

Why?!?

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[0 : 00] You can turn in your Bible to 2 Kings chapter 25. 2 Kings chapter 25.

And we are beginning a series on lament that will be focused on the book of Lamentations, but not exclusively on the book of Lamentations. And so that's why I put a little subtitle, and Lydia helped me with this, sermons about lament. Because we probably won't just be in Lamentations, I think we'll look at at least one psalm of lament as well. I find the first sermon of a preaching series, especially something like this, where we are not yet getting ourselves into the actual book. I find it to be quite challenging to know how much do we sort of wet our appetites, how much needs to be said today in order to help us prepare for the book of Lamentations without sort of just dumping the whole book of Lamentations on us. So that is our challenge for today. And the Lord will help us by the power of the Holy Spirit.

The presence of pain and the persistence of suffering and the power of evil. These are perpetual puzzles that perplex humanity.

Can you think of one day in the last thousand days? One day of your life in the last thousand days that wasn't touched by pain, or tarnished by sorrow, or tainted by evil.

I suspect that I am not the only one who regularly cries out, why is this happening to me?

[2 : 14] For followers of Jesus, this question, why is this happening to me, becomes even more poignant with a subtle little shift in emphasis. We might ask it this way, why is this happening to me?

How can a supposedly good God permit so much pain and suffering and evil to happen to his children?

This is like one of those multiple choice questions that we all hate, where none of the answers seem right, and yet you have to pick the best answer.

Do you feel the discomfort? Do you feel the pressure when someone asks, if your God really is in control of everything, as you say that he is, then why doesn't he do something about that suffering? Brothers and sisters, we will not help others by minimizing their pain.

[3 : 36] We will not help others by trivializing their suffering. We will not help others by overlooking evil that lurks behind injustice and abuse.

Nor, nor will you and I gain opportunities to testify for the hope that is in us. Unless if our neighbors and our friends and our co-workers really understand that for us as well, life is hard.

And that we only endure by God's sufficient grace. And that there is a hope that we have that is outside of ourselves and our circumstances.

If we want to have opportunities to testify to the hope that we have, like we read about in 1 Peter, then we must be willing to acknowledge the reality of pain and suffering and evil in our world.

There is no epidural for grief on this side of our eternal inheritance.

[4 : 50] There is no pill that you can pop. There is no miracle cure for suffering in this world that has been irreparably ruined by sin.

So, hear well the most comforting theme in Scripture. Where there is pain and where there is suffering and where there is evil, there, there is God.

Where there is pain, where there is suffering, where there is evil, there is God. A theologian no less distinguished than Celine Dion sang, Near, far, wherever you are.

I suspect David sang it better, but with similar lyrics. This is Psalm 139 and verse number 8.

If I ascend to heaven, you are there. And if I make my bed in Sheol, you are there. If, if I take the wings of the morning and dwell in the uttermost parts of the sea, even there, your hand shall lead me and your right hand shall hold me fast.

[6 : 12] Do you believe that? That God is with you? That God promises never to leave you? That even if you were to try to hide from him, the darkness that you think covers you is as bright, as light

as the day.

Darkness and light, we read in Psalm 139. Are the same to our God. Rather than a cure-all, quick-fix elixir that in the end would prove to be temporary and inadequate, our Lord offers his presence in pain.

And he gives us his word to provide perspective on our suffering. And in his gift of community, we find people, brothers and sisters, to share our grief with, who will disciple us towards endurance and nourish our hope by strengthening our faith.

Now, in addition to the fact that the poetry that we will encounter in Lamentations will feel off-putting to us, simply because it's poetry.

And I know it's not all of our thing. In addition to the fact that this poetry feels off-putting, there's an additional challenge that confronts us as we look at this book of Lamentations.

[7 : 49] Most of us are not Jews. And so these events that are described in the book of Lamentations, they're not part of our history.

And though this life-changing event happened to real people, it happened in 587 B.C., 2,600 and some years ago.

It is so far outside of our scope of history, what we think about when we think of history. And we are, as the crow flies, about 5,300 miles away from Jerusalem.

And so, except for what we hear on the news about the war that is happening there, this is not our context. And finally, since the events associated with the exile of God's people are so horrific, they can sound to us like they are just made up.

You know, when you hear a story and it sounds so wild, so crazy, that you just say, that sounds made up. Here is the challenge for us then.

[9 : 14] Lamentations may feel distant. And it may feel difficult to relate to. And frankly, it may on the surface feel irrelevant to us.

And so let me try to stir up some memories for you of some more recent and personal events. My hope is that by mentioning these events, even just briefly, that are a little closer to home, we might be able to sort of gather these disconnected memories into a bit of a bundle and say, okay, I'm beginning to engage with what you're telling me we're going to get.

I was nine years old in January 1986, and I had a dentist appointment one morning. And so I was home from school, and I watched live as the space shuttle Challenger exploded 73 seconds into its flight with teacher Krista McAuliffe on it.

And that felt like a tragic loss of life to me. It felt disorienting.

But that particular event was not widespread destruction like we read about in Lamentations.

[10 : 47] And so for that, I wonder if you can recall some of the images and video of the tsunami that swept over Japan in March of 2011.

Widespread, devastating destruction. Massive waves of water carrying away cars and trucks and homes.

But I realize that we don't live in Japan, and so recall where you were and what you were doing on the morning of September 11th.

What did you feel that September morning in 2001 when you learned about the unprecedented attacks on the United States in New York and in Washington, D.C.?

Very close to home. Do you remember the shock that you felt this summer when the news about a shooter near downtown began to spread through our community?

[11 : 57] And then the fear that I think settled on many of us and the anxiety of realizing that as investigators began to piece things together, realizing that the shooter may have done some searching to try to get himself near the street fair.

In addition to physical pain and emotional grief that the people of Judah experienced, they also experienced spiritual suffering.

It was as though God had abandoned them. I know this may still be raw, but many of us have experienced the loss of a church family.

We were part of a community that we believed was good and we believed was good for us. And then in a matter of days, it was gone and all of God's calling and all of God's promises and all of the things that it seemed like God was doing among us, they were just gone and over.

I wonder if that particular memory helps us enter into what the people of Judah must have experienced in some way spiritually to recognize that the city that we mentioned in our call to

worship is destroyed and the dynasty of David has come to an end and God's promises seem to have failed.

[13 : 48] If you can pull all of these diverse examples together, then perhaps you can begin to glimpse some of the emotion that we will feel in the book of Lamentations.

This is important because no other book in Scripture has as much feeling in it as Lamentations. But here is what I would love for us to remember today.

All of the feelings are connected to facts. Lamentations is not emotion for the sake of emotion, though it contains the stuff of real nightmares.

The suffering in Lamentations was not a dream. It was not imaginary. It was real. The feelings are very intense, but the facts behind these feelings are firm.

And if we lose this connection, if we lose the connection from the feelings to the actual facts, then I suspect that Lamentations will feel either sort of cheesy to us, like it's unbelievable, cheesy, overly emotional, or it will feel so overly dramatic, so overblown, that it will seem unrelatable and we won't connect with it.

[15 : 22] I'd love for us to make sure that we keep the facts connected with the feelings.

Lamentations is a series of songs memorializing the destruction of Jerusalem and the exile of God's people. It is likely written by the prophet Jeremiah, who didn't want anyone to forget the lessons from this awful moment in Israel's history.

How did we get here? After King Saul and David and Solomon, the nation of Israel divides into two kingdoms. It's known as Israel in the north and Judah down in the south where Jerusalem is.

The north was led by a series of wicked kings. And as a result, after ignored warnings from God's prophets, the northern kingdom was conquered by Assyria.

Now this should have been a warning to the southern kingdom. And yet, it didn't take all that long for Judah to persist in its rebellion against God and its ignoring of God's prophets.

[16 : 44] And they also were conquered. How did it happen? Well, Babylon laid siege to the city of Jerusalem for about three years.

Kids, do you know what a siege is? I should have prepared for this. I did not prepare for this. If everybody in the room goes over to Corey's place and we form a ring around Corey's apartment and we say, no one is getting out and no one is getting in unless we say.

That's a siege. Except, imagine doing it around an entire city. Right? Imagine if we were to gather, I don't know how many people we'd need, more than we have here, and we go down, let's say, to Horus.

And we make a big ring around the city of Horus and we say, no one is getting out and no one is coming in unless we say. What would happen to the city of Horus?

They would what? They would laugh, first of all. We don't, we don't do this. We don't do this anymore. But this is how you would have to conquer a massive city like Jerusalem.

[18 : 07] They've got a big wall. What are you going to do? You can't just go bursting through that wall. You show up, they'll just murder, they'll just kill all of you. So you laid siege to the city and you wait them out till all of their food runs out.

And the people get restless and they get angry at their leaders and their king because they're like, why don't you do something about this? Why don't you help us? This is what it means to lay siege to a city.

Babylon did this to Jerusalem. Gathered its army around the city of Jerusalem and no one could get in and no one could get out for three years.

Can you imagine how restless the people must have become? The people nearly starved to death. And eventually the wall was breached and the Babylonian army flooded into the city and they burned the temple and they demolished the wall and they looted everything valuable.

[19 : 18] Remember the story of King Belshazzar drinking from the golden goblets and seeing the writing on the wall? We read that in Daniel.

Where do you think they got that stuff? Right here. They took it. They looted all of God's vessels from the temple.

Those who survived became exiles and slaves.

Let's look at 2 Corinthians 25 and let's identify some facts behind the feelings.

This may feel just a little different. Come on up. Come on up, Emily. This will feel just a little different than normal because I want to kind of talk you through this text. We're going to look at 22 verses

and I just want to tell you so you know the things that I've mentioned so far what is happening in the text as we read it.

[20 : 24] Okay? So first we're going to read two verses and they're going to describe the siege. This Babylonian army gathering around the city of Jerusalem and staying there for three years.

No one gets in or out unless if they say. This is verses verse numbers 1 and 2 of 2 Kings 25. And in the ninth year of his reign in the tenth month on the tenth day of the month Nebuchadnezzar king of Babylon came with all his army against Jerusalem and laid siege to it and they built siege works all around it.

So the city was besieged till the eleventh year of King Zedekiah. Okay? Here's the siege and now what? Nobody can get in. Nobody can get out. You can't go plant your crops.

They're not hauling in goods in a big truck so that you can eat. People get hungry. Verse number three. On the ninth day of the fourth month the famine was so severe in the city that there was no food for the people of the land.

So what's going to happen now? Verses four through seven. The army and the king flee. Then a breach was made in the city and all the men of war fled by night by the way of the gate between the two walls by the king's garden and the Chaldeans were around the city and they went in the direction of the Araba.

[21 : 46] But the army of the Chaldeans pursued the king and overtook him in the plains of Jericho and all his army was scattered from him. Then they captured the king and brought him up to the king of Babylon at Riblah and they passed sentence on him.

They slaughtered the sons of Zedekiah before his eyes and put out the eyes of Zedekiah and bound him in chains and took him to Babylon. Now if we have a fire, right, we call the fire department and the fire department comes with all of their stuff, maybe even a truck that has a whole bunch of water already reserved in it.

But imagine a city 2,609 years ago that does not have running water, does not have any way of pumping the water that it does have and imagine lighting a fire in this city.

This is verses number 8 and 9. In the fifth month on the seventh day of the month, that was the 19th year of King Nebuchadnezzar, king of Babylon, Nebuchadnezzar, the captain of the bodyguard, a servant of the king of Babylon, came to Jerusalem and he burned the house of the Lord and the king's house and all the houses of Jerusalem.

Every great house he burned down. Now if you're in your city 2,609 years ago, you feel safe because you have a wall around your city.

[23 : 07] We know that some of these walls were so massive that you could drive two chariots on top of the wall side by side and they could pass like a two-lane highway that we might drive on when we go to the lake.

When you're in your city and you've got your wall, you feel safe and protected there. But look what happens in verse number 10. And all the army of the Chaldeans who were with the captain of the guard broke down the walls around Jerusalem.

And now what? Now your protection is gone. Your king is gone. The army is gone. You're already starving.

The city, the temple, the palace, it's all on fire. Verses 11 and 12. And the rest of the people who were left in the city and the deserters who had deserted to the king of Babylon, together with the rest of the multitude, Nebuchadnezzar and the captain of the guard carried into exile.

But the captain of the guard left some of the poorest of the land to be vinedressers and plowmen. Okay, so this is where you would find the connection to the book of Daniel. The people are taken away into exile and they are now living in a foreign land as foreigners.

[24 : 26] Daniel and Shadrach and Meshach, the people. And those that are left behind are what? Did you see that? They're slaves. They're working for the king of Babylon. And now, verses 13 through 15, we see something very devastating.

The looting, the looting of the temple. In other words, taking all of the valuables from the temple and hauling them to Babylon. This is verses 13 through 15.

And the pillars of bronze that were in the house of the Lord and the stands and the bronze sea that were in the house of the Lord, the Chaldeans broke in pieces and carried the bronze to Babylon.

And they took away the pots and the shovels and all the snuffers and the dishes for incense and all the vessels of bronze used in the temple service, the fire pans also and the bowls.

What was of gold the captain of the guard took away as gold and what was of silver as silver. You could read down through verse 16 and 17 as well.

Thank you. As for the two pillars, the one sea and the stands that Solomon had made for the house of the Lord, the bronze of all the vessels was beyond the weight. The height of the one pillar was 18 cubits and on it was a capital of bronze.

[25 : 40] The height of the capital was three cubits. A latticework and pomegranates, all of bronze, were all around the capital and the second pillar had the same with the latticework. Okay, so the city's on fire, the temple has been looted, your army is gone, you're being hauled off to Babylon and now as these things are happening, verses 18 through 21, they're going to kill all of the leaders of God's people.

And the captain of the guard took Saraiah, the chief priest, and Zephaniah, the second priest, and the three keepers of the threshold and from the city he took an officer who had been in command of the men of the war and five men of the king's council who were found in the city and the secretary of the commander of the army who mustered the people of the land and sixty men of the people of the land who were found in the city.

And Nebuchadnezzar and the captain of the guard took them and brought them to the king of Babylon at Riblah. And the king of Babylon struck them down and put them to death at Riblah at the land of Hamath. So Judah was taken into exile out of its land.

Do you feel this? Everything is gone. And now just one more verse verse number 22. What's to become of Judah?

What is to become of Jerusalem? Its status is as a vassal a vassal a city.

[27 : 05] In other words a city that's paying tribute to a foreign king under the boot of a foreign king. Verse 22 please.

And over the people who remained in the land of Judah whom Nebuchadnezzar king of Babylon had left he appointed Gedoliah the son of Ahicham son of Shavon governor. We have to remember thank you Emily that despite the shocking things that we read the laments do not embellish the facts.

the siege the famine the flight of the king the looting of the temple the burning of the temple and the palace the demolition of the wall the slaughter of all of the leaders the exile of the inhabitants the expectation of foreign help and then that foreign help failing to come the subordination of God's people under a foreigner the apparent end of David's dynasty the annulment of God's promises all of this seems utterly horrible and it really is but don't lose sight of that of this this is factual and historical we want to know why did this happen to me and perhaps a question more important than the why is to acknowledge what just happened to me see suffering is triggered by something these are the things that we have just read about together this is the what happened that triggers the suffering of God's people as they are taken away into exile their feelings their emotions are connected to these facts suffering is triggered by something it could be a discouraging word it could be a natural disaster it could be an injustice a divorce the birthday of a parent who has passed away it could be unforgettable betrayal or a tragic accident or a cancer diagnosis all suffering is triggered by something and hear this this is God's grace to us that suffering does not happen to us apart from something that triggers it suffering occurs within the framework of history time and place and people and when we remember that the suffering that we feel is connected to something real that actually happened then suffering takes its place in our lives as one of many things but not the only thing a significant thing but not an ultimate thing grace tethers grief to history so that suffering is significant without being ultimate if we don't receive

God's grace and tether our suffering within the framework of history if we don't give it a time and a place and people if we don't understand the what happened then as Eugene Peterson writes suffering like a helium filled balloon lifts us off the ground and we drift directionless through the air at the mercy of air currents and the barometric pressures of hormonal secretions in other words our emotions drag us around sorrow that is untethered from the history that caused it produces overwhelming anxiety insecurity anger bitterness shame mental illness suffering may not be explained by history but history is necessary to prevent our suffering from expanding disproportionately to the actual events that caused it do you see that reflect for a moment on the suffering that you experience maybe suffering that you are experiencing right now is it by God's grace is your suffering your sorrow your grief still tethered to history or has your suffering your grief broken loose like a runaway hot air balloon causing you to drift directionless at the mercy of every

triggering event at the mercy of your own emotions is your sorrow still proportionate to its underlying cause or has it become so over inflated such that every conversation is dominated by the ways that you have been hurt and every spare moment is consumed by what you have gone through I speak to my own heart first sin is not the cause of all suffering and yet all suffering can be correlated to sin your sin their sin Adam's sin through the suffering and death of the Lord Jesus Christ God dealt with sin yours and theirs and Adam's and after three dark lonely hours on the cross where God punished him for sin Jesus cries out my God my God why have you forsaken me [34 : 41] Mark chapter 14 dear friend you are not the first one nor the last one nor the only one crying out for an answer to the question why we won't find answers at the cross to all of our why questions but it is at the cross that we see most clearly that where there is pain where there is suffering where there is evil there is God and this is the most comforting theme in scripture for the joy set before him Jesus endured the pain the suffering and the evil of the cross and through the finished work of Jesus there is forgiveness for sinners like us we find forgiveness and grace mercy and hope

I wonder do you need forgiveness and grace and mercy and hope this morning come come to Jesus believe in Jesus followers of Jesus the presence of pain and the persistence of suffering and the power of evil find their match and their meaning and their comfort in the security of our salvation purchased by Jesus on the cross they find their purpose in the promise of God's sufficient grace and this means we can take suffering seriously while keeping it firmly tethered to history we grieve truly we grieve deeply but we do not grieve without hope though we may not have answers to the perpetual puzzles that perplex all of humanity us included we believe that God permits suffering to accomplish his purposes for his glory and the good of his people so rather than rescuing us from grief lamentations I believe will orient us towards God God who is with us in our grief and working in us through our grief let's pray good father we are grateful to receive your word this morning thank you for giving us personalities and emotions and ways of expressing these things tainted by sin would you please help us to anchor our feelings to facts and to tether our grief to history we recognize that this is your grace to us we need this grace or we will be overwhelmed by our suffering and our grief and our sorrow would you please help us to be the kinds of people who suffer and grieve but not without hope help us to grieve truly and deeply our losses our hurts help us to recognize that we are not alone remind us of our savior and all that he experienced so that he could be a faithful and sympathetic high priest for us father as we prepare to receive the lord's supper would you please by the power of the holy spirit give conviction where that is necessary give encouragement where that is necessary give comfort where that is necessary give relief from shame and guilt where it's necessary would you please do that by the power of the holy spirit as we quiet our hearts before you and examine our hearts and prepare to receive the lord's supper father we know the grace of our lord Jesus Christ that though he was rich for our sake he became poor so that we through his poverty might become rich we are so rich in grace and mercy and love help us to minister this to those around us who also walk through suffering we pray and ask these things in Jesus name amen to to to to to to to