



http://blogs.thegospelcoalition.org/erikraymond/files/2011/09/shutterstock_204905575.jpg

Do you find yourself apologizing for God?

You may not articulate it in the words, “I’m sorry that my God is like this.” However, there is some indication that the sharp edges of the character of God are better ignored, diluted, or otherwise recast so as to make his actions more acceptable. Don’t misunderstand, I am not talking primarily to liberals here but rather to evangelicals. *Mr. or Mrs. card carrying evangelical, are you quietly ashamed of some of God’s tirades of judgment in the Old Testament?*

Can your theology handle a book like Lamentations?

The danger, I suspect, for many people is that their functional theology undermines their confessional theology. In other words, people confess to believe the Bible is inerrant and authoritative but in practice they become functional redactionists (editors of the Bible). They ignore this God who judges and shows such grace. It is much easier for him to be, well, nice.

I came to the book of Lamentations recently in my own devotions. I have been reminded (via rebuke and refreshment) of how God works. In this post I want to highlight what you miss if you have a book like Lamentations in your blind spot.

A THEOLOGY WHERE GOD IS REALLY ANGRY (and shows it)

Lamentations is basically a series of poems expressing the funeral dirge for the nation of Israel following their destruction by Babylon. It is graphic and in several places it is quite disturbing.

The city (Jerusalem) was full of people but is now lonely. It is likened to a widow (1.1). Things are really, really bad.

Well, who did this? Short answer: Babylon. Long answer: God.

According to the writer God sent the fire (1.13), he summoned the armies to crush the people (1.15), he has “swallowed up without mercy all the habitations of Jacob” (2.2), he is the one who did not restrain his hand from destroying (2.8), and it was his purpose to do this (2.17).

In a fitting summary we read:

*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. (Lam. 4.11
(<http://biblia.com/bible/esv/Lam.%204.11>))*

I wonder how many of us, if we were living at the time of Lamentations, would ascribe these actions to Satan? Wouldn't that be much more convenient for our theology?

But there is absolutely no question reading Lamentations (or Jeremiah for that matter) that it is God who brought down the hammer of judgment upon Jerusalem.

Can your theology handle this book? Or, are you more comfortable ignoring these dark periods in the Bible? Are you more comfortable giving God an extreme makeover so that he is nicer and more palatable?

Lamentations forces those of us who affirm the authority and inerrancy of the Bible to come to grips with a God who gets really angry at sin and then shows it in judgment. This is who he is throughout the Bible, not just in Lamentations.

A THEOLOGY WHERE MAN IS REALLY BAD

Why does God do this? *In particular, why does he do it to his people Israel?*

It is because they were really, really bad.

In chapter 1.8 we read it is because they have “*sinned grievously therefore she has become filthy.*” They did not listen to God's word but to false prophets (2.14).

The bottom line here is that all of the wrath and subsequent pain that is experienced (and it is brutal) is because of personal sin. There is rape, killing, and parents disregarding the value of their children in order to accommodate and save themselves. This is indicative of and a result of human depravity.

When we look at the world around us today we see these same unsettling headlines. Why? It is because humanity is sinful. We don't just do bad things we are bad people.

When you read through this book what do you do with all of the horrific things that happened? How do you process them?

They can't be simply tied to an underdeveloped, uneducated culture. After all, these things still happen today. Let's be honest, it testifies to the utter sinfulness, the depravity of humanity.

Can your theology handle the book of Lamentations?

A THEOLOGY WHERE GRACE IS REALLY POWERFUL

Amid the funeral dirge we read several aspects of God's faithfulness to his covenant promises. Doesn't this type of thing strike you as odd at in a funeral poem?

"Remember my affliction and my wanderings, the wormwood and the gall! My soul continually remembers 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.""
([Lamentations 3:19–24](http://biblia.com/bible/esv/Lam%203.19%E2%80%9324))
(<http://biblia.com/bible/esv/Lam%203.19%E2%80%9324>)

The writer here is comforted by the character of God. Doesn't it strike you as odd that it is the one who brings the wrath is also the one who brings the comfort? It is like the 2nd Psalm whereby there is no refuge from him but there is refuge in him.

In this case this comfort is specifically said to be tethered to God's faithfulness, that is, his covenant love for his people.

Listen, this song of grace must be extremely loud to drown out the collective cries of anguish over sin. And it is.

Can your theology handle such lavish grace?

It is abundant and immeasurable grace because it covers abundant and infinite sin!

Even (perhaps especially) in Lamentations, amid the funeral, there is a repudiation of works righteousness and a promotion of the grace of God.

A GOSPEL CONCLUSION

In Lamentations we have God crushing his people Israel because of their sin. Their sin is rampant and repulsive. This is exacerbated by the fact that Israel is God's chosen people. He loves them. They are his nation.

In the New Testament we have God reacting to sin by crushing someone even more special than a nation of people. In the Gospel Narratives we read of God crushing his own beloved and dear Son for sin ([John 3.16](http://biblia.com/bible/esv/John%203.16) (<http://biblia.com/bible/esv/John%203.16>); [Col. 1.13](http://biblia.com/bible/esv/Col.1.13) (<http://biblia.com/bible/esv/Col.1.13>)). But note the twist: it is not because of his sin that he is judged upon the cross but for the sins of his people ([1 Pet. 3.18](http://biblia.com/bible/esv/1%20Pet.%203.18) (<http://biblia.com/bible/esv/1%20Pet.%203.18>)).

Our sin is not any less rampant or repugnant to the divine nostrils than at the time of Lamentations. Sin is and always will be wicked before God.

In the gospel, through the work of Christ, we have Lamentations come into full view.

- We understand that God is a judging God—for he has judged his own son for our sins.
- We understand that we are sinners—God has crushed his own son in our place so that justice might be paid.
- We understand that grace is abundant—God has acted upon his promises of forgiveness by lavishing his people in grace.

You have to see that there is a lot more at stake here than at first glance. If you can't handle the themes and trajectories of Lamentations then you can't handle the gospel. Every thread in this book is divinely stitched to Calvary.

Therefore, take up and read Lamentations! And, where necessary, tweak your theology by the Bible ([2 Tim. 3.16-17](http://biblia.com/bible/esv/2%20Tim.%203.16-17) (<http://biblia.com/bible/esv/2%20Tim.%203.16-17>)).

[photo via [Shutterstock](http://www.shutterstock.com) (<http://www.shutterstock.com>)]