

THE KINGDOM'S FALL: "Destruction and Promise"

A sermon by
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TEXTS: Psalm 137 and Lamentations 1:1-6

Psalm 137

By the rivers of Babylon— there we sat down and there we wept when we remembered Zion. 2 On the willows there we hung up our harps. 3 For there our captors asked us for songs, and our tormentors asked for mirth, saying, "Sing us one of the songs of Zion!" 4 How could we sing the LORD's song in a foreign land? 5 If I forget you, O Jerusalem, let my right hand wither! 6 Let my tongue cling to the roof of my mouth, if I do not remember you, if I do not set Jerusalem above my highest joy. 7 Remember, O LORD, against the Edomites the day of Jerusalem's fall, how they said, "Tear it down! Tear it down! Down to its foundations!" 8 O daughter Babylon, you devastator! Happy shall they be who pay you back what you have done to us! 9 Happy shall they be who take your little ones and dash them against the rock!

Lamentations 1:1-6

How lonely sits the city that once was full of people! How like a widow she has become, she that was great among the nations! She that was a princess among the provinces has become a vassal. 2 She weeps bitterly in the night, with tears on her cheeks; among all her lovers she has no one to comfort her; all her friends have dealt treacherously with her, they have become her enemies. 3 Judah has gone into exile with suffering and hard servitude; she lives now among the nations, and finds no resting place; her pursuers have all overtaken her in the midst of her distress. 4 The roads to Zion mourn, for no one comes to the festivals; all her gates are desolate, her priests groan; her young girls grieve, and her lot is bitter. 5 Her foes have become the masters, her enemies prosper, because the LORD has made her suffer for the multitude of her transgressions; her children have gone away, captives before the foe. 6 From daughter Zion has departed all her majesty. Her princes have become like stags that find no pasture; they fled without strength before the pursuer.

I remember Christmas in New Castle. Not Christmas, so much, as the weeks before the big day. Trips to see the animated window displays at New Castle Dry Goods and Strouss-Hirshbergs; shopping for that special present at G.C. Murphy, Neisner's or F.W. Woolworth's, the only stores with merchandise a young boy could afford. . . the falling snow, already gray with the soot of steel mills and factories. . . the sound of tire chains against the clamor of the Salvation Army bell-ringing Santas. . . the hustle and bustle of thousands of shoppers carrying shopping bags and boxes. . . and to finish the experience, a cup of hot chocolate at Isaly's, complete with fresh whipped cream.

In 1917, New Castle was the tin-plate capital of the world with sixty plating mills operating at full capacity. Today the mills are gone. The population of New Castle is less than half what it was in my youth. The downtown is desolate, a modern ghost town. My home church, once having the largest Sunday School in the United Presbyterian Church of North America, a Sunday School of over nine hundred, has shuttered its doors as a Pentecostal Church has purchased the property. Thomas Wolfe was right. You can't go home again, especially if there is no home to which you may go. . . no home you remember.

You cannot turn back the clock. You cannot make things the way they were in better days. Like the prophet Jeremiah, sometimes all you can do is weep.

The final siege comes. Jerusalem falls. The Babylonians are victorious. Suffering comes upon everyone. It is the human experience. Pain is universal. Sometimes it is corporate. Just ask the people of Syria or Egypt or China. Sometimes it is national. Think Darfur. Sometimes it is an individual experience . . . a lost career, a marriage ended, a tragic accident.

Life is never the same again.

This morning's Scripture is from Lamentations. It is a book from which we rarely draw sermon material. It seems better to lift up the bright, shiny glow of the Gospel message than cite the cry of despair from personal and national calamity. This is not Joel Osteen material. This is raw and real. It is where we hate to visit, but it is occasionally where we must live.

Jeremiah is known as "the weeping prophet," and for good reason. He was given a daunting task. He is born into the Golden Age of King Josiah. Yet, Jeremiah must proclaim judgment and destruction. Why? It is because after Josiah, the nation continues in its idolatry and moral decline. God tells Jeremiah, *"Now I have put my words in your mouth. See, today I appoint you over nations and over kingdoms, to pluck up and to pull down, to destroy and to overthrow, to build and to plant."* (Jeremiah 1:10) What is coming is horrific! Assyria has been defeated by an even greater kingdom, Babylon.

God tells Jeremiah, *"Out of the north disaster shall break out on all the inhabitants of the land. For now I am calling all the tribes of the kingdoms of the north, says the Lord; and they shall come and all of them shall set their thrones at the entrance of the gates of Jerusalem, against all its surrounding walls and against all the cities of Judah. And I will utter my judgments against them, for all their wickedness in forsaking me; they have made offerings to other gods and worshiped the works of their own hands. But you, gird up your loins; stand up and tell them everything that I command you. Do not break down before them, or I will break you before them."* (Jeremiah 1:14-17)

Would you want to be in Jeremiah's sandals?

Then it happens. In 586 BC, Jerusalem falls just as God has foretold through the prophet. Every person that can possibly serve the kingdom of Babylon must emigrate approximately 1,000 miles and set up a new home in a new land. Soldiers are pressed into the Babylonian army. Widows are remarried to Babylonian men. Children are adopted into Babylonian families. Those, like Daniel, who can serve in the bureaucracy of the conquering nation will find new jobs.

Imagine walking from Gloucester to Columbia, Missouri and having to create a new life where the people speak a foreign language like . . . Missourian.

The Southern Kingdom is no more. Now, Jeremiah looks in despair upon the deserted city of Jerusalem. It has fallen to the King of Babylon, just as Jeremiah had prophesied. Its productive citizens have been taken to Babylon. Its streets are deserted. The old and weak have been left behind. Jerusalem is aptly described as "a widow weeping bitterly in the night, with tears on her cheeks . . ." This passage starts in the same manner as a Hebrew dirge, a lament for the dead.

"How lonely sits the city that once was full of people!"

It is the cry of suffering, the cry of despair. Where is God? How do you cope with suffering?

What is the source of pain? Is it the consequences of our own actions? Sometimes it is. Is it the consequence of the actions of others? Yes, frequently that is so. Yet, sometimes evil and suffering do not have an identifiable source.

Where is God in the question of suffering?

Epicurus, the Greek philosopher who lived almost 300 years before Jesus Christ, framed the question in this way: "If God is willing to prevent evil, but unable, is he then omnipotent? If God is able to prevent evil but unwilling, then is he not malevolent? If God is both able and willing to prevent evil, then what is the source of evil? If God is both unable and unwilling to prevent evil, then why call him God at all?" Atheists and agnostics throughout the centuries have echoed Epicurus' questions.

Is this all that may be said about suffering?

Judaism and Christianity do not solve the problem of suffering. Beyond the consequences of sin and accident, there are no easy answers. No smiley-face T-shirt or trite bumper sticker slogan can camouflage the depth of the pain we sometimes experience in life.

At the same time, Judaism and Christianity never gloss over the question of pain and suffering. There is no assumption that God's silence indicates God's absence, and there is never an indication that unresolved pain and suffering are the result of God's indifference or deafness to our cry.

The constant affirmation of both the Old and New Testaments is that God is big enough to handle our anger, our disappointment, and our despair. Therefore, we can be "honest-to-God."

Hear the words of King David in Psalm 6, *"I am weary with my moaning; every night I flood my bed with tears; I drench my couch with my weeping."* Hear the words of Job in Job 7:4-6, *"When I lie down I say, 'When shall I rise?' But the night is long, and I am full of tossing until dawn. My flesh is clothed with worms and dirt; my skin hardens, then breaks out again. My days are swifter than a weaver's shuttle and come to their end without hope."* Hear the frustration, anger, and desire for revenge that comes through in this morning's Psalter selection, *"O daughter Babylon, you devastator! Happy shall they be who pay you back what you have done to us! Happy shall they be who take your little ones and dash them against the rock!"* (Psalm 137:8-9) Hear the words of Jesus, *"My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?"*

The Book of Lamentations is not all gloom and doom, all darkness and no light. God commands Jeremiah to prophesy judgment, destruction, war, and exile for the Kingdom of Judah. His words will go forth with power but be totally ignored. He sees what will be and can do nothing to stop it. In addition, the people are against him. They plot his death. He is a laughingstock and an object of mockery. He is beaten and put in the stocks. He spends time imprisoned in a dry cistern. Worse, Jeremiah cannot help himself. He must speak. In Jeremiah 20:9, we hear Jeremiah speak, *"If I say, 'I will not mention him, or speak any more in his name,' then within me there is something like a burning fire shut up in my bones; I am weary with holding it in, and I cannot."*

That is the dark side.

However, it is not the only side.

In all Jeremiah's suffering, in the word of judgment he is compelled to proclaim, another message, another promise comes forth. Jeremiah depends upon *chesed*.

Chesed is a constant theme throughout the Old Testament. It is the central truth of Israel's relationship with God. It is translated, "steadfast love" and sometimes "faithful loving-kindness." It is God's promise never to leave nor forsake the people God claims as God's own.

This is the source of hope in pain.

The city is devastated. The ruins of the Temple and Jerusalem's grand buildings lie scattered all around. The smoke of numerous fires continues to rise to the skies.

In all of this, Jeremiah speaks, *"The thought of my afflictions and my homelessness is wormwood and gall! My soul continually thinks of it and is bowed down within me. But this I call to mind, and therefore I have hope: The steadfast love of the Lord never ceases, his mercies never come to an end; they are new every morning; great is your faithfulness. 'The Lord is my portion,' says my soul, 'therefore I will hope in him.'"*

Great is your faithfulness.

Perhaps you recognize those words. They are the lyrics to a hymn we often sing.

*"Great is Thy faithfulness," O God my Father,
There is no shadow of turning with Thee;
Thou changest not, Thy compassions, they fail not
As Thou hast been Thou forever wilt be.*

*"Great is Thy faithfulness!" "Great is Thy faithfulness!"
Morning by morning new mercies I see;*

*All I have needed Thy hand hath provided—
“Great is Thy faithfulness,” Lord, unto me!*

These words were penned by Thomas Obadiah Chisholm. Chisholm was born in a log cabin in Franklin, Kentucky. He became a Christian at twenty-seven and entered the Christian ministry at thirty-six. He lasted a year. Poor health forced him to quit.

He moved to New Jersey, became a life insurance agent and spent the rest of his life behind a desk. Late in life he remarked, “My income has not been large at any time due to impaired health in the earlier years which has followed me on until now. Although I must not fail to record here the unfailing faithfulness of a covenant-keeping God and that He has given me many wonderful displays of His providing care, for which I am filled with astonishing gratefulness.”

There is suffering. The Bible acknowledges the reality of it.

That is not the end of it.

The Bible also points us to hope. We are never alone in our suffering.

Our suffering can have a redemptive purpose. Suffering can serve as a corrective to our own behavior and mistakes. Pain can bring wisdom and maturity. Out of our anguish we may discern a new relationship, a deeper relationship with God.

The future can be different from the past.

Without hope, without redemptive purpose, suffering is just, well, suffering. We are reduced to wounded animals that would best be advised to take the recommendation of Job’s wife . . . “Curse God and die.”

Job wouldn’t do that. Jeremiah wouldn’t do that. King David didn’t do that. Jesus on the cross didn’t do that. Paul in prison wouldn’t do that. Why? It is because each of them trusted that God is faithful. God is steadfast. It is because the *chesed*, the steadfast love, of the Lord never ceases, his mercies never come to an end; they are new every morning.” When we ask, when we seek, when we knock, we can find strength to endure.

When we come to the Table of the Lord, know that God meets you here. We always bring something to the Table of the Lord. Oh, we never bring something to share. It’s not like the potluck we will enjoy following the service today. The only thing we can bring to God is our brokenness and hurt, our pain and our sorrow. If you bring a broken heart, know that here you will find the understanding of a God whose heart has been broken, too. If you bring a hurt, frail, diseased body, know that God meets you here in the words, “This is my body broken for you.” If you bring a heavily burdened life to this table, know that your host invites you to cast your burden upon him. If you lack direction and do not know the way you should go, hear Jesus say, “I am the way, the truth and the life.”

One of my favorite stories is about the famous artist Auguste Renoir. One of his best friends, Henri Matisse, even though he was 30 years younger, was a constant companion of Renoir. During the last decade of the famous artist’s life when he was confined to his home because of his crippling arthritis, Matisse visited him every day.

Despite his torturous pain, Renoir kept painting. In fact, he did so almost to his dying day. “The Bathers,” one of his most famous paintings was completed only two years before he died — fourteen years after he was stricken with this disabling disease.

On one occasion when Renoir was struggling with every brush stroke, his friend Matisse said to him, “Auguste, why do you continue to paint when you are in such agony?” To which Renoir replied, “The beauty remains: the pain passes.”

James, the brother of Jesus writes, *“My brothers and sisters, whenever you face trials of any kind, consider it nothing but joy, because you know that the testing of your faith produces endurance; and let endurance have its full effect, so that you may be mature and complete, lacking in nothing.”* — James 1:2-4 (NRSV)

Truly, that is redemptive suffering.

It is the same suffering that others experience, some more and some less. Yet, for the person of faith, God may be found in its midst. Beauty may be found at the end.

The pain passes. The beauty remains.

Perhaps this is the greatest comfort we may receive when we struggle and fail, when our bodies become weak, our minds less clear, our eyes with fogged vision, our strength at an ebb . . . God understands. God understands because in Jesus Christ God has entered our world and our lives to participate in, to experience, and to redeem our suffering.

The pain passes. The beauty remains.

Soli Deo Gloria. To God alone be the glory.