

Small group questions

Compassion that Never Fail

1. Have you ever lived somewhere that experienced some sort of dramatic change from nature or violence? What happened? How did people respond?

Read Lamentations 3:1-33

2. What is happening in the backdrop of Lamentations?

3. The first verse in the book is, "How lonely sits the city!" *How* in Hebrew can also be translated *Alas*. Why would the writer, who was probably the prophet Jeremiah, say, alas the misery of sin's consequences? Why lament in other words?

4. Every sermon in this series so far has shown how God's compassion and mercies blots out sin and gives people a second chance. How is Lamentations different?

5. Why do you think Lamentations is not necessarily a popular book of the bible to read? Why is it difficult to reconcile God's anger and wrath with his compassion?

6. What new things do you learn from this portion of scripture about God's character? How might that affect how you live?

7. Lamentations is a book that describes the sorrow that comes when we turn our backs on God and yet the compassion he still offers, even in ways we might not expect. How might his judgment be an extension of his compassion? How does Romans 2:4 speak to this?

8. The writer seems to 'come to his senses' in verses 21-26 when God's love clarifies everything for him. What's changed in his perspective?

9. "Because of the Lord's great love, we are not consumed." Discuss the implications for the writer of Lamentations and for us today.

10. How does the judgment of God's people in ch 3 and the promise of God's mercies being new every morning point to Christ Crucified and Risen from the dead? How can this reality lead us to lives of compassion in the here and now, and when Christ returns to judge the world?

Alas . . . And Yet.

By Jo Kadlecek-Gilbert, 1 Oct. 2017

On a crisp September morning about 16 years ago, I had just finished a bible study with friends in our church and was riding my bicycle back home. I remember stopping at a red light and seeing a woman cross the street but when she got to the middle, she froze. Something awful had caught her eye, and she stood there with her hand over her mouth. I looked over my shoulder to see what she saw. Smoke. Lots of it filling the blue sky and I thought, "Oh no. Another fire in New York City."

By the time I got home, my phone was ringing and friends were wondering if I was okay or asking for prayer as they evacuated lower Manhattan. The World Trade Center had been hit by a plane. And the city was in despair. I got back on my bike that morning and the next and the next, trying to help or make sense of what had happened, feeling the palpable pain and the eerie quiet of a city that before then was always noisy. The streets were gloomy and people despondent. Our church put together flyers for help and we handed out bottles of water or talked with folks when we could. And though New York City had not been destroyed completely, it was a deeply wounded place, lives and dreams lost, families and businesses and normalcy forever changed.

Living in NYC during 9/11 was probably the closest I'll ever come to being able to identify just a tiny bit with the passage we heard in Lamentations, a tough passage that conveys the utter destruction of Jerusalem. It's hard to explain how awful 9/11 was, how much Chris and I hurt and felt because NYC had been attacked. But NYC was not wiped out by God's Judgment as Judah had been. Though some religious folk might have thought otherwise, this was not the result of God's anger. Most treasures of the Big Apple were spared, not so with Jerusalem.

So what's happening in Lamentations? When the author, who was probably the prophet Jeremiah, walks through a smoldering, leveled, despairing city, seeing mothers so desperate they want to eat their children, who could imagine the pain he felt? No wonder it is called Lamentations, which means to cry aloud! It's filled with public wailing and grieving because a stubborn, unrepentant people had tested God's patience one too many times and now felt his punishment and judgment.

In fact the first verse in the book is, “How lonely sits the city!” *How* in Hebrew can also be translated into the word *Alas*. Alas, the misery of sin’s consequences. Alas, the terror of life apart from God! Alas, the utter despair and hopelessness of a people who turn their back on their Creator. Alas, indeed the pain that comes when we think we can live as we want, say what we want or do what we want because deep in our heart of hearts we believe *we* are the rulers of the world, the makers of our own destiny. Alas. Alas.

And Yet. Thankfully, we know from this sermon series that God’s character is one of wonder-filled compassion. In Exodus, with Moses, we saw the compassionate and gracious God, slow to anger, abounding in love and faithfulness and establishing his covenant. In Psalm 51 we saw how David experienced God’s compassion that *blotted* out sins and transgressions. And if we had any doubt about the Lord’s character, we know from last week that *even if* a city like Ninevah is *exceedingly evil* and a prophet like Jonah has no interest in its salvation, God’s compassion wins over both. In fact, the Almighty spared Ninevah after Jonah warned them. They did repent and what happened? He displayed his compassion.

But now we come to Lamentations where the people did not listen and God was not patient. What’s happening? Probably one of the least preached ☺ or studied book in the bible, Lamentations records the gory destruction of the Holy City long after Jonah, the disturbing suffering brought by the Babylonian invasion of 586 BC which our *compassionate* God orchestrated! Tilt. *No wonder* it’s not a popular book; we’d rather not lament. Let alone consider the possibility that if the Bible is true, humanity’s wicked ways do *indeed* deserve God’s severe judgment. Yet we love, in fact, *we sing* about the beautiful verses in the middle of this chapter: Great is thy faithfulness morning by morning *new mercies* I see. Thou changes not, Your compassions they fail not.

Well, I don’t think it’s an accident that some of the church’s most beloved verses, 3:20-22, are planted smack in the center of so much bad news, of so many dark descriptions of how God Almighty had indeed destroyed, really destroyed, his people. But we can’t pick only the feel good verses of scripture – we need to read them in context, as God intended. What a tension then Lamentations brings to our modern brains, this absolute destruction of a reckless sinful people, with only a

glimmer of compassion for only a few survivors. Lamentations forces us to look at God's anger, just as it calls us to empathize with a prophet's lament. And because the whole Bible tells us that God *is* compassionate, maybe we have to consider that Israel's judgment here is an extension of that. Thankfully, his anger is temporary – after all, the city was later rebuilt and we're talking about it this morning. He didn't just wipe us all off the planet, though if he's God, he certainly could have. So given we live in a culture where God's commands are often ignored or seen as a thing of the past, two things stand out for us to consider: **1. the sorrow that comes when we turn our backs on God, and 2. the unlikely compassion he gives when we do.**

First, the sorrow that comes. We know from biblical history – highlighted btw in our sermon series last year in Judges and this year in 1 Samuel that you can listen to online – we know that God's people failed to obey him again and again and again and again. Each time, the Lord gave them over to want they wanted, knowing that their selfish desires were not good for them, knowing in fact that they were far from God's best for their lives. But because of the covenant he established through Moses, the Creator of the Universe always provided a way out for the people of Israel in spite of themselves or their enemies. He was patient with his chosen people.

Until now. In Lamentations we get a first hand report of the absolute annihilation of Jerusalem by the Babylonians. The poetry reflects personal experience and eyewitness testimony especially when you read some of the detailed descriptions of death, desolation and starvation. It's bad. The prophet is distraught. The people are defeated, and God is fuming, revealing a side of his character that is real and powerful and righteous. And I'll admit it: I don't always like this side of God. But as one pastor put it, "God doesn't command Moses to 'tell the people I am what you want.' He says, Tell them I am what I am."

So in this case, *I Am* lifts his finger, as he can, and wipes out his own people. Every single resource is taken from the few who survived. Verses 1- 18 of this chapter confirm that each possible source of life, or confidence, is gone: Light, health, safety, reputation, even prayer and endurance, all gone. There is nothing left to sustain them. The writer even forgets what happiness or prosperity are! It is an absolute emptying, a thrashing rock bottom time. All of which is God's justified doing. As one scholar put it, "At one level the divine anger is acknowledged to be right. (He

did warn them again and again) At another it is simply unendurable . . . the anger of God and the suffering it produces are overwhelmingly shocking realities from which only *God himself* can give relief. The book of Lamentations, more than any other Old Testament book, shows us God's wrath as a directly experienced reality." Alas Alas.

And yet. V 33 shows us that God's first instinct is *not* to punish, he does not willingly bring affliction or grief to anyone. He only sends judgment when his patience doesn't lead people to repentance, as the Apostle Paul, the chief sinner and converted persecuter of the church, wrote in Romans 2:4 *Do you show contempt for the riches of his kindness, forbearance and patience, not realizing that God's kindness is intended to lead you to repentance?*

So what's going on? Simply this: and **this is our second point**, the Lord sent judgment to bring restoration. It was an unlikely compassion! In fact, the lament of the writer is a small portion of God's enormous lament and sorrow for his people. As the word compassion is defined, He *suffers with* his people. He has not turned his wrath on them lightly. He'd been patient. He grieves over their judgment because He desires all would be saved.

And so the lament and sorrow of God, expressed in his judgment to those who did not listen to him, makes the **compassion he extends to each of us all the more amazing**. Look what happens for the writer in verses 21-26 he realizes his suffering and the consequences of his sin and is moved beyond himself to God's bigger story (v21): **"Yet this I call to mind:** Because of the Lord's great love, we are not consumed."

No matter what has befallen him, or what he and his people have received as just judgment, he finally calls to mind God's love! And God's love doesn't allow him to be consumed by the evil of his heart or the brokenness of the world. Because he has called this to mind, therefore, he has hope! Not because he suddenly willed himself to see things this way but because God's love clarified everything for him. It renewed his perspective. God's faithfulness turned him around. He realized even to be able to lament was a gift. Even to weep was to be alive and he saw himself as an object of God's grace: *because of the Lord's great love we are not consumed!* Yes, judgment was part of the covenant relationship, but it didn't end things. The

Creator's relationship with his people had always been – and would be – founded on and guaranteed by his eternal love and promises.

And when Jeremiah says, "his compassions never fail. They are new every morning," he is suddenly aware that this is an extraordinary new. It's not the kind of new you grab like a new water bottle because the old is used and disposable. No, this is "the blow your mind, we should not have survived but we did because of God" kind of new! It's as if Jeremiah saw – as we can – how amazing it was that the God who never changes is the author of change, who makes every day full of new opportunities for his people to trust him, and be restored by him! Isn't it fantastic that, unlike these human afflictions and sufferings which are temporary, God's mercies never end?! They go forever, a little like when you stand at Hell's Gate in Noosa National Park and the ocean goes on and on and on! Or when you look out of the window of a plane and the sky seems endless. Combine those and they still don't measure God's never ending mercies. They're big!

So how can Lamentations be good news for our broken world today? Well, 600 years after God's judgment fell on Jerusalem, it fell again but this time was different. The stubborn thick people of God did not receive it. God's son Jesus did. Jesus took on the righteous anger they – and all of us – deserved. God sent Jesus to *suffer with us*, literally absorbing all of God's anger and judgment not because *he* sinned, but because our Holy God so wanted to be in relationship with you and me that Jesus was willing to suffer what we deserved to bring us to him.

You see the hope of Lamentations is that the destruction of the temple (and the city) points us to "Christ crucified, the God-given replacement for Jerusalem and the temple." Jesus stepped forward to receive God's terrifying judgment for our sin so that if we believe, we *never* have to! We can live in his unfailing mercy and love every day forever. And we can be confident even when he comes again to judge the world. It's like the hymn says, "Because the sinless Saviour died, my sinful soul is counted free, for God the Just is satisfied, to look on him and pardon me."

And those mercies that are new every morning? Guess what happened three mornings after Christ's heart was pierced, after he was mocked and trampled and his body was brutally destroyed? New Life! Resurrection! The Lord heard the cries of his people and The Son of God, the slain Messiah from Jerusalem, came alive

again! That meant new life and new hope for his followers, renewed commissioning, restored relationships. Forever.

Because of the Lord's great love reflected in the Risen Jesus, we are not consumed. No matter what the headlines say, no matter what happens at our jobs or in our communities, our lives or our families, His compassions always sustain us. The Lord is our portion, therefore He is more than enough. And the more we call to mind his compassions – which we must do everyday through Bible study and small groups – the more we call to mind his compassions, the more they anchor us even as everything around us makes us lament. And it will.

That's the nature of compassion. If we know the Son of God has suffered for us and with us, and we live in the mercy of his resurrection and love, renewed daily in his grace, we can't help but come along side others. We can't help but pray and lament and hope for those who might have turned their backs on him. We can't help but offer water and friendship to those whose normalcy has been shattered. We can't help but cry out Alas indeed for the broken world and for our own sinful hearts.

And Yet, this we call to mind and therefore we have hope: Because of the Lord's great love, we are NOT consumed. The Lord is good to those who wait for him. To the one who seeks him. Because his faithfulness is greater than all our failings. The question for each of us now is, will we lament for the times we turn our backs on him and then receive his mercies? Will we invite the Resurrected Lord to make us new creations? Will we receive and extend his great compassion to others day after day? Because if we do, the world will never be the same.

Let's pray.