

Title: Good and angry
Text: Lamentations 2
Theme: The unbearable weight of sin's consequences
Series: Lamentations #3
Prop Stmtnt: The anger of God is dangerous to talk about, but more dangerous not talk about.

The patience of God should never be mistaken for apathy. His warnings are not idle threats. If God is good, then he has to punish evil. Evil is insatiable. Evil does not stay in a corner and mind its own business. Evil is aggressive. Evil is destructive and left unchecked will not stop until everything good is destroyed. Therefore, if God is good, he has to punish evil, which means, if you are evil, God is not safe. If God is good, then he has to hate evil. No one but God has the capacity to understand the true nature of evil and just how evil it really is. Therefore, no one but God has the capacity to hate evil and respond to it. If God's response to evil is violent, it is only because evil demands it. If God response to evil is one of anger, it is because evil is really that bad. The anger of God is real. It is aroused by relentless rebellion. When God reacts in anger, it is not trivial. It seems out of character since God is so patient, but again we should never mistake the patience of God for apathy.

God cannot ignore evil and be good. But, God's good and righteous response to evil is not an unpredictable temper where he flies off the handle and in his rage wipes out a nation or two. God is relentlessly righteous, but not vindictive. He is just, but not petty. In fact, for several hundred years, God sent his servants the prophets to warn the nations of Israel and Judah of the consequences of their sin if they refused to repent. But, to most his warnings seemed like a long way off and irrelevant to daily life. But, they weren't. God was serious about his words. And true to his word, God used the Babylonian empire, and the army of Nebuchadnezzar to be the instrument of judgment upon his own people, the nation of Judah. The nation, and particularly the city of Jerusalem are devastated. Zion, the city of kings, the dwelling place of God, the site of the Temple, the Holy of Holies and the Ark of the Covenant is destroyed. Her massive walls sit in rubble. Her gates are burned with fire. The beautiful, historic estates and homes of her famous families are gone. The outline of the city upon the mountain is now like the contours of an ashtray that holds the charred remains of a nation smoked into ruin by the fury and might of Nebuchadnezzar. But the rise of the Babylonian empire is not a surprise to anyone listening to Judah's prophets. This is an event predicted at least 100 years earlier in the days of Hezekiah by the prophet, Isaiah. That which he and Jeremiah, and Habakkuk warned about is now reality. Yet, in spite of the warnings, no one was ready for how vast the devastation would be.

Lamentations is a series of 5 very carefully constructed poems that grieve the destruction of the city of Jerusalem by the Babylonians in 586 BC. The poet is not only a highly skilled composer who writes masterfully with style, meter, nuance and flow, he is an eye witness to the destruction and citizen of the city whose life has been virtually ruined. Through him we see it, smell it, feel it, and grieve it and we do so from several angles. Chapter 1 is characterized by shame and mourning. The second poem is full of anger. God's anger has been poured out on Jerusalem and the poet not only acknowledges this, but in response he, the poet is angry at God because it seems like Judah is getting punished by God when she only did the same things that everyone else did. Lamentations 2 is full of unresolved tension. God has poured out his anger on Judah and the poet can't handle it and is angry at God, and yet while he is angry at God, God is the only

One he can turn to, so in an angry desperation he demands God to do something about the mess that God has made, when in reality God has responded to the mess that Judah has made. There is another unresolved tension. God said that he is going to have a people that for his own who will bear his name and represent him on this earth. But, the people he has chosen keep rebelling against him and God also said that he will punish their sin. How on earth is that ever going to work?

1. **God did this!** (1-10)

This second poem (chapter 2) begins like the first one – ekah! “How” or “Alas” or even “Euughhh” It is a guttural cry of anguish and is not only the first word of chapters 1, 2 and 4, but this word is actually the title of this book in the Hebrew Bible. The opening line, not only speaks of the anger of God, but the poet sets this anger off against “the daughter of Zion.” Six times in the first 10 verses Jerusalem is referred to as the daughter of Zion or the daughter of Judah. There is a lot of emotional weight placed on these phrases. When you talk about a little girl, and particular a daughter, you naturally think of someone that you want to care for and protect. For God to be angry at the daughter of Zion means something has happened that is unimaginable. Yes, God did this, but he hated doing it!

The next phrase, “*He has cast down from heaven to earth*” establishes a direction, a flow of so much of what is described. Everything is crumbling and falling down. The violent verbs of “broken down”, “brought down”, “burned”, “swallowed up”, “poured out” describe actions that result in the city falling, so that the everything that was heavenly and high is now rubble, dirt and low. V. 9 The gates have sunk. They have crumbled. The people have too. Look at v.10. “*The elders (the respected ones) of the daughter of Zion sit on the ground in silence; they have thrown dust on their heads (they are lower than the dirt), and put on sackcloth; the young women of Jerusalem have bowed their heads to the ground.*” The ones who are respected and listened to have nothing to say while the young women are so disgraced and shamed they hide their faces.

The first ten verses attribute the destruction of Jerusalem to the hand of God and the language is interesting in the sense that so many of the events that happened to the enemies of Judah are now described as having happened to Judah. For example, when the Israelites came out of Egypt, God protected them from the Egyptians and from others by his presence in a cloud by day and fire by night. The cloud that guarded them then now hung over them in judgment v.1. The Egyptian army was swallowed up in the Red Sea, and now, it is the habitations of Jacob that are swallowed up in v.2. In v.3 God’s right hand that protected them was taken away as the enemy advanced. In v.4 God is the archer who releases the arrow of his wrath against his own. Taken together, God does not defend in v.3 but attacks in v.4. God did this. God’s hand used the eraser of Babylon to virtually wipe Jerusalem off the map.

Everything about social, political, religious, and cultural life has been demolished. No one (not kings, princes, prophets, priests, elders or statesmen) were spared. And nothing (not even the temple, the palaces or the great homes) were left standing. God destroyed even his own Temple. The language of v.6 captures it all. You may remember back when we studied the Tabernacle in the series from Exodus that God designed the Tabernacle to be a replica of the Garden of Eden. It was a picture of heaven on earth. In fact, God ruled his people from the holy of holies by

sitting enthroned on the ark of the covenant. The Garden of Eden was where God lived with his people. He walked with them and talked with them and enjoyed them and they, him. That is what God had in mind when he made the universe and this world. The sin of Adam ruined that, and God set out to restore it. The Tabernacle, which was replaced by the Temple looked back to the Garden of Eden, back to what was and it looked forward to the day when the entire world would be remade into the Garden of God, where God would live once again with his people. That is the theme and dream of the book of Revelation. So, right here, in this text, we have two very important truths, two important, unshakeable, unchangeable and undeniable truths violently colliding into each other. 1) God will have a people that he will dwell with and 2) God will not dwell with sinful people. And once again the tension is profound. How can God, how will God carry out his plan to dwell with his people when they keep rebelling against him? That question is not answered here. The loss of the dwelling place of God only adds to the grief. The destruction of Jerusalem at the hands of the Babylonians is not just historically significant, it is cosmic!

2. **I can't handle it!** (11-19)

Near the midpoint of the poem, the perspective changes. The poet who described the destruction of the city now is overcome with the deepest of griefs. He has no more tears left, they are all spent. His stomach is so cramped from throwing up, so wrenched from upheaval, that bile is coming out. He sees the effect of all of this on babies, infants even. Verse 12 is pitiful. The children cry, then they faint, then they die. There is no one able to care for them. They are dying, just like the city. The future is gone. Children die in their mother's arms. The poet, who is obviously skilled at writing and expressing himself has no words. He loves his city, but he has no words of comfort because at the moment he has no hope. Mothers cannot reassure their children. They cannot provide for their children. They cannot protect their children. Is there anything that is more grievous? (v.13 – what is there to say?)

Like the short little stabs at confession in chapter 1, there is a short acknowledgment of what contributed to all of this in v.14. For years, the true prophets of God were mocked because their message of repentance did not go over very well with people who wanted to live as if they could make up their own rules about life and do whatever they wanted to do. Other people called themselves prophets and they were very popular with the people because they told them what they wanted to hear. They did not talk about sin. They claimed that God would never judge them, never punish them and never allow the Babylonians to invade. Guys like Jeremiah were mocked as lunatics and delusional. They were accused of making people feel bad about themselves. *“They have not exposed your iniquity.”*

But, any prophet who exposes sin, can expect the wrath of the people. That is so true today. It is one of the reasons why I am so grateful for you. You are willing to study hard books like Lamentations and deal with hard topics, like our own tendencies, insecurities and idolatries. We should be careful that we not use truth like vice to crush one another, but neither should we hide behind the mask of being nice and avoid speaking the truth. This is the result. In v.14, the prophets did not want to upset anyone, so they refused to warn people about sin. Now, in v.15 what has happened? The people did not repent and now their sin and all of their destruction is exposed for everyone to see, and hiss at and applaud at their downfall. It is so pathetic. The

enemies of Judah are dancing in the streets. But, the poet knows (v.17) that God has done what God warned that he would do. He kept his word. But, at what cost? To the poet, the reality of God's judgement is simply too much. He can't handle it. He imagines (v.18) the city walls crying torrents of tears to God, pleading for relief, but there is none to be found. In v.19 he calls upon the city to cry out in the night, to pour out its heart, to lift its hands like a dying beggar to God, so that perhaps he could get a crumb or two before starving. The end of v.19 speaks of rampant starvation and death.

3. **Do something, God!** (20-22)

The last 3 verses of this poem are the words of the city crying out to God. They are the words that the poet has given to the city and they are hard to read. God is angry at their sin and they are angry in response. But, this is not the anger of two equals. The anger of the city is emotional, but unfounded. It is understandable as a reaction, but it is not a sustainable position. The city really has no ground for anger. But, in the moment, we can empathize. The atrocities are very deep. In v.20 the city is crying out to God and asking him if he has forgotten who they are? Women have lost their minds. They are doing the unthinkable. They are behaving as the worst of humanity by eating their children in an effort to stay alive. The priest and the prophet are being killed in the Temple, of all places. The dead are piled up in the city streets. The bodies of the young and old are heaped in piles.

“Look, O LORD and see!” Do something God! This is too much! Chapter 1 ends with a despair of sorrow. Chapter 2 ends with a despair of anger. The one who has done this, is the only one that I can turn to. How do you turn to the one that you are angry with? But, the end of chapter 2 is not the end.

God understands why and how you could get angry with him. He knows our frame. He remembers that we are dust. He knows that we are not always rational, but often emotional. So, while we may get angry with God, we are foolish to stay angry with God because, we don't have any grounds. What do you hope to accomplish with your anger at God anyway? Do you think he will apologize and confess that he made a mistake? He won't, because he didn't make a mistake, but at the same time, the book of Lamentations is evidence that God gives us space to work through and sort out the worst of situations without resorting to madness or self-destruction.

Nine years ago, my sister ended her life. My dad had died a few years before and my mom was not in good shape, so Cathi and I had to take care of everything. Many of you know the questions. What kind of family do I really have? What does this say about me? When I was about 14 I physically stopped her as she tried on two other occasions to take her life. She was not easy to live with. I was angry. I was angry because of how her life had become such a black hole for my family. I was angry because of how this so hijacked my life, thoughts, schedule and emotions. I was angry because I had to have a funeral service and you all had to interrupt your life and come. I was angry because my wife had to help me and my kids had to try to figure out what it means to have an aunt who ends it all. But, I was burdened. Every trip to her condo, every meeting with the authorities, every legal issue that I was tasked with taking care of, every piece of furniture that I had to move, every encounter in the recent past that I replayed a thousand times, every diary entry and letter of hers that I read was a weight that was chained to

my soul. Life was heavy and I was angry at how she chose to respond. I am not telling you that I have worked through all of that. I'm not sure I ever will this side of heaven. We all walk with a limp. But, this week, I have found what may to some be a "strange comfort" from Lamentations 2. We see it. God is good and angry and he has every right to be. But, the poet is angry. He is not necessarily good and angry, maybe just angry, angry at God, angry at the false prophets, angry at his own people, angry at the Babylonians, and every body decaying in the streets is another opportunity for him to be angry. He can't handle this. I find some comfort in that, because God, directed the poet to write these words and put them in the Bible so that when people like you and me go through dark nights of the soul, and are angry that there are no shortcuts or escape routes, and there are no other options but to get your hands and your heart messy, we can know that He knows. He knows! It's not that our anger is good. Mine wasn't. But, God gave the poet space for that and space for me and space for you to work through some of this. And since we all walk with a limp, it's probably a good idea if we learn to give others some space too.

But, what I just shared with you is ultimately not helpful to you if all that we have is shared misery. We can't stop here. Lamentations 2 is way more than the anger of the poet. Lamentations 2 is undeniable proof of the anger of God. God's anger is a righteous anger. Therefore, God's wrath is his righteous response to the offense of our sin. The sins of Judah were deep, like ours. And God was angry because it would not be right or good if he wasn't angry, yet like the poet we can't handle the anger of God. And yet, we have no one else to turn to, so we, like the city cry out, "do something God." And he did.

Did you know that the guy (Nebuchadnezzar) who destroyed the city of Jerusalem and wreaked all of this havoc wrote a chapter in the Bible? Read Daniel 4. It's the firsthand testimony (very humbling I might add) of Nebuchadnezzar's conversion. God doesn't have to have Israel or Jerusalem to carry out his plan. All looked like it was lost, but it wasn't lost. God restored the city, and the nation. And 600 years later Jesus Christ walked these streets and in fact one day he carried a cross. Do you know why he did that? Oh, you say, it's because God loves us. Yes, but it is also because God hates sin and because the just righteousness of God demands that sin be atoned for. What does chapter 2 teach? God is angry at sin and has to respond, but we can't handle it, so somehow we need God to save us from God. How can God save us from God? How can the mercy of God save us from the anger of God? This is exactly what Jesus did! On the night before he died, Christ was in the garden of Gethsemane, just outside the walls of the city of Jerusalem. It all came down to this. The mission of Christ was to become our sin-paying, wrath-absorbing sacrifice. In order to pay for our sin, Jesus had to become our sin, that is, he had to be credited with our sin. When Christ took the cup of wrath in the garden, he accepted the guilt and condemnation for the sins of every single person who would ever believe on him. The wrath of the Father was now concentrated upon him. And in his suffering and in his dying, Christ absorbed wave after wave after infinite wave of the Father's righteous wrath, until all of the Father's wrath against our sin was used up, at which point Jesus said, not in defeat, but in completion, in accomplishment, in victory – "It is finished." Jesus paid it all. Yes, God is angry at sin. No, you can't handle it. Yes, God did something! The mercy of God through Christ and only through Christ rescues us from the wrath of God against our sin. That mercy is ours when we repent of our sin and trust in and surrender our lives to Christ. God, who has every right to be angry with me, isn't. He exhausted that on Christ. I am the recipient (undeserved) of his love. Therefore, I do not have to be angry with my sister, or anyone else, and neither do you.