

Dark Clouds, Deep Mercy

The Pain: When God Feels Like an Adversary

Lamentations 2

Mark Vroegop

¹ How the Lord in his anger has set the daughter of Zion under a cloud! He has cast down from heaven to earth the splendor of Israel; he has not remembered his footstool in the day of his anger. ² The Lord has swallowed up without mercy all the habitations of Jacob; in his wrath he has broken down the strongholds of the daughter of Judah; he has brought down to the ground in dishonor the kingdom and its rulers. ³ He has cut down in fierce anger all the might of Israel; he has withdrawn from them his right hand in the face of the enemy; he has burned like a flaming fire in Jacob, consuming all around. ⁴ He has bent his bow like an enemy, with his right hand set like a foe; and he has killed all who were delightful in our eyes in the tent of the daughter of Zion; he has poured out his fury like fire. ⁵ The Lord has become like an enemy; he has swallowed up Israel; he has swallowed up all its palaces; he has laid in ruins its strongholds, and he has multiplied in the daughter of Judah mourning and lamentation. ⁶ He has laid waste his booth like a garden, laid in ruins his meeting place; the LORD has made Zion forget festival and Sabbath, and in his fierce indignation has spurned king and priest. ⁷ The Lord has scorned his altar, disowned his sanctuary; he has delivered into the hand of the enemy the walls of her palaces; they raised a clamor in the house of the LORD as on the day of festival. ⁸ The LORD determined to lay in ruins the wall of the daughter of Zion; he stretched out the measuring line; he did not restrain his hand from destroying; he caused rampart and wall to lament; they languished together. ⁹ Her gates have sunk into the ground; he has ruined and broken her bars; her king and princes are among the nations; the law is no more, and her prophets find no vision from the LORD. ¹⁰ The elders of the daughter of Zion sit on the ground in silence; they have thrown dust on their heads and put on sackcloth; the young women of Jerusalem have bowed their heads to the ground. ¹¹ My eyes are spent with weeping; my stomach churns; my bile is poured out to the ground because of the destruction of the daughter of my people, because infants and babies faint in the streets of the city (Lamentations 2:1-11).

Those of you who have been around College Park for a while may have heard me talk about “the dark side of God’s will” as I have taught on how to deal with suffering. That phrase is my attempt to provide a metaphor for certain seasons of life that are extremely difficult – moments when it feels as if God has abandoned you.

In 2012 while preaching on Psalm 89, I described it like this:

I call this moment “the dark side of God’s will.” By this I mean those moments when you are in the orbit of God’s will, but for a moment you are in a place in which the warm glow of His promise-keeping grace is eclipsed by difficulty, confusion, and pain. Being on the dark-side of God’s will doesn’t change the certainty of the providential orbit or the real presence of the promise-filled sun. Yet, the eclipse creates an environment that feels dark, cold, and lonely. You know that one day the sun will shine again, but it seems like a long way off when you are on the dark-side of God’s will. When you are in this season, you need a Psalm like Psalm 89.

That concept is helpful for me when I need to trust that God is working out a plan that is bigger than what I can see or know. I've anchored my heart to God's sovereignty when life is painful, confusing or seems to be unfair.

But there is another aspect of the dark side of God's will. In the same way that the bigness of God's plan should inform how I see the circumstances of my life, so too His holiness must inform how I view the problem of sin in me and in the world. When life is confusing and you are wondering what is going on, it is then that your view of God's plan really matters. And when you see judgment fall – on society, on someone near you, or on yourself – that is when your view of God really matters. Or when you look back at history and you see the judgment of God, your view of God helps to interpret what is going on.

So, what is your view of God in relationship to His holiness and sovereignty? How big is your God? How different is He from you? And then: how does that affect your perspective on sin? Do you take sin seriously in your life? Do you know how lament can help with that?

The Tune of God's Glory

Lament is a heart-felt cry of sorrow as we pour ourselves out to God in prayer. It serves the Christian as an interpreter of life's pains and sorrows. It takes the "thing" that is happening, and it interprets what lies underneath and beyond whatever has happened. Christian lament is one of the most theologically-rich things that we do, and it ought to be because what you really think about God, yourself, and the world surfaces in those moments.

I've compared it negatively to the sediment in a beaker. A substance lies dormant at the bottom of the beaker and the rest of the solution can look pretty clean and pure. But when the beaker gets bumped, that's when what lies beneath becomes clear and evident. Things come out of our mouths. Things that we really believe suddenly surface. And part of what comes to light in that moment is your view of God. That is the beauty and trauma of suffering, whether it is innocent or deserved suffering. It tests what we really believe to be true about God.

Lament, especially Lamentations, is helpful in that it tunes the heart to God's glory. It reminds us that there is a bigger symphony that is being played in the universe. We may have an instrument and we may be able to make music, but only God plays the symphony. How does lament relate to this? In two ways: 1) It gives us the sheet music to play when we are invited into God's tune. In other words, it connects us back to the bigger story of God's glory when we are hurting, confused, or struggling. 2) In reading lament and reflecting on it, we are able to have God tune our hearts to His glory and to be warned. In other words, lament reminds us that God is merciful and kind and gracious. But he is also holy, just, and to be feared.

There is another side to grace. As I said last week: grace is only amazing because judgment is real. And that statement should make you rejoice and tremble. Lament tunes the heart to hear the major and minor keys of God's glory. It invites us to consider what kind of God we are dealing with. Lamentations 2, in particular, sings a terrifying song about God's glory in judgment.

My aim is to help you hear this tune in Lamentations 2, but to do so in a way that is balanced. You need to know upfront that there is no happy resolution to this chapter. God will bring restoration to His people, but this chapter is not about that. It is only about judgment. And I hope to keep it balanced today by showing how this picture of God is also seen in the crucifixion of Jesus. So as we really grapple with the horror of God's wrath, I want you to see the hope offered through the death, burial and resurrection of Jesus Christ.

The Wrath

The first ten verses are a poetic expression of what the judgment of God looked like in the city of Jerusalem. In case this is your first Sunday with us, the background to this Hebrew poem is the destruction of the temple and the city of the Jerusalem in 586 BC at the hands of the Babylonian army. God, through the prophet Jeremiah, had warned the people of Judah that judgment was coming, but they failed to listen. As a result, they faced the deserved judgment of God.

Now the first word in 2:1 is the same word in 1:1. "How!?" is both a question, a cry in pain, and a statement of struggle. What's more, it serves as the Hebrew title for the book of Lamentations. This shocking question will make more sense as we walk through the text. Chapter two is an amplification of chapter one. Also, you should note that there are twenty-two verses in this chapter as there was in the previous one. Lamentations 2 follows the same pattern as Lamentations 1 with the first word of every verse starting with the subsequent letter of the Hebrew alphabet. This is to communicate that God's judgment is from A to Z; it is complete and total.

Verse one serves as the theme for the entire chapter.

¹ How the Lord in his anger has set the daughter of Zion under a cloud! He has cast down from heaven to earth the splendor of Israel; he has not remembered his footstool in the day of his anger (Lamentations 2:1).

Take note of what we see here because it sets the framework for what is to come:

- The Lord is angry. This is not a comfortable thought or image, but it is real. The God of the universe can be justifiably and righteously angry.
- Even though the people of God are precious to Him (i.e., a daughter), He has set her under a cloud. What kind of cloud? It is a cloud of judgment.
- The glory of the people of God has fallen. The blessing of God has been removed. The light of the nations has been extinguished. A blessed people are now a disciplined people.
- The temple and the city seemed to have been forgotten by God. Ezekiel 8-10 records how the glory of God left the temple. The beauty of God's presence was gone.

Now that is just verse one! The rest of the chapter paints a relentless and troubling picture of God's wrath against the nation for their waywardness. Notice in verses 2-3 how God is described. Take special note of the verbs.

*² The Lord **has swallowed up** without mercy all the habitations of Jacob; in his wrath he **has broken down** the strongholds of the daughter of Judah; he **has brought down** to the ground in dishonor the kingdom*

and its rulers.³ He **has cut down** in fierce anger all the might of Israel; he **has withdrawn** from them his right hand in the face of the enemy; he **has burned** like a flaming fire in Jacob, consuming all around (Lamentations 2:2–3).

This judgment is severe, and Jeremiah wants us to see it from different angles and in full color. He wants us to see two things. First, he wants us to see the extent of the destruction and how bad it really is. And, secondly, Jeremiah clearly wants us to know that God is the one who is behind it. Babylon may be the means, but God was ultimately the one orchestrating the judgment. I know that for some of you, that raises all kinds of questions – really good questions. And what I want you to do is to set all of those questions aside as it relates to this text. Just see what Jeremiah wants you to see here. Behind the Babylonian army and the judgment of Judah is a holy God.

Now, we are going to come back to verses 4-5 in a moment, but let's see what other descriptions are given for God's disciplining work. In verses 6-7 the judgment of God even extends to the worship of God's people. Even the temple and all the worship connected to it is destroyed. Here's a quick survey of what we find: "laid in ruins his meeting place," "made Zion forget festival and Sabbath," "spurned king and priest," "scorned his altar," "disowned his sanctuary," and "raised a clamor in the house of the Lord as on the day of festival." This last statement means that temple festivals have been replaced with enemies who are celebrating.

What's more, the protection of the city was destroyed. In verse 8 we read that the walls and ramparts of the city have been laid in ruins. In verse 9 the gates have been knocked over, and there is no means to hold the enemy back. There is no defensive ability for the city. Jerusalem is totally exposed.

But the ruin is not just about the city; their culture is destroyed as well. According to verses 9-10, their leaders have been taken captive, they have no access to the Law, the prophets have no word from the Lord, the Elders are silent and in mourning, and the young women are weeping. Everything...everything is ruined. Everywhere you look there is destruction.

Now, let's go back to verses 4-5 because there is a concerning word there. He says that God has become like an enemy. The wrath of God has turned against Judah, and the results have been terrible. Death, destruction, and ruin are everywhere. In order to bring the people back to himself, God will have to discipline them severely. So much so, it will seem like the Lord is the enemy. Now let me assure you that God is surely not their enemy in the end. This book ends, in fact, with an appeal for God's restoration, which does happen in the future. But the pain of the moment makes it feel (that's an important word!) like God is the enemy.

The people of God are under the judgment of God. His wrath against their sin is being poured out in full measure. Despite the fact that they are His chosen people, despite His covenantal love for them, and despite His continual warnings, the nation has now reached a point where the scales of divine justice have tipped.

God leveled His own temple. He scattered His own people. He ruined His own city. Why? Because as important as Israel is to God, there is something more important: God's own righteousness. Israel began to believe that they could do whatever they wanted with God's commandments and

obedience. They were dismissive of God's rule in their life, and it led to this moment. And the smoldering ruins of Jerusalem are meant to send a message. The laments of lamentations are meant to be a warning: do not forget that God is holy. He is longsuffering and merciful, but the city of Jerusalem was a stark reminder that God will deal harshly even with His own people if they are rebellious against Him. Sin is that bad and God is that holy. Do you think of Him that way? You should. And you should tremble.

Now you need to know that Jerusalem in 586 B.C. is not the only place where God makes His holiness in contrast to man's sinfulness very clear. There is another moment when the wrath of God becomes shockingly clear.

So what is the greatest display of God's wrath in the New Testament? Where is the place or where would you point and say, "Let me show you how bad our sin is?" The answer, of course, is the crucifixion of Jesus Christ. In the cross of Jesus, we see the wrath of God poured out. Just listen to two texts. While they are short, they are loaded with important truth.

¹³ *Christ redeemed us from the curse of the law by becoming a curse for us—for it is written, "Cursed is everyone who is hanged on a tree"— Galatians 3:13 (ESV)*

²¹ *For our sake he made him to be sin who knew no sin, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God. (2 Corinthians 5:21)*

Jesus became a curse (Gal. 3:13) and became sin (2 Cor. 5:21). The Father crucified His own son in order that the sins of those who trust in Christ might be atoned. Jesus died a ghastly death because of the significance of the holiness of God. The ability to be forgiven by a holy God is directly dependent upon a sufficient sacrifice. God is able to be both just and justifier because of the cross (Rom 3:26).

It is at the crucifixion of Jesus Christ that we see both the mercy of God and the holiness of God. We get a clear picture of the beauty of God's grace, but we also should feel the weight of his righteousness. How holy is He? How righteous is He? How precious is His glory? So much so that He would bring judgment upon His people and would pour out His wrath on His own Son.

So when you read Lamentations 2, you need to ask yourself some questions:

- How big is God's holiness and righteousness to me?
- Do I take my sin seriously?
- Have I trusted Christ for the forgiveness of my sins?
- Is my heart tuned for God's glory?

You see this is one very practical way that Lamentations and the category of lament help us. They tune our hearts to be aware of the glory of God. As we read this chapter and as we lament the sin inside of us and around us, it reminds us about the important place of God's glory in the universe. Judgment can awaken the soul. And lament helps us by keeping the weight of God's glory in front of us and in our hearts.

The Sorrow

The second movement of chapter two extends from verses 11-19, and the focus shifts from the details of the destruction of the city to the deep grief that the people of God are facing. Jerusalem has experienced the wrath of a holy God, and it has not only devastated the city, but it has also created great grief in the heart of the people. The scene is sad. It is emotional and tragic. Lamentations was written to provide more than a historical record of Jerusalem's failure. It was composed to get into the heart of the people so that they would remember and be warned. Lamentations was meant to move the people of God.

Verses 11-12 make the lament personal and more emotional: *"My eyes spent with weeping; my stomach churns; my bile is poured out on the ground..."* (2:1). As Jeremiah and the people witness the destruction, they are deeply grieved. Even "innocent children" are caught up in this tragedy. The children faint in the streets, they cry out in hunger, they faint like a wounded man, and they are dying in their mother's arms. Few things are more moving than the suffering of children in the midst of a tragedy.

The judgment of Jerusalem cannot not just be studied; it must be mourned. Think of this as the difference between museums in Washington, D.C.: The Museum of Natural History and the Holocaust Museum. Both contain information and history, but they were not built for the same reason. The Holocaust Museum was built to remind and warn, and that is why there are clear messages and themes throughout the museum such as: "From Memory to Action," "Think About What You Saw," and "Only guard yourself and your soul carefully, lest you forget the things your eyes saw..." (Deut. 4:9). The facts and the emotions are meant to move and warn us.

The warning here is strong because the destruction is widespread. It seems like all hope is lost: "...for your ruin is as vast as the sea; who can heal you?" (2:14) The picture is bleak, and we learn about the spiritual component in verse 14. The spiritual leaders did not give people the truth of God's Word. They avoided dealing with the sins of the people. They gave the people misleading oracles. So underneath the destruction of the city was a very significant spiritual problem. Judgment has come because of sin.

What's more, the enemies of Judah rejoice over their defeat. They mock the former glory of Israel (v. 15). Jeremiah even puts Psalm 48:2 in their mouth as they ridicule the statement "the perfection of beauty, the joy of all the earth." The enemies of God are laughing at the promises of God and the destruction of the Jerusalem. They proudly act as if they are the ones who have brought the people of God down (v. 16).

And to make matters even worse, all of this has happened at the command of the Lord (v. 17). God has used a victorious enemy to be the instrument of His judgment. Part of the grief here is the fact that God is not intervening and that, at the end of the day, He is behind this terrible judgment. That is what makes this situation so painful. The heart of the nation is breaking.

Again, as we think about the trajectory of this and how it connects to the story of the gospel, it is very clear that the judgment of God which was poured out on the Son of God was not by accident. God was on a mission to provide atonement.

²³ *this Jesus, delivered up according to the definite plan and foreknowledge of God, you crucified and killed by the hands of lawless men (Acts 2:23).*

And Jesus himself cried out to God while on the cross. He not only asked that his persecutors be forgiven, but he poured out his heart because of the personal abandonment that he experienced and felt: *“My God, My God, why have you forsaken me? (Matt. 27:46).* Jesus experienced the greatest and most frightening sorrow that is possible in the entire universe. He experienced separation from God.

In this respect, do you realize that Jesus not only saved us from our sins. He saved us from God. He saved us from being on the wrong side of God’s judgment. He saved us from the sorrow of judgment. The prophet Isaiah said it this way:

⁴ *Surely he has borne our griefs and carried our sorrows; yet we esteemed him stricken, smitten by God, and afflicted.* ⁵ *But he was pierced for our transgressions; he was crushed for our iniquities; upon him was the chastisement that brought us peace, and with his wounds we are healed. Isaiah 53:4–5 (ESV)*

The Appeal

The final section turns from a poetic recollection of the devastation of Jerusalem to an appeal to God. The wrath of God and the subsequent sorrow has now turned their focus toward God. In their sinfulness, they had ignored God. Now He has their attention.

¹⁸ *Their heart cried to the Lord. O wall of the daughter of Zion, let tears stream down like a torrent day and night! Give yourself no rest, your eyes no respite!* ¹⁹ *“Arise, cry out in the night, at the beginning of the night watches! Pour out your heart like water before the presence of the Lord! Lift your hands to him for the lives of your children, who faint for hunger at the head of every street.” Lamentations 2:18–19 (ESV)*

The people are now desperate. They long for God to hear them. The pressure of the moment and the judgment on their sin has awoken them to the destruction of their actions. They are feeling the pressure of being on the wrong side of God’s glory.

Therefore, they appeal directly to Him (v. 20): *“Look, O Lord and see! With who have you dealt thus?”* The people of God – His chosen people! – have now been rejected...and severely. And He gives two vivid examples of the horror of the judgment of God: *“Should women eat the fruit of their womb.... Should priest and prophet be killed in the sanctuary of the Lord?”* From a cultural and societal standpoint, it could not get any worse.

The city is ruined, people are dead, the nation is destroyed, and God has turned against His own people because of their sinfulness. There is a great and sobering summary in verse 21: *“You summoned as if to a festival day my terrors on every side terrors on every side, and on the day of the anger of the Lord no one escaped or survived” (v. 21).* Chapter 2 completes this comprehensive (A to Z) treatment of God’s wrath, and these last few verses show us that now God has the attention of the

people. They are appealing to Him and crying out to Him in the midst of this dark moment. It is similar to what the prophet Habakkuk said, “...in wrath remember mercy” (Hab. 3:2).

Experiencing, witnessing or remembering God’s judgment is meant to turn our hearts back to God. The record of God’s judgment on sin, whether it is Jerusalem in 586 B.C. or the crucifixion of Jesus, invites us to call out to God.

If you are not a follower of Jesus, it may be that this message and weight of the vision of God’s judgment is calling out to you to put your faith in Jesus today. It may be that the circumstances of your life are such that you know God is trying to get your attention. It may feel as if every where you turn, you are being resisted. If you are broken over your sin, weary of running your own life, and ready to trust Christ, why not do so today?

Many of you are followers of Jesus, and there are some of you who know, right now, that you are under the disciplining hand of the Lord. It is not that God is punishing you for your sin – that was already paid by Jesus at the cross. But it may be the pain, the struggle, or the hard circumstances in your life have served to awaken you to your need to take sin more seriously or to treat God’s glory with more respect. Why not cry out to him today for mercy and grace?

Finally, we see in this text a very important warning that every believer should heed regardless of what is going on in your life right now. Lamentations reminds us that God is holy. It shows us the dark side of God’s glory. This chapter invites us to soberly have our hearts tuned again to God’s glory, and for us to heed the warning in Hebrews 12:

²⁵ See that you do not refuse him who is speaking. For if they did not escape when they refused him who warned them on earth, much less will we escape if we reject him who warns from heaven....²⁸ let us be grateful for receiving a kingdom that cannot be shaken, and thus let us offer to God acceptable worship, with reverence and awe,²⁹ for our God is a consuming fire. (Hebrews 12:25& 29)

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