



# Hard Passages in the Bible

Gaining confidence for engaging the  
biblical story

# From last week – Passages in dialogue with Joshua 6

- Book of Jonah – God showing mercy on the city of Nineveh
- James and John want to call down wrath on Samaritan city:
  - “When his disciples James and John saw it, they said, “Lord, do you want us to command fire to come down from heaven and consume them?” But he turned and rebuked them.”
  - Luke 9:54–55 (NRSV)

## Lamentations 2, 3

**2** How the Lord has covered Daughter Zion  
with the cloud of his anger!  
He has hurled down the splendor of Israel  
from heaven to earth;  
he has not remembered his footstool  
in the day of his anger.

**2** Without pity the Lord has swallowed up  
all the dwellings of Jacob;  
in his wrath he has torn down  
the strongholds of Daughter Judah.  
He has brought her kingdom and its princes  
down to the ground in dishonor.

...

**20** "Look, LORD, and consider:  
Whom have you ever treated like this?  
Should women eat their offspring,  
the children they have cared for?  
Should priest and prophet be killed  
in the sanctuary of the Lord?"

**21** "Young and old lie together  
in the dust of the streets;  
my young men and young women  
have fallen by the sword.

You have slain them in the day of your anger;  
you have slaughtered them without pity.

**22** "As you summon to a feast day,  
so you summoned against me terrors on every  
side.  
In the day of the LORD's anger  
no one escaped or survived;  
those I cared for and reared  
my enemy has destroyed."

....

**3:38** Is it not from the mouth of the Most High  
that both calamities and good things come?  
**39** Why should the living complain  
when punished for their sins? **40** Let us examine  
our ways and test them,  
and let us return to the Lord.  
**41** Let us lift up our hearts and our hands  
to God in heaven, and say:  
**42** "We have sinned and rebelled  
and you have not forgiven. **43** "You have  
covered yourself with anger and pursued us;  
you have slain without pity.  
**44** You have covered yourself with a cloud  
so that no prayer can get through.  
**45** You have made us scum and refuse  
among the nations.

# Reaction to the readings

- What words or phrases stand out to you?
- What emotions does this bring up for you?
- Does these passage(s) present a difficulty for you? If so what?
- What are you confused or unclear about?

# Conventional reading of related passages

- God had a special covenant with Israel. If only they followed the covenant, God would have brought only good for Israel.
- Because Israel broke the covenant, Israel deserved punishment. This is why God sent the Babylonians to attack Jerusalem and lead the people into exile.
- The laments in passages like these in Lamentations are expressions of remorse for sin.

# Possible ways some interpreters address divine violence

- **God's character is not consistently loving.**
  - Sometimes God gets very angry and lashes out. God is God and we dare not question God by holding him to our own standards of “good behavior.”
- **It's what our sin deserves.**
  - Biblical portraits of God's wrath communicate the truth of God's righteous indignation at sin. Again, who are we to question God's justice?
- **God is angry at injustice, because a loving God cares.**
  - God's has righteous anger because God truly loves all people and is grieved and angered at what humans do to each other. The good news in God's “wrath” is that God cares and will set things right. Biblical portraits of God's wrath communicate the God working to correct injustice.
- **Ancient Near East Religion**
  - The Old Testament at times portrays the God of Israel as violent because other Ancient Near East cultures described their gods in similar ways.

# Possible ways some interpreters address divine violence- continued

- **Projection**

- Biblical portraits of God's wrath are projections of human anger and violence onto God. They tell us more about the aggrievement, grief, or fear in the communities that produced the Bible than who God actually is.

- **Problem of human suffering**

- Biblical portraits of God's wrath were the writers' attempts to reconcile the reality of terrible suffering in their lived experience with the sovereignty of God. If God is powerful and above all other gods, than somehow God must have authored or "ordained" the actual lived experienced of suffering of the biblical communities.

- **Progressive revelation**

- God is willing to meet us even in our imperfect human understanding of God. Over the landscape of the biblical canon, we gain a progressively better picture of God, especially as we look to Jesus as the best revelation of God's character.

- "God let's his children tell the story" – way to sum up several of the above

- Which of the above seem helpful? Which seem unhelpful or inappropriate?

# Passages of comfort

## **Lamentations 3:22-26**

Because of the LORD's great love we are not consumed,

for his compassions never fail.

23 They are new every morning;

great is your faithfulness.

24 I say to myself, "The LORD is my portion;

therefore I will wait for him."

25 The LORD is good to those whose hope is in him,

to the one who seeks him;

26 it is good to wait quietly

for the salvation of the LORD.

## **Isaiah 40**

40 Comfort, comfort my people,  
says your God.

2 Speak tenderly to Jerusalem,  
and proclaim to her

that her hard service has been completed,  
that her sin has been paid for,

that she has received from the Lord's hand  
double for all her sins.

# Questions

- Where does this passage fit in the biblical story?
- What do you respond to heart-wrenching lament?
- How might you wrestle with passages that describe God in very violent ways?
- What wisdom, insights, or call can we take from this passage, as followers of Jesus, reading it in light of the witness of Jesus ?