Congregation of the Lord Jesus Christ,

A few years ago now, when ISIS was a strong force in the Middle East, one of their targets was the **Assyrian Christians** who lived in that region. Many were killed and many had to flee their homes to escape death. At the time, I read a report from one church leader who said, It is “genocide – ethnic cleansing … They are killing our people in the name of Allah and telling people that anyone who kills a Christian will go straight to heaven …[Our people] fled their villages and houses [with] nothing but … the clothes on their backs … [It is] an exodus … Christians are walking on foot in Iraq's searing summer heat towards the Kurdish cities … the sick, the elderly, infants and pregnant women among them. They are facing a **human catastrophe**.”

Well, the fact is that the human catastrophe that happened in the Middle-East then was half a world away from you and me. The closest we came to it was news stories on our TV screens in between programmes like The Chase and The Batchelor. And if it was hard for us to really understand the scale of the human catastrophe that took place in 2012, it is near on impossible for us to imagine the human catastrophe that was the destruction of Jerusalem and the Babylonian captivity 2600 years ago!

But if you have been here for this short series of sermons on the Book of Lamentations, I am sure you will agree that the author of the book has done his level best to help us see just how horrific this time in the history of the Jewish people was. But just in case we are not quite there yet, with the last of the five poems that make up this book, the author makes one last attempt to capture the horror of that time. And he does this not only with his words, but also with the **structure** of his poem.

When we looked at ch. 3, I spoke about the poetry of Lamentations. And we noted that chapters 1,2,3 & 4 are acrostic, which means that in Hebrew the first letter of verse 1 begins with A and verse 2 B and verse 3 C, etc. But that is not the case here in ch. 5.

And the other thing we noted is that ch’s 1-3 have three lines of poetry per verse or stanza and ch. 4 has two lines of poetry per verse/stanza, but ch. 5 has just one-line stanzas. So it is the shortest of the five poems and it does not have the cute alphabet layout. Have you heard the expression ‘**without rhyme or reason**’ before? We use it when there doesn’t seem to be any reasonable explanation for something. When someone does something odd someone might say he behaved ‘without rhyme or reason.’ So because of what I have just explained about the poetry of ch. 5, and because of the **ending** of the chapter, which seems to lack certainty about whether the people will actually be restored, I am calling this chapter ‘Without Rhyme or reason?’ (question mark) It is as though the poet is asking the Lord, **is all that has happened without rhyme or reason**?

And the Assyrian Christians I mentioned would surely have asked the same question and it is very common for Christians who experiences a severe trial to ask the same question: Why has this happened to me? Will this ever end? Where are you God? So what answers do we get from this, the last of the 5 poems of Lamentations?

1. Well, the first thing for us to note is that while the first four poems were the Narrator and Lady Zion speaking to each other and describing what had happened, this last one is a **prayer** that is addressed to the Lord.
2. And it begins with a call to the Lord to **Remember** what has happened to Jerusalem and her people. And as we shall see, this chapter seems to be written from the perspective of someone who was allowed to remain behind in the destroyed city of Jerusalem. And we know that the Babylonians did leave behind some of the elderly and the poor and the sick. And clearly some time had gone by since the destruction of Jerusalem and most of the people being carried away into exile. And as days and weeks and perhaps months or years or decades passed by, the poet was beginning to wonder if the LORD had forgotten the people and their distress.
   1. If you read through the book of **Judges**, you encounter the following pattern: The people do evil by worshipping false gods of one sort or another. Then the Lord hands them over into the hands of the Midianites or Amorites or the Philistines, etc, for X amount of years. And then you read words to the effect of, “But when the people of Israel cried out to the LORD, the LORD raised up a deliverer for the people of Israel, who saved them…” And then we are introduced to the new judge/deliverer/redeemer. So our poet, who surely knew his Jewish history well, with each passing year and no rescue or restoration or redeemer, is concerned that God has forgotten His people.
   2. So he reminded the Lord, again, of all that had happened:
      1. Verse 2 speaks of **occupation**. When the Jewish people first arrived in the Promised Land, the land was divided up and each tribe and family was given a piece of land as its permanent inheritance. It was not allowed to be sold; it had to remain with the family from one generation to the next as a symbol of God’s faithfulness. But all that was gone as the poet reminds the Lord that strangers now inherit the land.
      2. Verse 3 speaks of **Bereavement**. One of the ways that God demonstrated His love for His people was in the special laws He put in place for the care and protection of orphans and widows. Well, says the poet, Look, Lord, we are all orphans and widows because so many have died.
      3. Verse 4 speaks of **Poverty**. Jerusalem and Judah were once places of abundant and free supplies. But now the basics of life had to be bought and paid for.
      4. Verse 5 speaks of **Harassment**. The people were constantly hassled and harassed by enemies, to the point that they were exhausted.
      5. Verse 6 speaks of **dependence**. What is described there is the fact that those who remain in Jerusalem had to stretch out their hands to Assyria in the North and Egypt in the South just to get enough bread to survive on.
      6. Verse 7 speaks of **Generational** **Guilt**. Such is the weight of the disaster that has come upon the people, the poet recognizes that this must be, at least in part, because of the sin of previous generations.
         1. Now, we have to be careful here to remember God’s special relationship with the OT Jews. He ruled them, directly, as their government, if you like. The Second Commandment says, “*You shall have no other gods before me. You shall not bow down to them or serve them, for I the LORD your God am a jealous God, visiting the iniquity of the fathers on the children to the third and the fourth generation of those who hate me.*” So God had warned them what would happen if they worshipped idols. And there had been generations of idolatry in Israel and now the consequences of the Lord’s judgment were being endured by children and grandchildren.
         2. But this does not mean that if we encounter severe suffering today that it must be a punishment for something our parents or grandparents did. In the days of Jesus, His disciples saw a man born blind and they asked Jesus if the blindness was because of his sin or his parents. What was Jesus reply? The man’s blindness was not a punishment for his sin or the sins of his parents; it was so that the glory of God could be revealed as Jesus healed Him, which He then did. So the type of thing that happens at ‘healing and deliverance meetings,’ where people with illness or injuries are told to find out what their grandfather did do they can be delivered from the curse of that sin is not right.
         3. But what we can say is that if a professing Christian turns his or her back on the Lord and embraces an ungodly lifestyle and becomes a harsh critic of God and all that Christian mumbo jumbo, then unless the Lord graciously intervenes, there is every likelihood that what that man or woman does will have consequences for children and grandchildren.
         4. But having said that, we mustn’t how the Second Commandment ends! “*For I the LORD your God am a jealous God, visiting the iniquity of the fathers on the children to the third and the fourth generation of those who hate me,* *but showing love to a thousand generations of those who love me and keep my commandments.*”
      7. Verse 8 speaks of **humiliation**. The people who remained in Jerusalem were ruled by those who were only slaves themselves! How degrading for those who were once a military powerhouse in the region!
      8. And then v9 speaks of **Famine**, v10 speaks of extreme **sunburn**, v11 speaks of the horror of **Rape**, v12 speaks of **execution**, because the rulers of Judah had been hung or impaled by the hands of the enemy, and v13 speaks of the hard work of forced **slavery** and sheer **exhaustion**.
   3. Now congregation, if you have been here for this whole book, you must have a sense of the human catastrophe that was the destruction of Jerusalem. Can you feel the desperate sorrow and grief and weariness described here? The poet has chosen his words to help us *feel* this agony. And this is reinforced with **vv14-18**, which describe the **emotional anguish** of the poet and his people – there was no music, there was no joy, and there was no dancing. There was a sickness of heart and complete barrenness and desolation. Jerusalem was destroyed; life was utterly miserable. It should not be possible for us to read this and be unaffected by the sheer weight of the human catastrophe described here.
   4. But remember that the poet is speaking these words, first and foremost, to God, as a prayer. He is reminding God of the suffering of himself and the people. And here is the first major point of application as we consider this prayer. You see, in **Judges 10** there is one of those cycles of disobedience and deliverance. And this is what we read: “*And [the Lord] could bear Israel’s misery no longer*.” Or literally, “*His soul was grieved for the misery of Israel*.” Isn’t that beautiful!? What a wonderful reason to pray! God is grieved by the misery of His people!
      1. And in case you are thinking to yourself, hold on, haven’t we repeatedly heard that God is really, really angry with sin? Yes we have. And haven’t we heard that God brought this judgment on the people of Judah because of their sins? Yes, we have. But do you remember the words we read in Hebrews 12 that we read in connection with an earlier chapter? “*The Lord disciplines the one He loves … God is treating you as sons … He disciplines us for our good, that we may share His holiness*.” So in the same way that a parent can discipline their children in a way that causes the child pain, while still loving the child and hurting for the child, so the Father can discipline us and feel our misery. And He disciplines us always because He loves us and He wants us to grow in our love for Him and our trust in Him.
      2. So believer, in your suffering, pray to God. Turn to Him because He is the only one who is able to bring relief from distress and suffering.
      3. And remember that when you pray to God, you are praying to your *Father* in heaven who grieves for the misery of His children.
3. Another part of the poet’s prayer that is worth noting is the **confession of sin** in v16: “*Woe to us, for we have sinned*.”
   1. And it’s good for our prayers to include confession of sin.We referred to this verse this morning – **1 John 1:9** says, “*If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness*.” If you have trusted in Jesus Christ as your Saviour then all your sins were forgiven and dealt with on the cross of Calvary by the sacrifice of Jesus. Hallelujah! But we continue to sin in the here and now. And God is displeased with our sin. So we should be eager to turn to Him, often, and express sorrow for our sin and to speak of our resolve not to sin.
4. But as the poem begins to end, we see **more of the helpful why questions** of the poet in v20. And let me explain why they are helpful:
   1. In chapter 3 of Lamentations, we took note of a moment in the third poem when the poet spoke of being utterly empty of happiness, endurance, and hope. He described his soul as bowed down within him. But in the very next verse we read this, “*But this I call to mind, and there fore I have hope, the steadfast love of the Lord never ceases; His mercies never come to an end; they are new every morning; great is your faithfulness*.” The poet preached to himself; he reminded himself of the great truthes of God’s grace and mercy and love and compassion and patience, that the Bible is chock full of!
   2. Well here he does the same, but while the words from ch. 3 have become a hymn that would surely be one of the first ones called out if I asked us for favourite hymns, it is pretty obvious why the words at the end of ch. 5 are not a top ten hymn! The start is bright, “*But you, O Lord, reign forever; your throne endures to all generations*.” It is a declaration of God’s sovereign power as the eternal ruler of the universe. But then we read, “*Why do you forget us forever, why do you forsake us for so many days?*”
      1. And yet, while those words might not be in a favourite hymn, I suggest that you find them in the hearts of believers very often. In our tour of Lamentations we have often mentioned the fact that you often find prayers that use this language in the Bible. 1/3 of the Psalms are Psalms of Lament.
      2. And I guarantee you that when those Assyrian Christians were fleeing their homes and crossing the border to escape ISIS, they were not singing Onward Christina Soldiers, they were singing Psalms of Lament. Why Lord? Where are you, Lord? And if we could hear our brother, Pastor Wang Yi of ERCC, in his prison cell, we would hear the Psalms of Lament. Why Lord? Where are you Lord? And when illness or hardship or death comes into our homes, our prayers and our songs will be Why Lord? Where are you Lord?
      3. So we should be thankful that the Lord has caused prayers like these to be recorded in Scripture because they teach us that we may cry out to God in our pain and sorrow and confusion, so long as we cry out to Him as our faithful Father in heaven.
      4. **Philippians 4:6-7** says, “*Do not be anxious about anything, but in everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made known to God.**And the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus*.”
5. And that brings us, lastly, to **vv21-22**, “*Restore us to yourself, O Lord, that we may be restored! Renew our days as of old – unless you have utterly rejected us, and you remain exceedingly angry with us*.” Wow!
   1. In my research for this sermon I read that when these verses are read in Jewish homes and synagogues today, they read v21 again after they read v22. They refuse to let this poem end with v22. Isn’t that fascinating!
   2. But with that fact in view, let’s think for a moment about Jewish history. What we have seen as we have worked through this book is that it points forward to two things in particular, the return from exile but ultimately also to the coming of the Lord Jesus and His great work of salvation.
      1. And we know that the Lord brought the Jews back to Jerusalem. And the city and the temple were rebuilt. But you know what? The glory cloud of the Lord did not return to dwell in the Holy of holies in the temple as it had before the destruction of Jerusalem.
      2. And the people were not ruled by Jewish kings but by the Medes and Persians, and then the Greeks, and then the Romans.
      3. And there were no prophets and no direct word from the Lord for 400 years.
      4. And the same problems of injustice and immorality and idolatry continued.
      5. And then, finally, the long promised Messiah was born. The one who the people had been waiting for for 2000 years came among them. And what did these people who had sinned and who had been punished with destruction and exile for their sin, and who cried out to the Lord for a deliverer and deliverance, do to Messiah Jesus? They crucified Him. They did not learn the lesson that the human catastrophe described in Lamentations should have taught them. They remained a stubborn and rebellious people.
   3. So what Lamentations reveals is that man is really, really bad. And God is really, really angry with sin. But punishing us so that we learn the lesson and obey Him does not work. It *cannot* work because our sin is so all-consuming.
      1. So God chose to pour out His anger on Jesus so that He could pour out His grace on you and me.
      2. He was angry with Jesus, who did not deserve it, so that He need not be angry with us, who do deserve it!
      3. He made it possible for us to become His children not through a *human* catastrophe that we suffer, but through the *divine* catastrophe that Jesus suffered.

So I hope that you have learned from Lamentations that **God is a judging God**. He cannot ignore sin. And He will condemn unrepentant sinners to the fire and loneliness and misery of eternal suffering in hell. But He is also a merciful God! A gracious God! A loving God! “*For God so loved the world that He gave His only Son, Jesus, that whoever believes in Him should not perish but have eternal life*.” So the **last word of Lamentations**; the place where we must end is that God’s grace in Jesus Christ is really, really powerful!!! Amen.