

## Life Goes On; Justice Will Come

### Lamentations 4

No matter how much faith a believer has, no matter how much hope they can muster, faith and hope do not make reality disappear, nor do they undermine its seriousness. Sometimes God delivers with a miracle. Other times believers are called to persevere in faith and witness, trusting God as he fulfils his purposes. Faith and hope notwithstanding, the reality remained: Judah was under foreign occupation. Jerusalem had been ravaged, devastated and traumatised. Restoration and recompense lay in the future. In Lamentations 3:64–66, the lens zooms out to focus for a moment on the future that is promised. But the focus cannot stay there, for life goes on. And in Lamentations 4 we are returned to Jerusalem's present reality as the lens zooms back in to focus on the ground upon which the people presently stand. This is what survivors do – they to cling to future hope while pressing on through present trials.

#### Discuss:

Have you ever felt guilty or ashamed, like a spiritual failure, because your faith in God and hope in the future did not dispel your suffering or reduce your grief? What pressure did that put on you?

How can we best help those who suffer and grieve?

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After the sermon of Lamentations 3, Lamentations 4 returns to the scene of Lamentations 1 and 2 and reinforces the truth that God takes the reality of pain and suffering seriously. Hardship and suffering do not come to an end with the emergence of hope; it is not an instant fix. Hope – which must be nurtured – simply enables endurance. We must always take suffering seriously and give it its full weight while refusing to let it have the last word!

The first ten verses of Lamentations 4 describe the fall of Zion. That which was precious has been ruined (Lam 4:1–2). It's a dog-eat-dog existence, and the people have become crueler than animals. Like ostriches, they abandon their young (v. 3). Because no one shares, children go without water and bread (v. 4). Those who once lived in luxury are now desolate (v. 5).

**Read:** Lamentations 4:1–5.

While verses 1, 2 and 5 describe the material degradation of the city, verses 3 and 4 describe the moral degradation of society. Not all victims of crime or survivors of disaster are cruel. In many cases, disaster brings out the best in people. But that is *not* the picture painted in Lamentations 4:3–4. The catastrophe has stripped off Judah's façade and exposed the Judean reality: having drifted away from the LORD, the Judeans have become self-obsessed, self-interested, heartless and cruel.

#### Discuss:

- A lack of faith/trust in God expresses itself in desperate self-interest. Why is this so?
- What changes would you expect to see in a society that has turned away from (stopped trusting) the LORD?
- Faith/trust in God expresses itself in sacrificial giving. Why is this so?
- Does your faith enable you to give generously, even sacrificially, to those in need?

**Read:** Philippians 4:14–20 and **Discuss:** To whom is the promise given – 'God *will* supply your every need?'

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In Lamentations 4:6 we read: 'The chastisement [Hebrew: *\`avon*] of the daughter of my people has been greater than the punishment [Hebrew: *\`avon*] of Sodom'. The Hebrew word *\`avon* can be translated as guilt/sin /depravity/iniquity or its consequence, chastisement/punishment. Thus, verse 6 can be translated as the iniquity/sin *or* punishment/chastisement of the people. Both are correct. Maybe God meant for *both* to be embraced: the sin and punishment of Zion are *both* worse than that of Sodom.<sup>1</sup> How many Christians would

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<sup>1</sup> The story of Sodom's sin and punishment is found in Genesis 18–19.

imagine that Judah's unfaithfulness – her national abandonment and betrayal of Yahweh – could be considered a greater sin than that of Sodom, deserving greater punishment. But that is exactly what the scripture says here.<sup>2</sup>

**Discuss:** In what ways does this surprise or challenge you?

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Once exalted and magnificent, Zion's fortunes have been reversed; those who were respected and glorious are now grim shadows of their former selves (vv. 7–8). Indeed, the dead are deemed better off (v. 9) than the living, who survive by cannibalising their own (doubtless already dead) children (v. 10). **Read:** Lamentations 4:6–10.

The burning wrath of Yahweh has devoured Zion's foundations (v. 11), shocking all those who believed that Jerusalem was invulnerable (v. 12). Zion's prophets and priests stand accused, for instead of leading the nation to repentance, they prophesied lies and shed righteous blood, rendering themselves unclean (vv. 13–15a). Even other nations wanted nothing to do with these prophets and priests (vv. 15b–16). **Read:** Lamentations 4:11–16.

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**Read:** Jeremiah 23:16–22 and **Discuss:**

- What were Jerusalem's prophets and priest doing (vv. 16–17)? What were they *not* doing (vv. 18, 22)?
- How might you encourage your pastor to give faithful and fearless spiritual leadership?

In Lamentations 4:17–20 the poem changes to a communal lament (note the use of 'we' and 'our'). The voice is doubtless still that of the reporter/narrator as he cries out on behalf of the community. On their behalf, he laments the folly of hoping in nations that cannot save (v. 17 – Egypt? Jer 37:5–11). He gives voice to their fears: death stalks them; they sense the end is near (vv. 18–19). Their king – 'the Lord's anointed' – the one in whom they had invested their hopes, has been captured (v. 20) (2 Kgs 25). Surely Judah is finished!

**Read:** Lamentations 4:17–20.

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Just when it seems that Judah is disappearing from the stage of history, a prophetic voice of authority (possibly the reporter, possibly Jeremiah) rises up to address 'Edom' (Judah's historic enemy whose name is frequently used in prophecy to represent 'the world'). Edom, he says, should rejoice while she has the chance, because the cup of God's wrath *will* soon come to her as restoration comes to Zion. Their fortunes *will* be reversed! Yahweh *will* restore Zion and attend to the sin and punishment (Hebrew: *avon*) of 'Edom'.

**Read:** Lamentations 4:21–22.

**Discuss:**

- Does the prophetic word given in verses 21–22 describe vengeance or justice or both?
- Who is doing the work? Who is reversing the fortunes of Edom and Zion?

This prophecy (vv. 21–22) has immediate and future fulfilments in view. Short term, the promise pertains to Jerusalem and her enemies (Edom). Long term, the promise is for the church and her enemies. This promise – that God will, in righteousness and justice, bring down the wicked and exalt the righteous – is found throughout scripture. While the wicked prosper and the ruthless dominate – while the righteous are persecuted and the faithful downtrodden – it will not always be this way.

God *will* have the last word! Everything *will* be made right.

**Read:** John 16:33b and Matthew 16:18.

**Discuss** these verses in light of the prophecy in Lamentations 4:21–22, that God *will* have the last word.

**Discuss:** What is your response? How will this affect the way you live your life?

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<sup>2</sup> This does not minimise the sin of Sodom; rather, it magnifies the sin and consequences of rejecting/turning away from the LORD. For more on the sin of 'Forgetting God', see Elizabeth Kendal's book, *Turn Back the Battle: Isaiah Speaks to Christians Today* (Deror Books, 2012), in particular chapter 5, titled 'Forgetting God'.