

Title: A New Norm (for now)  
Text: Lamentations 4  
Theme: When sorry doesn't leave  
Series: Lamentations 5  
Prop Stmtnt: God's faithful pain is for our eternal pleasure.

Read Text:

Anne Applebaum writes: *"The starvation of a human body, once it begins, always follows the same course. In the first phase, the body consumes its stores of glucose. Feelings of extreme hunger set in, along with constant thoughts of food. In the second phase, which can last for several weeks, the body begins to consume its own fats, and the organism weakens drastically. In the third phase, the body devours its own proteins, cannibalizing tissues and muscles. Eventually, the skin becomes thin, the eyes become distended, the legs and belly swollen as extreme imbalances lead the body to retain water. Along the way, different kinds of diseases can hasten death...."*

Anne's remarkable book *Red Famine*, painfully and somberly details the account of the forced starvation of 5 million Ukrainians by Stalin in 1931-1933. *Red Famine* is a hard book to read. It is also necessary if you want to understand Russia and Ukraine. Lamentations 4 is a hard text to read. It speaks of events that we would rather not think about. But, if you want to understand God and the gospel, these truths need to be part of your theology. We don't treasure the gospel if we don't understand its cost and our need. It is evident that the poet did not want to think about these events either. In fact, this chapter in particular feels like the poet attempting to process what has happened all around him. Historically, politically, and militarily we understand what has happened. Since Jerusalem and the nation of Judah, did not fall into the hands of the Assyrian empire she acted as if somehow she would not be conquered by the Babylonians. Even after Babylon came to town and slapped Jerusalem around a bit and forced Jerusalem to submit to Babylon Jerusalem broke her promise, rebelled and allied herself with Egypt thinking that Egypt will defeat Babylon. Babylon's Nebuchadnezzar could not let that happen and he waged something of a scorched earth campaign against the nation that culminated in a suffocating siege of Jerusalem. Inside Jerusalem there were two forces at work: 1) The politically popular voices of the false prophets were promising the king and the people that Jerusalem would never fall to the Babylonians. God would deliver them. 2) The unpopular voice of the true prophets, like Jeremiah who said that the Babylon was the hand of God's judgment and it would be better to repent and submit to God's hand. The refusal of the city to surrender only caused the pent-up fury of the Babylonians surrounding the city to get even hotter. Inside the city, the situation went from hopeless to horrific. The conditions were almost unspeakable. This poem speaks of the results of the siege (starvation) and the aftermath of the fall of the city. Life has changed drastically for the city and the nation and things would not go back to normal for a very, very long time. The poet is trying to process this new norm. It is hard.

1. **I can't believe this is happening.** (1-10)

The 4<sup>th</sup> poem is shorter than the first three. The poet is trying to wrap his arms around what has become of his city. He is in a fog. He cannot believe that this is happening. Everywhere he looks,

he sees misery. In fact, misery would be a good one-word summary of this chapter and the poet's life. The opening verse is saying that everything that was valuable and beautiful is now trash and ugly. Nothing sparkles. Nothing is attractive. There is nothing pleasant to look at. Can you imagine life, where there is nothing, absolutely nothing pleasant to look at? That is why I call Lamentations, a verbal holocaust.

What gets to him most of all, it seems, is what gets to us – the children. They are not the only victims, but they are the most vulnerable. We are not merely looking at the power of the Babylonians and the sickening consequences of war. We are looking at the consequences of rebellion against God. The consequences of sin are sickening. The consequences of sin are sickening because the nature of sin is so very serious. Underneath this historical event is an unmovable theological reality. Sin destroys. Sin causes deep loss. In these first 10 verses we read of the loss of dignity, the loss of status and esteem and then the very loss of civility and decency.

#### a. Loss of dignity

Our local newspapers are full of stories about the athletic and academic accomplishments of our kids. There is something about our kids doing well, that makes us feel good. Of course, the opposite of that is true. When something tragic happens to a kid, it feels as if our grief is even greater. The boys that Zion was so proud of are worth nothing (v.2). Starvation has become so bad, that the little ones, sustained by nursing are so dehydrated that their tongue is stuck to the roof of its mouth, while pitiful children begging get nothing.

Children are to be protected. They are the most vulnerable and times of war make that evident. Hunger kills them sooner than it does adults. And the starvation experienced by Jerusalem has resulted in the city turning its back on caring for its children. This city which prized and championed its children, now lets them die.

#### b. Loss of status

The downfall and degradation has affected everyone, even those who were used to finer things in life. These have fallen the farthest and lost the most. (v.5) The food snobs with refined palates and discriminating tastes now find themselves scrounging for anything edible and when they can't even find that, they die. The princes whose physical form was very easy on the eyes, whose bodies adorned the front pages of magazines (if they would have had them) are now darkened by the dying process. Their skin, once smooth and silky is dry and like tissue paper is easily torn and falls off the bones. Everyone is starving and everyone is gruesomely ugly. The famine has put everyone on the same level. The poet comments that death by starvation is so much worse than a sudden death by fire (Sodom) or by the sword (war). It was part of Babylon's cruelty to not kill everyone, but to allow vast amounts of people to die over time and in the process to kill one another. Why expend energy killing your enemy, when your enemy will do it to himself?

#### c. Loss of civility and decency

V. 10 is the most difficult verse to read. Young mothers, who cared for and provided for their children, now consider them expendable and are guilty of cannibalizing. We, who, for the most

part, only concern ourselves with what or where we will eat and not if we will eat simply cannot imagine this scene. Neither could the poet a few months earlier. The loss is overwhelming.

When you read accounts of disaster, and particularly this kind (what humans are capable of doing to each other), it is so easy to blame God. That is a theme in this book. God! Where are you? Why have you allowed this? Don't you care?! You get the challenges from members of your family or co-workers: How can you believe in a God who would allow such a thing to happen? Those comments reveal how little we know about God, and therefore, how little we are able to discern about our situation.

All this misery and degradation is the result of people rebelling against God. The severity of the consequences of sin are enormous because the nature of sin is so bad. If God did not punish sin, he would be a bad God. The fact that he is an infinitely righteous God, means that sin has offended his righteousness. God takes our sin so much more seriously than we do. We casually say that "Jesus died for our sins" without realizing what that means. Look through the eyes of the poet. What do you see? You see the result of what happens when people sin and sin and sin and act like they will never get caught, or that sin is not really that big of a deal. God withdrew his grace from Jerusalem. He allowed the natural consequences of evil to be unleashed.

If you are in rebellion to God, God is not safe. However, if we never talk about that and never let people know about the severity of God's wrath, we are defaming God. A domesticated god, whom we can train to fetch, rollover and beg is not God. To the rebellious, God is not safe. What has happened to Jerusalem is shocking on two levels. The poet is saying, I can't believe that this has happened because the righteous wrath of God is terrifying. It is overwhelming. But there is more. The consequences are so stunning because no one believed that something like this was possible. Now, the reality of the consequences finally begins to expose why this has happened.

## 2. **Our sins have caught up to us.** (11-16)

Back in the book of Deuteronomy, God warned his people that this would happen to them if they rebelled. His warnings were intended to keep them from sin. But, they kept pushing the boundaries. Like little kids trying find out how much they can get away with, they pushed and pushed and pushed. Over time, they concluded that they could get away with things. They were special. They were the people of God. They were the exception to the rule. If you would have told these same people that they would be killing each other for food and living like animals, they would have said to you what most of us have said in response to this. "I would never do such a thing."

It's like the man who says, "Sure, I have a little temper and lose my cool once in a while, but I would never hit my wife. I would never slap my kid. That is a line I would never cross." And he really believes it, because that is a line that he would not cross today. But sinful anger does not play nice and it does not keep the rules. Sinful anger is aggressive and the person you think you could never be, is the person that sin will make of you. These people lived as if they could handle it. But, when we are dismissive of our sin, we are already owned by it.

It's like the girl who says, "It's just innocent flirting. I would never cheat on my husband, but this other guy just makes me feel pretty and alive and easy to talk to. I forgot how much I liked that. But, it won't go anywhere. We're just old friends." And it won't, today. But insecurity and living for the approval of others does not play by the rules. And the very thing you swore you would never do, be that woman, is the woman that sin will make you. Your sin will catch you. Those of you who are looking at porn and telling yourself that you can stop anytime that you want, why don't you? Why don't you just stop? I mean for good. Because when you say, I can stop anytime I want, you are saying you are in control. You are claiming to be more powerful than the sin. You are not in control. Sin is bigger than you. Sin will catch you.

Beloved, I have to tell you this. I have to preach this to myself and to you. What happened to Israel was the fact that most of her prophets refused to tell her the truth about the seriousness of her sin (v.13). Israel and Judah were full of prophets who preached a health and wealth prosperity message. Her priests turned their position of spiritual care into amassing power and fame and influence. Instead of serving the people they served themselves and when you serve yourself you will change the message to please the people instead of being faithful to God.

Just so, everyone is clear. No one can legitimately throw the blame of this catastrophe on God. Yes, this is the result of God's wrath, but God has to respond to our sin. If God is good he will hate evil. If God is loving he will not love evil. The love of God is not mushy, it is costly. God so loved the world that he gave his only Son. He gave him over to be rejected, to be scorned, to be beaten, to be crucified, to be humiliated by being hung naked to a cross in front of his own people with a crown of thorns and spikes driven through his hands and feet because God responded to the costliness of our sin with the costly death of his Son. This is love! God's love is costly because God's wrath against sin is immense. Do you see what is going on in this chapter? Either you will pay for your sin (and it will destroy you) or Christ will pay for your sin (and you will be saved). The poet isn't done shaking his head.

### 3. **We don't know where to turn.** (17-20)

The debriefing and analysis continues. What went wrong? The poet correctly identified that the spiritual leaders of the nation betrayed the people by telling them what they wanted to hear instead of telling them what they needed to hear. One of the things that the people wanted to hear was that Babylon would never defeat them. Anyone who said anything other than that was labeled as spreading dissension and being disloyal. Prophets like Jeremiah pleaded with the people to turn from their sins and turn back to Yahweh. Instead, Judah thought she could depend on Egypt or other alliances to defend her. She didn't need God, she could find her own solution. Now, the poet is analyzing that plan and reminding everyone that it was an unmitigated disaster. This happened because we trusted in someone who could not rescue us instead of trusting in the One who could. V. 20 speaks of the utter disbelief of the people, when their king was captured and they realized that they had no one to protect them now.

Sadly and tragically, most people, it seems, look at these horrific conditions through a very narrow lens and ask, "Where is God in all of this?" But, if you pull the lens back you will see a bigger picture. God tells us ahead of time what will happen. If you do not listen to that, or if you listen to spiritual leaders who never mention that part of God's word, then difficulty seems so

unfair and unexpected. All along, it was God who said that this would happen if you keep running down the path of sin. The judgment that God ordains is designed to change us. God does not bring about judgment so that he can do some divine venting and then feel better because he blew off some steam. No! God provides warnings and if we do not heed the warnings, then what he warned would happen, then happens and people want to blame God. How come God let me be unfaithful to my wife? How come God allowed those double-stuff Oreos to be on sale? He knew that I would buy them and eat the entire container. Don't you dare use the sovereignty of God as an excuse for your sin. It did not work for Adam when he wanted to blame God for putting Eve there. It did not work for Eve when she wanted to blame God for letting the serpent be there and it will not work for you. God is Sovereign and will never apologize for that. And we are responsible for our failures and we have to own them. To the degree that we dismiss our sin, we are owned by it. But, to the degree that we own our sin and confess it, we are set free. Our confession opens the flood gates of mercy.

#### 4. **The cup shall pass.** (21-22)

The last 2 verses are amazing. There is a lot that is packed into these words. The Edomites were the people of Esau. Esau was the twin brother of Jacob (whose name was changed to Israel) and therefore the son of Isaac. Edom and Israel were kin. The Edomites were related to the Israelites and the Jews. But, instead of helping Israel, Edom was usually her enemy. When Judah was being devastated by Babylon, Edom not only rejoiced, she joined forces in order to be there to help rape and plunder. It only added another level of misery.

Now, comes a warning and a promise. The warning is veiled in some sarcasm. Rejoice and be glad, O daughter of Edom. In other words, go get drunk, party and celebrate our demise because here is what happens when you get drunk. You do stupid things, like taking off your clothes and exposing yourself. And when you do this, it will be a preview of what will in reality happen to you. Today, you will drink some wine, but the day is coming when you will drink the cup of wrath and on that day, you will be fully exposed and then destroyed. We have had the cup of wrath and we are devastated, but not completely destroyed. For us, the cup shall pass. For you, the cup will destroy you. Today, you can visit the ancient capital of Judah – Jerusalem and the ancient capital of Edom – Petra. The one remains, the other is no more. But, this historical reality is more than a prediction and warning. It points to a greater reality. It points to the gospel. These verses talk about the future of two peoples. 1) The people of God, who no longer are drinking the cup of wrath and 2) The people who suffer the wrath of God, who like a drunk live in a stupor of bondage. The people of God, are those for whom the cup of wrath has been drunk. The rest live under its wrath. Lamentations 4 is a cruise ship, compared to hell. Hell is the arena where the cup of God's wrath against rebellion is never drained. Heaven is the arena for the people for whom the cup of wrath was taken by Christ. This chapter ends with a fork in the road that reveals two radically different destinations. For people who reject God, they will suffer the cup of God's wrath and for them, there is no hope. For people who turn to God, they find that the cup of wrath has been taken. It was taken by Christ, whose death in our place, was when he absorbed the wrath of God that should have been poured out on us. Which road you take determines where you end up. Who will you trust? Whom will you serve? Whom will you love? Whom will you worship?