
Sermon Manuscript

The Wounds of God: Studies in the Book of Lamentations

No. 2: "Should You Take Suffering Personally?" (Lam. 2)
2 Jan 1994 • Dr. Doug McIntosh, Senior Pastor
CORNERSTONE BIBLE CHURCH • 869 COLE DRIVE • LILBURN, GA 30047

INTRODUCTION AND REVIEW: THE NUMBING OF MODERN CULTURE

There was once a somewhat backward farmer who stopped by his neighbors to tell them that their son was stuck in a mud hole. "How deep is he sunk?" the boy's father asked. "About to his ankles," the farmer replied lazily. "Well,"- said the father, "only up to his ankles—we've got time to set awhile and have a drink before we go."

"I don't think so," the laid-back farmer answered. "He's in head first."

It's been that kind of year for some of us.

Remember Annette Funicello? Many young men who were in their teens in the 1950's will confess they were in love with this dark-haired beauty who was on the original Mickey Mouse Club. As the most popular of the Mouseketeers, Funicello was the perfect peaches-and-cream portrait of adolescence. Later she made those light-hearted—and by today's standards very innocent—beach movies with Frankie Avalon.

Annette Funicello courageously stepped down from the pedestal of perfection in July 1992. This was five years after she had been diagnosed as suffering from multiple sclerosis. Going public with her disease was a great weight lifted from her shoulders, she says. She had feared her fans' reaction. Here is how she explains it: "I didn't go public for a long time because I believed people wanted to think that nothing bad ever happens to Annette."¹

But bad things do happen to the Annettes of the world, and to less perfect sorts as well.

Last week we began to look at one of the truly neglected books of God's Word, the book of Lamentations. This unusual volume addresses the subject of deserved suffering, something that people have great struggles with. It is usually thought that the serious problems about suffering are all connected with undeserved suffering. Certainly, some of the major ones are. But it has been my experience, in two and a half decades of ministry, that deserved suffering creates great problems, too—problems that are practical instead of theoretical.

One of the very practical problems that arises with deserved suffering is deciding whether or not it is deserved. If you believe in the involvement of God in the affairs of His family, then deserved suffering is going to happen. However, when it happens, it is always capable of being misinterpreted as undeserved suffering; particularly by people who are on the inside looking out. Those of us who are looking on from a distance, of course, are much wiser. We can tell in an instant whether a friend's sufferings are deserved or undeserved, can't we? I hope you realize that I am being facetious. One of the cruelest things that Christians do to each other is to assume that sufferings are deserved when they are not—the book of Job is largely built around this—and that they are undeserved when they are deserved. Either way, we assume a level of knowledge of what God is doing in somebody else's life that seems to disappear when He reaches into our own.

What do you tell somebody who has just experienced a great deal of personal pain? Should you comfort him by assuring him that what he is going through is not personally directed at him by God? Therein lies the substance of this chapter of Lamentations. Too many would-be friends, out of misdirected kindness, advise the hurting individual: "Don't take it personally!" Or, "Don't think about it; after all, that's the just way the ball bounces. Things just happen that way."

But such talk only keeps us from one of the most valuable helps that can be given to the sufferer. Suffering is not due to some blind, brute, dumb forces that happen to come upon me by chance. Rather suffering is an intensely personal experience. And in retributive suffering (suffering for offenses done) it is especially personal since in it I face up to the anger of God. The penalty we will pay for removing God's anger from this kind of suffering will be the loneliness of being hit by a depersonalized grief in which we are objects being bombarded by blind chance and impersonal forces. That kind of world is scary.²

Much of the time, we are more concerned about God's reputation than He seems to be. When God acts in justice, He is not reluctant to have people know that He is involved. In the book of Lamentations, we find the prophet Jeremiah writing about the deserved sufferings of the city of Jerusalem and its people. Remember that the book was written in 586 B.C., right after the time when the Babylonian army destroyed the city and the temple, plundered its goods, and took the people captive as slaves back to Babylon. The cause of this suffering was the centuries of idolatry that had preceded it, ages in which God's prophets had repeatedly warned against God's anger. As Jeremiah writes, God's anger is a visible reality in what is left of the city.

I want to begin reading this morning with chapter two and verse one, where the prophet describes in graphic detail how God was personally involved in what happened to Jerusalem.

SCRIPTURE: LAMENTATIONS 2:1-22

1 How the Lord has covered the daughter of Zion with a cloud in His anger! He cast down from heaven to the earth the beauty of Israel, and did not remember His footstool in the day of His anger.

2 The Lord has swallowed up and has not pitied all the habitations of Jacob. He has thrown down in His wrath the strongholds of the daughter of Judah; He has brought them down to the ground; He has profaned the kingdom and its princes.

3 He has cut off in fierce anger every horn of Israel; He has drawn back His right hand from before the enemy. He has blazed against Jacob like a flaming fire which devours all around.

4 Standing like an enemy, He has bent His bow: with His right hand, like an adversary, He has slain all who were pleasing to His eye: on the tent of the daughter of Zion, he has poured out His fury like fire.

5 The Lord was like an enemy. He has swallowed up Israel. He has swallowed up all her palaces; He has destroyed her strongholds, and has increased mourning and lamentation in the daughter of Judah.

6 He has done violence to His tabernacle. As if it were a garden; He has destroyed His place of assembly: the Lord has caused the appointed feasts and Sabbaths to be forgotten in Zion. In His burning indignation He has spurned the king and the priest

7 The Lord has spurned His altar. He has abandoned His sanctuary; He has given up the walls of her palaces into the hand of the enemy. They have made a noise in the house of the Lord as on the day of a set feast

8 The Lord has purposed to destroy the wall of the daughter of Zion. He has stretched out a line; He has not withdrawn His hand from destroying: therefore He has caused the rampart and wall to lament; they languished together.

9 Her gates have sunk into the ground; He has destroyed and broken her bars. Her king and her princes are among the nations: the Law is no more, and her prophets find no vision from the Lord.

10 The elders of the daughter of Zion sit on the ground and keep silence: they throw dust on their heads and gird themselves with sackcloth. The virgins of Jerusalem bow their heads to the ground.

11 My eyes fail with tears, my heart is troubled: my bile is poured on the ground because of the destruction of the daughter of my people, because the children and the infants faint in the streets of the city.

12 They say to their mothers. ‘Where is grain and wine?’ as they swoon like the wounded in the streets of the city, as their life is poured out in their mothers’ bosom.

13 How shall I console you? To what shall I liken you, O daughter of Jerusalem? What shall I compare with you, that I may comfort you, O virgin daughter of Zion? For your ruin is spread wide as the sea; who can heal you?

14 Your prophets have seen for you false and deceptive visions: they have not uncovered your iniquity, to bring back your captives, but have envisioned for you false prophecies

and delusions.

15 All who pass by clap their hands at you: they hiss and shake their heads at the daughter of Jerusalem: “Is this the city that is called ‘the perfection of beauty, the joy of the whole earth’?”

16 All your enemies have opened their mouth against you: they hiss and gnash their teeth. They say, “We have swallowed her up! Surely this is the day we have waited for we have found it, we have seen it.”

17 The Lord has done what He purposed: He has fulfilled His word which He commanded in days of old. He has thrown down and has not pitied, and He has caused your enemy to rejoice over you: He has exalted the horn of your adversaries.

18 Their heart cried out to the Lord, “O wall of the daughter of Zion, let tears run down like a river day and night; give yourself no relief; give your eyes no rest.

19 “Arise, cry out in the night at the beginning of the watches; pour out your heart like water before the face of the Lord. Lift your hands toward Him for the life of your young children, who faint from hunger at the head of every street.

20 “See. O Lord, and consider! To whom have You done this? Should the women eat their offspring, the children they have cuddled? Should the priest and prophet be slain in the sanctuary of the Lord?

21 ‘Young and old lie on the ground in the streets; my virgins and my young men have fallen by the sword: You have slain them in the day of Your anger, You have slaughtered and not pitied.

22 ‘You have invited as to a feast day the terrors that surround me. In the day of the Lord’s anger there was no refugee or survivor. Those whom I have borne and brought up my enemies have destroyed.’”

THE REASONS

I have said that the answer to the question, “Should you take suffering personally?” is always “Yes.” That is an answer that requires a defense, and so I want, to give you four reasons why I believe that suffering (regardless of whether it is deserved or undeserved) is always to be taken personally. To begin with, we take deserved suffering personally...

Because God regards sin and indifference to Him as personal offenses 1-10

Now, in these first ten verses, we see over forty references to God’s personal involvement in the catastrophes of Jerusalem. If you had been sitting on the Mount of Olives, overlooking Jerusalem, and you had watched what was going on in the city, it would have looked for all the world as though Jerusalem was suffering because the king of Babylon wanted it that way. After all, they were his armies that looted and burned the city.

As far as it goes, that was true. But it does not give the whole truth. That is why Jeremiah goes to such lengths here to emphasize God’s personal involvement. He was the one offended: He was the one doing the judging. For example, look at verse six: “He has done violence to His tabernacle, As if it were a garden; He has destroyed His place of assembly: the Lord has caused the appointed feasts and Sabbaths to be forgotten in Zion. In His burning indignation He has spurned the king and the priest.”

Here we have something useful: “In His burning indignation He has spurned the king and the priest.” The Lord was upset with His people. He was angry.

The anger of God: the problem

This whole question of divine anger has been the subject of some sharp debate in the history of the church. The debate was called the passibility debate, the term describing either the quality or aptness in God to feel, suffer, or be angry (passibility) or the denial of those qualities (impassibility).

In one of the early heresies, Gnosticism (a philosophy that combined Greek and Oriental ideas with Christian teaching and professed access to truth that was a mystery to outsiders), a doctrine of God emerged that took the strongest exception to any claim that God could feel or suffer anything or that He could be angry. A man named Marcion became the center of the debate. Marcion’s God never took offense, was never angry, was entirely apathetic, and free from all affections; in fact, He was incapable of being angry.³

Eventually, the church expelled Marcion and declared his teaching to be heresy. But the church had to wait until the last half of the third century before another writer, Lactantius, wrote his *De Ira Dei*, “The Anger of God.” Lactantius insisted that God must be moved to anger when He sees sin and wickedness in men and women or otherwise compromise His holiness. This is what he said:

He who loves the good, by this very fact hates the evil: and he who does not hate the evil, does not love the good; because the love of goodness issues directly out of the hatred of evil, and the hatred of evil issues directly out of the love of goodness. No one can love life without abhorring death; and no one can have an [appetite] for light, without an antipathy to darkness.⁴

The anger of God: the solution

Of course our problem with anger is that we define it as Aristotle did, “the desire for retaliation”⁵ or a desire to get even and get revenge for a slight or real harm done to us. With anger goes the idea of an unsettling of the mind, upon the receipt of an injury, with a present purpose of revenge. During his conquest of the world, Alexander the Great attended a banquet with a number of his leading generals. One of them, a man by the name of Clitus, was a lifelong friend of both Alexander and his father, Philip of Macedon. In fact, Clitus had saved the conqueror’s life in a recent battle. At the banquet, Clitus became inebriated and began to insult Alexander by extolling the simplicity of Alexander’s father and his Macedonian troops. Alexander listened for a while and then reached for his sword in a moment of rage. Clitus’s friends quickly ushered him out of the room, but, in a few minutes, unknown to them, he returned through another door. Clitus stood behind some curtains and began to quote some lines from a Greek poet which were critical of Alexander. The conqueror quickly grabbed a spear from the hands of a guard and hurled it in the direction of the curtain. Clitus was fatally wounded.

Alexander was horrified at what he had done. He rushed to the fallen Clitus and pulled out the spear, turned it around, and tried to fall on it himself, only to be prevented by his officers. All that night and for several days afterward he lay sleepless, calling out for Clitus by name and chiding himself as the murderer of his friend. It is understandable that we not attribute such harmful, uncontrolled rage to God.

But Lactantius defined anger as “a motion of the soul rousing itself to curb sin.”⁶ In this, he properly insists that anger does not mean an unreasonable rage. God’s anger is always clearly thought out, even-handed, and just. God’s anger is never explosive, unreasonable or unexplainable. It is His firm displeasure with our wickedness and sin. It is never a ruling passion; rather, it is always an instrument of His will. As a result His anger does not shut off His compassions from us (Ps. 77:9). But it does express a personal offense. Second, we should take suffering personally...

Because even the most godly can profit from personalized suffering, given the right conditions 11-13

That is the point of verses 11-13, where Jeremiah, probably the most godly man of his era, shrinks back from the sting of God’s justice, while at the same time he feels a deep sorrow for what has happened as a result of it. He says in this section:

11 My eyes fail with tears, my heart is troubled: my bile is poured on the ground because of the destruction of the daughter of my people, because the children and the infants faint in the streets of the city. 12 They say to their mothers, “Where is grain and wine?” as they swoon like the wounded in the streets of the city, as their life is poured out in their mothers’ bosom. 13 How shall I console you? To what shall I liken you, O daughter of Jerusalem? What shall I compare with you, that I may comfort you. O virgin daughter of Zion? For your ruin is spread wide as the sea: who can heal you?

I don’t think it is stretching a point to say that Jeremiah is in the strange position of expressing the heart of God here. God has acted in a just anger, but He takes no pleasure in the necessity of being just. Isaiah 28:21 says that God’s acting in a holy anger is His “unusual” work: “For the Lord will rise up as at Mount Perazim, He will be angry as in the Valley of Gibeon—that He may do His work, His awesome work, and bring to pass His act, His unusual act.”

So how do you benefit from God acting in anger? Three conditions have to be met. You must possess, first...

A thoroughgoing confidence in the sovereignty of God

If you don’t, then you will miss half of what God is doing. You have to believe that He is involved in your life. Secondly, you have to have...

A teachable heart

If you do, then you will be sensitive to the things in your life that would make you a subject of divine discipline. Third, you have to have...

A conviction that God suits the discipline to the offense

Here is where a great many people stumble. They may have a confidence that God is indeed sovereign, and involved in their lives. They have a teachable heart, and want to learn from their mistakes. But they forget that God suits the discipline to the offense. They forget that even decent human parents overlook most of the offenses their children commit, and at any given time only take issue with the most lethal of the offspring’s mistakes. Very often we need to give God credit for being at least as good a parent as we are. God does not use a sledgehammer to swat a fly. He is wise enough to suit the discipline to the offense.

There is another reason why we should take suffering personally...

Because the alternative to taking it personally is hopelessness 14-19

If you can suffer severely and have God entirely removed from it, that is all that is left. When Jeremiah looks at the intense destruction of Jerusalem, he writes in verse 15, “All who pass by clap their hands at you; they hiss and shake their heads at the daughter of Jerusalem: Is this the city that is called ‘the perfection of beauty, the joy of the whole earth’?” All your enemies have opened their mouth against you: they hiss and gnash their teeth. They say, ‘We have swallowed her up! Surely this is the day we have waited for: we have found it, we have seen it.’”

But he says that the enemy’s involvement was secondary: “The Lord has done what He purposed, He has fulfilled His word which He commanded in days of old. He has thrown down and has not pitied, and He has caused your enemy to rejoice over you, He has exalted the horn of your adversaries.”

If God is not involved, then what is going on in the universe is beyond His control. And if what is going on in the universe is beyond His control, then there is no point whatever in prayer. And if there is no point whatever in prayer, then there is no hope in human experience. Then there is a fourth reason why suffering should always be taken personally...

Because personal pain alerts us to a need for a personal God 20-22

C.S. Lewis says,

The human spirit will not even begin to try to surrender selfwill as long as all seems to be well with it. Now error and sin both have this property that the deeper they are, the less their victim suspects their presence... We can rest contentedly in our sins and in our stupidities... but pain insists on being attended to. God whispers to us in our pleasures, speaks in our consciences, but shouts to us in our pain. It is His megaphone to rouse a deaf world.⁷

God definitely shouted to Jerusalem. Look at verse 20: “See, O Lord, and consider! To whom have You done this? Should the women eat their offspring, the children they have cuddled? Should the priest and prophet be slain in the sanctuary of the Lord?”

On what do you lean when you have seen such horrible things? You have to lean on a personal God. He must be...

One whose character is irreproachable

Now you don’t come to this conclusion while you are in the middle of your suffering. You will have difficulty in the middle of your dark days if you have not already settled the question of God’s character when you can afford to be objective. That is why the study of the Word cannot be forced by an emergency. You study when you can be calm and see what the Bible says about God’s character when you can deal with it objectively. And the Scripture says that He does all things well.

The God you lean on must also be...

One whose actions are tied to His Word

That is the importance, of verse 17: “The Lord has done what He purposed; He has fulfilled His word which He commanded in days of old.” The things that happened in Jerusalem in 586 B.C. are all written down in Deuteronomy 28 which was written 900

years before. God hasn't changed when you suffer. Did He not care or love so intently He would not trouble Himself to call you back to His embrace? Pain is His megaphone. We need to take the time to examine it and see in what way it is God seeking to rouse us in our deafness.

Copyright © 1994 P. Douglas McIntosh. This data file/manuscript is the sole property of the copyright holder and may be copied only in its entirety for circulation freely without charge. All copies of this data file/manuscript must contain the above copyright notice. This data file/manuscript may not be copied in part (except for small quotations used with citation of source), edited, revised, copied for resale, or incorporated in any commercial publications, recordings, broadcasts, performances, displays, or other products offered for sale without the written permission of the copyright holder. Requests for permission should be made in writing and addressed to Dr. Doug McIntosh, Senior Pastor, Cornerstone Bible Church, 869 Cole Drive, Lilburn, GA 30047.

Notes:

1. Mary Hart, "The Survivors," *Ladies' Home Journal*, October 1993, p. 80.
2. Walter C. Kaiser, Jr., *A Biblical Approach to Personal Suffering* (Chicago: Moody Press, 1982), p. 59.
3. Abraham Heschel, *The Prophets* (New York: Harper & Row, 1971), 2:30.
4. Lactantius, *De Ira Dei*, p. 51.
5. Aristotle, *De Anima*, I, p. I.
6. Heschel, 2:82.
7. C.S. Lewis, *The Problem of Pain* (New York: Macmillan, 1978).