

# Where is God in all this?

## 5 July - Jeremiah

**Learning to lament:** Facing the reality of God's judgement and trusting him for a better future

*Notes and discussion questions for home groups or personal study – Brian Bull*

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### Readings

### Key verses

Lamentations 3:14-26	"His compassions never fail. They are new every morning; great is your faithfulness."
Revelation 21:1-5	"He will wipe every tear from their eyes. There will be no more death or mourning or crying or pain..."
Luke 21:9-19	"When you hear of wars and revolutions, do not be frightened. These things must happen... By standing firm you will gain life."

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### Background

Jeremiah's tough and brutal message of coming judgement results in him being rejected and vilified by everyone, even his friends. Jeremiah himself complains about the consequences: *"Whenever I speak, I cry out proclaiming violence and destruction. So the word of the LORD has brought me insult and reproach all day long."* (Jeremiah 20:8)

At various times Jeremiah was put in the stocks, lowered into a muddy cistern, put under house arrest and accused of being a collaborator by encouraging people to submit to Babylon. But the political and religious leaders refused to face up to the truth, that God had withdrawn his blessing because of their sin, and that they were destined to be defeated and carried into exile. Their reluctance to accept Jeremiah's message and face up to God's purposes for them resulted in terrible suffering during the second siege of Jerusalem and in the end the complete destruction of the city and the Temple.

The outbreak of the Covid-19 pandemic has reminded us of the consequences of not facing up to realities and failing to deal with issues at the earliest opportunity.

- Why are we often reluctant to face up to the facts?
- What strategies do we use for avoiding the truth?
- Why would those who try to warn of coming disaster, like Jeremiah, be ignored, even forcibly silenced by the authorities?

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### Second wave

This reluctance to believe Jeremiah's message actually led to two successive stages of defeat and exile. At the time, Judah was caught in the middle of a power struggle between Egypt and Babylon. Judah owed allegiance to Babylon, but in 601 BC Nebuchadnezzar tried unsuccessfully to invade Egypt, and as a result Judah (together with several other subject kingdoms) decided to stop paying tribute to Babylon and ally itself to Egypt.

In 597 BC Nebuchadnezzar responded by laying siege to Jerusalem. He captured the city, looted the gold and silver from the Temple and took about 10,000 of Judah's prominent citizens and craftsmen back to Babylon as captives.

Nebuchadnezzar appointed Zedekiah as puppet king, but Zedekiah in turn revolted against Babylon and formed a new alliance with Pharaoh Hophra of Egypt.

In 589 BC Nebuchadnezzar once more laid siege to Jerusalem, which lasted for some 30 months and had much worse consequences than the previous siege. In the end Nebuchadnezzar's armies razed the city to the ground and completely destroyed the Temple. Those who did not die in the siege were almost all carried into exile. King Zedekiah was blinded and taken captive to Babylon where he died in prison.

- Why would Zedekiah and other political leaders not have learned from previous history that rebelling against Babylon was a bad idea?
- Do we ever learn from history?

I suspect that this rebellion against Babylon may have resulted from a perverse pig-headedness – a (maybe subconscious) decision to do just the opposite of what God was telling them to do. Rebellion against Babylon equated to rebellion against God. We will do things *our* way!

## A hymn of heartbreak

Do you think Jeremiah would be happy to see his prophecy being fulfilled? Rather he would be heartbroken that the nation had rejected God's message. Heartbroken at the suffering of the people and the destruction of Jerusalem. Heartbroken at the sin and rebellion and divine judgement that resulted.

Lamentations is primarily an outpouring of grief for the nation, and for the city that had played such a crucial part in the religious life of the community. But it is also a way to remember, to grieve and to heal.

We will look at some different themes that may help us to remember, to grieve, and to heal from traumatic and catastrophic experiences in our own lives.

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### 1. Tell it like it is

Read **Lamentations 4:1-19**

**WARNING:** If you haven't read this passage before, some of the description is pretty distressing. Read The Message version if you can.

- What does the passage tell us about the severity of the famine and the degree of suffering caused?
- How does the passage describe the situation for the elite, the political leaders?
- What is the fate of the prophets and priests? Why are they abused and rejected by the people? (For some reason the term "fake news" comes to mind!)

Our own situation in coronavirus might not compare with the suffering of those in the siege of Jerusalem. But consider street children who are served by the Jigsaw Project in Manila. Or those in Yemen, in the middle of a civil war, with shortages of food and water and a failing medical system. And that was before Covid-19 hit.

- We won't know the full impact of the pandemic for many months, even years, but how important do you think it is to understand the full extent of the suffering caused?... How should that information help us change things for the future?

### 2. Mourn for the things that have been lost

Read **Lamentation 1:1, 7**

- How do these verses describe the Jerusalem that has been lost?
- What affect did separation from Jerusalem have on those in exile? (See Psalm 137:1-5)
- What aspects of our own life have we left behind? How does this feel?

### 3. Express the pain and heartache

Read **Lamentations 1:2,12; 5:15**

- How do these verses describe the grief of those who have gone into exile?

Sometimes it's difficult to just find the right words to express how we are feeling. Using Biblical passages like these poems of grief from Lamentations may give us words we can't find ourselves.

### 4. Pray for forgiveness and restoration

Read **Lamentations 2:18-19; 3:41-42; 5:19-22**

- How should we pray?
- What should we be praying for?
- Why should we expect our prayers to be answered?

### 5. Hold on to hope

Read **Lamentations 3:19-26**

- How would Jeremiah be able to express such hope in God seeing the suffering and chaos in the world around him?
- What qualities of God's character are remembered here?
- What attitude should we have in our hearts as we wait for God's response?

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## Final thought

In **Luke 21:9-19** Jesus tells us not to be surprised when wars and revolutions and natural catastrophes happen. Nor when we are hated and persecuted for our faith. Jesus tells his disciples, "This will result in you being witnesses."

Let's pray for people here and around the world who are suffering famine, grief and loss of livelihood because of the pandemic.

Pray too for opportunities to be witnesses by our own response, and by our love for one another and for the community in which we live.

Pray too that we will be able to stand firm in the knowledge that God holds the future. "*By standing firm you will gain life.*" (Luke 21:19)