

There are two chiasms in our passage today.

There are 22 letters in the Hebrew alphabet –
and so there are 22 verses in our poem for tonight.
The first chiasm is found in the first half (the first 11 verses).
And the second chiasm is found in the second 11 verses.

The first chiasm is organized around the comparison of Sodom and Jerusalem in verse 6,
with the devastation of Zion at the beginning and at the end.

The second chiasm is organized around the collapse of Jerusalem at the middle,
with a lesson for the nations at the beginning and at the end.

That is why I have entitled this sermon,
“Sodom, Jerusalem, and Us.”

Lamentations 4 is designed as a lament over the destruction of Jerusalem –
but with a zinger at the end!
A warning to the nations that your time – your end – is coming!

We live in a day of remarkable contradictions.

Never before in human history has a woman been able to stand up against sexual harassment
with such confidence that her story will be taken seriously!
And that is a good thing!!

And yet –
never before in human history has pornography been so widely available and accepted.
And *that* is a bad thing!

No longer does the modern world care about good and evil –
all that matters to our culture is *consent*.

But to God, there still is such a thing as *iniquity* and *sin*.
And that is what brings judgment upon a people – upon a nation!

The first word of chapter 4 is also the first word of chapters 1 and 2.

The ESV translates it as ‘how’ – but it would better be translated *Alas!!*
But whereas in chapters 1-2 there were triple lines for each verse,
here in chapter 4, the lines shrink to couplets.
In other words, the poet is beginning to wear out.

Lamentation is exhausting!
Lamenting wears you out!

But there is no other way.

Grief is a process.

If you try to take shortcuts, and bypass the process,
you will only make it worse.

Psychologists have analyzed the various stages of grief –
and there is a way in which the book of Lamentations supports such a model.

But it's important to recognize that there is no one-size fits all model.

When someone is in the middle of their grief –
often all you can do is sit and listen in silence.

When they are ready to talk – they'll talk.

Until then, sit in silence and mourn with them!

Job's friends said a lot of useless stuff.

But there is one thing that they did right!

They sat in silence for 7 days.

For a week, they just sat there and let Job mourn!

We will not speak wiser words until we have sat silently for longer than they!

So let us sit and listen to our poet in his grief!

1. Sodom and Jerusalem: The Degradation of the People (v1-11)

a. The Sons of Zion Turned from Gold to Clay (v1-2)

*How the gold has grown dim,
how the pure gold is changed!*

*The holy stones lie scattered
at the head of every street.*

² *The precious sons of Zion,
worth their weight in fine gold,
how they are regarded as earthen pots,
the work of a potter's hands!*

If you know anything about gold,
you would know that gold does not lose its shine.

One of the great quests of medieval alchemy was the attempt to find a way to transform other things
into gold!

But turning gold into clay is equally impossible –
and, of course, even more undesirable!!

The image in verse 1 is of the temple artifacts –
but verse 2 makes it clear that the gold of the temple is designed to point to the *people*.

The point of the temple was to be a place where God would dwell with his people.

The point was not lost on faithful Israelites!

They saw that there was a connection between the temple and the people.
God desired to dwell – not just in a temple of gold and stone –
but in the temple of human hearts!

And so verses 1-2 connect the idea of the gold of the temple
with the precious sons of Zion!

Because somehow, someone has done the impossible!
The precious sons of Zion have been turned from gold into clay!

This is the reversal of history!
History is supposed to move from clay to gold!
We are supposed to be moving toward the glory of God and his Kingdom!

But instead, we are going backward.

From gold to clay.

b. Children Beg for Bread (v3-4)

³ *Even jackals offer the breast;
they nurse their young;
but the daughter of my people has become cruel,
like the ostriches in the wilderness.*

⁴ *The tongue of the nursing infant sticks
to the roof of its mouth for thirst;
the children beg for food,
but no one gives to them.*

And everything gets turned on its head.

The jackal is usually a negative picture – a scavenging dog.
But here the jackal is portrayed as a positive comparison to “the daughter of my people.”
Even the jackal cares for her young –
but my people allow their children to starve!!

As the drug epidemic continues to ravage this area,
we are seeing a different sort of siege –
not armies, this time – but opioids.

And the effect is the same:
children begging for food –
but their parents have lost control...

c. The Wealthy Embrace Ash Heaps (v5)

⁵ *Those who once feasted on delicacies
perish in the streets;
those who were brought up in purple
embrace ash heaps.*

When a society collapses, no one is safe.

The wealthy may try to blockade their doors and hide from the chaos in the streets –
but it will find them!

In verse 6, the poet looks around for a comparison to the severity of God’s judgment against Jerusalem:

d. Sodom and Jerusalem (v6)

⁶ *For the chastisement^[a] of the daughter of my people has been greater
than the punishment^[b] of Sodom,
which was overthrown in a moment,
and no hands were wrung for her.^[c]*

Why Sodom?

Because Sodom is the classic example of God’s judgment on a city.

God destroyed Sodom with fire from heaven –

because of their sin.

(And what was the sin of Sodom?

Ezekiel 16 says that the sins of Sodom

were pride, gluttony, refusing to help the poor, *and* abominations.

Ezekiel 16 goes on to say that Jerusalem was *worse* than Sodom.

We often think of homosexual sin as the chief sin of Sodom –

but Genesis 19 portrays that is only *one* of the many sins of Sodom.)

And the poet says that Jerusalem’s punishment is more severe than the punishment of Sodom –
suggesting also that Jerusalem’s sin is worse than Sodom.

But also think about the implications of Sodom here.

What was God doing in the destruction of Sodom?

Before God destroyed Sodom,

he came to Abraham and talked it over with him (Genesis 18).

Abraham pled for Sodom, asking that if there were only 10 righteous men in Sodom,
that the LORD would spare the city.

And God agreed.

But there were not ten righteous men in Sodom.

There was only one.

Lot.

When you look at God’s conversation with Abraham,

God says that all nations will be blessed in Abraham.

So he will not hide from Abraham what he is doing.

“For I have chosen him, that he may command his children and his household after him
to keep the way of the LORD by doing righteousness and justice” (18:19).

It is worth noting that Abraham’s judgment on Sodom

will become the way that God judges Israel.

So long as there is a significant remnant –

a righteous remnant –

God preserves Jerusalem.
But when Jerusalem becomes worse than Sodom –
only then does judgment fall.

The judgment on Sodom was a prefiguration of the final judgment
as fire from heaven destroyed the ancient city.
Even so, the judgment on Jerusalem was *also* a prefiguration of the final judgment.

Verses 7-8 speaks of this judgment by fire:

c'. Princes Turned from Beauty to Hideousness (v7-8)

⁷ *Her princes were purer than snow,
whiter than milk;
their bodies were more ruddy than coral,
the beauty of their form^[d] was like sapphire.^[e]*
⁸ *Now their face is blacker than soot;
they are not recognized in the streets;
their skin has shriveled on their bones;
it has become as dry as wood.*

These princes are the same ones who feasted on delicacies in verse 5.
But now they are reduced to ashes and soot.
The effect of enforced fasting is clearly seen:
their skin turns black and shrivels –
they are reduced to hideousness.

b'. Hunger Turned Mothers into Cannibals (v9-10)

⁹ *Happier were the victims of the sword
than the victims of hunger,
who wasted away, pierced
by lack of the fruits of the field.*
¹⁰ *The hands of compassionate women
have boiled their own children;
they became their food
during the destruction of the daughter of my people.*

Verses 3-4 talked about the children –
now we hear about their mothers.

Dying by the sword would be a painful way to die –
but it would be a better (and certainly quicker) death than wasting away to hunger!
Because when you are crazed with hunger,
you just might do the unimaginable...

And we're not talking about just any woman.
We're talking about *compassionate women* –
(the word "compassionate" comes from the Hebrew word meaning "womb"),
so we're talking about the kindest, most motherly mothers you know!

The WSBT piece on foster care was striking in this regard.
We are living in the middle of another invasion.
But this time it is not the Babylonian army that besieges us.
Rather, it is a drug epidemic.
Parents are rejecting their children in order to pursue a life of drugs –
and all that goes with that.

These mothers *love* their children –
and yet they are so twisted and turned around by their cravings,
that they are destroying their children – devouring their children –
all for the sake of the next high.

Deuteronomy 28 had warned that this would be one of God’s curses upon Israel’s rebellion.

(Yes, we must *do something* for the sake of these children –
but the first thing that we must do is *weep* for the mothers –
weep for those who are afflicted and destroyed by the evils around them!)

a’. The LORD’s Fire Consumed Zion (v11)

¹¹ *The LORD gave full vent to his wrath;
he poured out his hot anger,
and he kindled a fire in Zion
that consumed its foundations.*

This may not sound like a very hopeful verse!
But the opening line says that the LORD has given *full vent* to his wrath.
It is the same phrase used in 3:22,
when the poet said that the LORD’s mercies *never* come to an end.
God never “uses up” is mercy.

His mercies are new every morning!

His wrath, however, *can be* used up!
Because God’s wrath only exists because of sin.
In fact, God’s wrath – his “hot anger” – is an exercise *of* his love and mercy!
Because he loves his people – therefore he is *angered* when his people rebel!
God is angry with murder – rape – abuse.
He is angry when the powerful use their power to harm others!
You cannot possibly *love* in a sinful world without getting angry!

It is your anger that drives you to *make things right!*
And even so it is with God!
(The difference being that his anger is *always* driven by true love –
whereas *our anger* is too often twisted by our perverted loves).

But the first half of our passage ends with God’s wrath being “used up”
in consuming the foundations of Zion –

the fire of God's wrath has consumed Jerusalem – as it had consumed Sodom long ago.

But what does this mean for the nations?
What does this mean *for us*?

2. Jerusalem and the Nations: an Eschatological Vision (v12-22)

The second chiasm – in verses 12-22 – takes us from Jerusalem to Edom,
with a focus on the nations (the Gentiles).

a. The Kings of the Earth Believed in the Inviolability of Jerusalem (v12)

¹² *The kings of the earth did not believe,
nor any of the inhabitants of the world,
that foe or enemy could enter
the gates of Jerusalem.*

The prophet Jeremiah tells us that in his day it had become the unshakeable confidence of Jerusalem
that *no one* could capture Jerusalem – because the LORD was present in his holy city.

And that was true.

As long as the LORD was present, no enemy could capture the city.

But shortly before Nebuchadnezzar's attack,

Ezekiel saw a vision of the glory of the LORD *leaving* Jerusalem – leaving the temple.

Once the glory of the LORD had departed,
Jerusalem was a sitting duck.

But watch what the nations are doing in this chiasm!

First, in verse 12, the kings of the earth did not believe that anyone could conquer Jerusalem.
(Nebuchadnezzar does not seem to have shared this belief –
but probably the surrounding neighbors of Judah did!

Edom, Moab, Ammon –

they had all seen multiple instances of divine protection
shielding Jerusalem over 500 years –

so the nations believed that God was protecting Jerusalem).

b. But Because of the Sins and Uncleaness of the Prophets and Priests (v13-15)

¹³ *This was for the sins of her prophets
and the iniquities of her priests,
who shed in the midst of her
the blood of the righteous.*

But then in verses 13-15, we hear of the sin of the prophets –
the iniquities of the priests.

What is this sin?

They “shed in the midst of her the blood of the righteous.”

Again – this is *worse* than Sodom –

because the prophets and priests were *supposed* to defend the righteous!

But instead they have shed the blood of the righteous in the midst of the holy city –
thereby turning Jerusalem into an unclean city.

Indeed, so unclean are they – defiled with blood –
that even the Gentiles refuse to accept their presence!!

¹⁴ *They wandered, blind, through the streets;
they were so defiled with blood
that no one was able to touch
their garments.*

¹⁵ *“Away! Unclean!” people cried at them.
“Away! Away! Do not touch!”
So they became fugitives and wanderers;
people said among the nations,
“They shall stay with us no longer.”*

The leper was to cry out “unclean, unclean” – do not touch!!
But the prophets and priests of Jerusalem are so hideously defiled,
that even Gentiles will want nothing to do with them!

Isaiah speaks of how the exiles should “come out” of Babylon –
touching no unclean thing – (Isaiah 52)
but here the priests and prophets of Jerusalem are unclean!

Jerusalem no longer has a place among the nations.
When it says, “They shall stay with us no longer”
that means that the nations are saying that Judah is such a miserable excuse of a nation
that they are removing Judah from the list of nations.

When God’s holy nation is excluded from the roster of nations
because of how corrupt they are –
that’s not good!

The same is still true today.
You see it when pastors are guilty of sexual infidelity.
You see it when churches cover-up scandals.
When churches become more concerned with power and prestige
than with holiness in action,
and the result is that even the nations are scandalized!
(Think of how Paul says in 1 Corinthians that even the Gentiles do not approve
of the scandal of a man having his father’s wife...)

And so verse 16 says:

c. The LORD Himself Scattered Them (v16)

*¹⁶ The LORD himself^{ff} has scattered them;
he will regard them no more;
no honor was shown to the priests,
no favor to the elders.*

The face of the LORD has turned against his priests.

As God had said to Eli the priest,
“Those who honor me, I will honor,
but those who despise me will be disgraced.” (1 Sam 1:30).

And in verses 16-17 you see a contrast

between how the LORD has scattered his people – even the priests and elders –
and how “our eyes” failed – watching vainly for help –
waiting for a nation which could not help.

b'. The Helplessness of the City – Because the LORD’s Anointed Lay Captive (v17-20)

*¹⁷ Our eyes failed, ever watching
vainly for help;
in our watching we watched
for a nation which could not save.*

Ordinarily, the LORD is our help –

but here our eyes fail while we are watching – waiting for help.

And part of the problem is that they were waiting – *not* for the LORD –
but for a nation which could not save.

What is this nation?

Well, there were those in Jerusalem
who thought that Egypt could save them from Babylon.
But the LORD declared that Egypt was a broken reed that would pierce the hand
of the one who leaned on it.

And so instead, Jerusalem’s days were numbered:

*¹⁸ They dogged our steps
so that we could not walk in our streets;
our end drew near; our days were numbered,
for our end had come.*

*¹⁹ Our pursuers were swifter
than the eagles in the heavens;
they chased us on the mountains;
they lay in wait for us in the wilderness.*

The LORD had carried Israel on eagles’ wings out of Egypt.

Now the pursuers are swifter than the eagles in the heavens.
Everything has been turned upside down!

And any thought that the LORD's Messiah would save them is shattered:

²⁰ *The breath of our nostrils, the LORD's anointed,
was captured in their pits,
of whom we said, "Under his shadow
we shall live among the nations."*

Modern commentators all focus on Zedekiah.
Zedekiah was the last King of Judah.
He was captured by Nebuchadnezzar, blinded, and died in captivity.

But patristic commentators all saw something more here.
After all, "the LORD's anointed" is the Messiah.
And while there is definitely a reference to Zedekiah here,
it is worth noting that Israel's *hope* was indeed
that it was under the Messiah's shadow that they would live among the nations.

And so the Fathers were right to see that the LORD's anointed was indeed the Lord Christ.

We saw this morning how Psalm 93 points us to the incarnation of our Lord.
We see tonight how the judgment of Jerusalem – the judgment of the LORD's anointed –
is in fact the very way in which God's blessing *does come* to the nations.

After all, God had said to Abraham that *all nations* would be blessed through him.
But that can only happen
when the Seed of Abraham endures the judgment of Sodom.
When the Son of David endures the judgment of Jerusalem –
and triumphs over it through his resurrection!

After all, Jesus *descended into hell* – he descended into the pit –
in order that he might bring life to his people through his resurrection.

The Fathers regularly and frequently comment on this as one of the prophecies of the coming of Christ,
and how the gospel would go forth to the nations.

In verse 21, then, the poet suddenly turns to daughter Edom.
(There is no "of" in the Hebrew).

This is not the daughter *of* Edom – any more than it speaks of the daughter *of* Zion.
Zion is the daughter – Zion is the young woman
who *should have been* the bride –
but instead has become an adulteress (chapter 1).

Now the poet speaks of "daughter Edom."

a'. Edom and Zion: Your Turn Is Coming (v21-22)

²¹ Rejoice and be glad, O daughter of Edom,
you who dwell in the land of Uz;
but to you also the cup shall pass;
you shall become drunk and strip yourself bare.
²² The punishment of your iniquity, O daughter of Zion, is accomplished;
he will keep you in exile no longer;^[g]
but your iniquity, O daughter of Edom, he will punish;
he will uncover your sins.

There are definite echoes of Psalm 137 here.

Psalm 137 says that Edom had cried ‘lay it bare, lay it bare’ (137:7),
calling for Babylon to utterly destroy Jerusalem.

Now Lamentations 4 says that Edom shall strip bare –
draining the cup of God’s wrath to the dregs.

The contrast between daughter Edom and daughter Zion
is that whereas daughter Zion’s judgment is completed –
as we saw in verse 11 – God’s wrath has been fully poured out on Zion –
Edom’s sin has not yet been judged.

But your turn is coming!

No nation can escape judgment forever!

Babylon fell.

Persia fell.

Greece fell.

Rome fell.

Every empire has fallen –
except those of today –
and they are crumbling!

It can be hard to read a passage like verses 21-22 –
and it can be hard to sing a song like Psalm 137,
where the Psalmist declares,
“O daughter Babylon, doomed to be destroyed,
blessed shall he be who repays you with what you have done to us!
Blessed shall he be who takes your little ones and dashes them against the rock!”

But when judgment falls upon a nation,
it will be *the whole nation* that pays the price.

Even as the tender mothers devoured their children in Jerusalem during the Babylonian siege,
so also the children of Babylon will suffer in the wrath to come against Babylon.

Because Babylon in Psalm 137 is very much in the position of Edom in Lamentations 4 –
symbolizing the city of Man in his opposition to the city of God.

And until the city of Man – until Babylon the Great – is cast down and destroyed –
we will never have peace!

It is only when the kingdom of Satan is overthrown –
and the kingdom of God is established –
that salvation will come to all the earth!

Sure, Edom stripping bare and Babylon's little ones being dashed against the rock
sound like a horrible end –
and *it is* a horrible end!
But hell *is* a horrible end.

That's why verse 22 also speaks of how the punishment of daughter Zion's iniquity is *over*.
There is *hope* for the one who trusts in the LORD and turns away from sin.

Because Jesus has drunk the cup of the wine of God's wrath to the dregs – for us.
Therefore, all who hope in him are restored from exile
and brought home – home to dwell in the presence of the Almighty forever!