

Session 8: Explanations of Evil and Suffering

D. Suffering as merited punishment: Lamentations

Activity 8.6

Read Lamentations

What picture of God emerges for you from meditation on this book?

We have seen two very contrasting approaches to the problem of evil and suffering in the Psalms and Ecclesiastes. But both in their different ways take it for granted that we cannot expect God simply to make everything all right when things go wrong. As expressed in Isaiah 45:7, they assume that God may be the author of darkness as well as light, evil as well as good. In the same way, Lamentations very clearly sees God as the author of evil, and specifically for his people.

In 587 B.C. Jerusalem was sacked and the Temple destroyed by the conquering Babylonian army. The king, priests and nobles were taken into exile and a small number, mainly of the poor, were left behind. These people, or at least some of them, continued to worship in the ruins of the Temple. The book of the prophet Zechariah in chapters 7 and 8 mentions an annual fast commemorating the destruction of the Temple.

As well as continuing with worship as best they could, the community left behind also needed to come to terms with the disaster. To do this they needed an answer to the central question: Why had God abandoned his people? We have already seen that part of the book of Jeremiah was written to answer this question, and that on a larger scale this was the purpose of the whole Deuteronomic history. In Lamentations we have a different type of literature expressing a different aspect of the answer: a set of communal laments to be used in worship, through which the survivors in Jerusalem could express their grief and perhaps begin to hope.

There are five poems, four of which are acrostics. As well as memory and the sense of completeness, it may be that this form helped to focus the expression of emotion, in a similar way to the forms of classical music. The five are arranged in a CHIASTIC PATTERN, that is a 'cross-over' pattern: the first and last elements corresponding to one another and the middle elements corresponding, like A B B A. In the case of Lamentations the pattern is A B C B A. Chapters 1 and 5 have a similar theme: general descriptions of the disaster. Chapters 2 and 4 include more explicit details of the deaths, atrocities and devastation the city had suffered. Chapter 3 is the heart of the poems, suggesting what the people of Judah's response should be.

Chapter 1 is a cry of pain at the reversal of Jerusalem's former glory. It looks the facts full in the face: the city that once was like a princess is now like a widow; the city once full of people is now deserted. Verses 12 to 22 face up to the city's guilt. The devastation has been the Lord's doing, and he is in the right (verse 18). Chapter 2 takes this further, including some gruesome descriptions of the conditions during the siege and following the destruction (verses 9,10,20,21). This is the day of the Lord's anger, not against the nations but against his own city. God has

become the enemy of Jerusalem (5): he has destroyed without mercy (2), cut the city down in his fierce anger (3), bent his bow like an enemy (4).

Chapter 3 is another lament of the city. The writer speaks for the personified city out of the depths. It is the song of one who has been forced to eat gravel (16), and all is the Lord's doing. But verses 21 to 39 present the possibility of hope. The Lord, who is now the enemy of Jerusalem, is a God of mercy and 'hesed' or covenant love. In verses 25 to 27 each verse begins with the word 'good'. In verse 25 it is the Lord who is 'good'. In verses 26 and 27 it is 'good' to wait quietly for the Lord's salvation. The very God who has destroyed may be the one who will eventually build up. Verses 40 to 66 speak to the community, calling on them to 'test and examine their ways' and to 'return' to the Lord, Jeremiah's word for repentance (40). Finally, these verses move into a prayer to God on the community's behalf, a prayer for restoration.