinners, they're pagans. Why are not they suffering like I'm suffering?

And so the second half of verse 21 says, bring on the day that you've announced and let them be as I am. Let all their evil doing come before you and deal with them as you've dealt with me because of all my transgressions.

[32 : 35] for my groans are many and my heart is faint. This is a painful cry of grief. I hope you're getting a feeling for it.

It's not easy to read. But it's particular grief. It's grief because of sin. It's grief that comes from God's punishment for sin.

sin. It is not an answer to all sorts of suffering or bereavement. It is self inflicted grief in the sense that it comes from our own sin or Jerusalem's own sin.

And don't think that God is being overly harsh either. 800 years before this, Israel received the laws from God. It made it very clear what Israel should do, how they should respond to those laws and what would happen if they didn't.

And this lament, chapter 1, has picked up much of that language of what would happen if Israel disobeyed. And through the subsequent history from the giving of those laws, there were many periods of warnings from prophets, one after the other.

[33 : 41] The northern kingdom fell 150 years before this. There was a severe warning to Jerusalem not to go the way of the north of Samaria. But it kept on ignoring the warnings from prophet after prophet from the Old Testament law, from kings, and priests and others.

And finally, after numerous delays of mercy, God acted and Jerusalem fell. Lamentations, you see, is warning us.

It is warning us not to disobey God. It is warning us not to play with sin as with fire. It is warning us not to flirt with rebellion against God.

Not to think that we can play around sin and wrongdoing and get away with it. Not to deceive ourselves and think that God doesn't care. God's not going to act. God's just full of mercy.

He'll forgive. He won't punish. Don't be deceived into thinking along such lines. For the fall of Jerusalem here in the Old Testament is a model of what that final day will be like.

[34 : 46] just as Jesus warned that the fall of Jerusalem again in 70 AD after his own lifetime, the second fall if you like, to the Romans, that that also would be a model of the final day of judgment.

And if we think this is bad and this lamentation is full of anguish that we could not bear, then that final day will be worse. And don't flirt with rebellion and sin.

In the pits of God's judgment, there will be no one to comfort. It is a fearful thing to fall into the hands of the living God.

Don't risk it. That's the warning of lamentations. This is bad. Hell is worse. And yet, as we'll see, truly the steadfast love of the Lord never ceases.

For God in time does announce comfort. In the Old Testament, in the prophet Isaiah speaking to the exile, those magnificent words of the beginning of Isaiah chapter 40, comfort, comfort my people, speak tenderly to Jerusalem.

[36 : 01] A theme that's picked up by John the Baptist as he announces the coming of Jesus and the real end of the exile. And in the New Testament, we see time and again echoes of Jerusalem's plight here in the life of Jesus.

Abandoned, betrayed, forsaken, forlorn, mocked, alone, deserted by God, man and friend.

For Jesus, of course, in a sense, was the living temple, destroyed by evil people, when he hung on a cross and died.

When he cried out, my God, my God, why have you forsaken me? That cry of dereliction that is so reminiscent of Jerusalem's anguish in this book, Lamentations.

The man of sorrows, Jesus. But it's on the cross, in that place of desolation and dereliction, abandonment and forsakenment, that we find God's answer to comfort for sin.

[37 : 16] Though there is relief from sin. For Jesus died not for his sins, but for ours, so that we might find relief and comfort from our sin, from punishment, from guilt and from shame.

At Calvary, tears turn to joy, for surely he has borne our griefs and our sorrows. The answer to suffering for sin is that Jesus has borne the sin for us.

God is not impassive, he does care. He carries the sin to bring us comfort. finally and fully.

The warning still stands, don't flirt with sin. For the outcome then will be worse than this. But come to Jesus and find rest, for his yoke is easy and his burden light.

And his burden light. Thank you.