

Lamentations 3:1-36: Biblical Reading and Reflections

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[0 : 00] Lamentations chapter 3 verses 1 to 36 I am the man who has seen affliction under the rod of his wrath. He has driven and brought me into darkness without any light.

Surely against me he turns his hand again and again the whole day long. He has made my flesh and my skin waste away. He has broken my bones.

He has besieged and enveloped me with bitterness and tribulation. He has made me dwell in darkness. Like the dead of long ago. He has walled me about so that I cannot escape.

He has made my chains heavy. Though I call and cry for help he shuts out my prayer. He has blocked my ways with blocks of stones. He has made my paths crooked.

He is a bear lying in wait for me. A lion in hiding. He turned aside my steps and tore me to pieces. He has made me desolate. He bent his bow and set me as a target for his arrow.

[1 : 00] He drove into my kidneys the arrows of his quiver. I have become the laughing stock of all peoples. The object of their taunts all day long. He has filled me with bitterness.

He has sated me with wormwood. He has made my teeth grind on gravel. And made me cower in ashes. My soul is bereft of peace. I have forgotten what happiness is.

So I say, my endurance has perished. So has my hope from the Lord. 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.

[2 : 02] The Lord is good to those who wait for him. To the soul who seeks him. It is good that one should wait quietly. For the salvation of the Lord. It is good for a man that he bear the yoke in his youth.

Let him sit alone in silence when it is laid on him. Let him put his mouth in the dust. There may yet be hope. Let him give his cheek to the one who strikes.

And let him be filled with insults. For the Lord will not cast off forever. But though he cause grief, he will have compassion. According to the abundance of his steadfast love.

For he does not afflict from his heart. Or grieve the children of men. To crush underfoot all the prisoners of the earth. To deny a man justice in the presence of the Most High.

To subvert a man in his lawsuit. The Lord does not approve. Lamentations chapter 3 is a chapter with an acrostic pattern. There are 22 sets of three lines.

[3 : 04] Each line beginning with the same letter. In alphabetical sequence. It is the central section of the entire book. While it does not have the same dirge elements. Of the other chapters of the book.

It does have elements of instruction. Individual and communal lament. And wisdom. Its more disparate structures and genres. Mean that the unity of the chapter. Is most readily apparent. In the tightness of its literary structure. With the threefold repetition. Of each letter of the alphabet. Following all the way through. Nevertheless. As we look more closely. We will see the unity of a movement.

Within it as well. Within the chapter. There are a number of changes. And points of view. It begins with first person singular speech. In verses 1 to 24. Moves to third person masculine speech.

In verses 25 to 39. Moves to first person. Plural speech. In verses 40 to 47. Before finally reverting. To first person singular speech.

[4 : 00] In verses 48 to 66. And these changes. And points of view. Represent natural transitions. In the material of the chapter. But don't require a change.

In the speaker. As the same person. Is almost certainly speaking throughout. It's very important. To recognize these sorts of transitions. Though. As they represent psychological transitions.

In the speaker. Among other things. There are a number of other striking transitions. To be noted. For instance. The first 21 verses. Alternate between the first person singular.

Of the speaker's references to himself. And continual third person masculine. Singular references. To the Lord's acting. And devastating judgment upon him. Yet the name of the Lord.

Only appears once. In verse 18. Throughout this section. The Lord is the unnamed. He who's bringing disaster. Upon the person who's speaking. In verses 22 to 39.

[4 : 53] The I and the me. Of the speaker disappears. And third person masculine. Singular references. To the righteous sufferer. Join the third person masculine. References to the Lord.

But now the Lord is repeatedly named. Not merely appearing in pronouns. He and him. This section involves. A wisdom flavoured. Reflection upon the manner. Of wise suffering.

And what he has learned from it. And the transition here. Is noteworthy. It's followed by a further movement. Into the first person. Plural references. To the people. Especially in exhorting them.

To turn back to the Lord. While the references. To the Lord. Start to shift. To a second person. Singular form. You. So it's moved. From the speaker.

Speaking about I. And the Lord constantly being spoken of as he. To the speaker moving. To speaking about he. Of himself. And the righteous sufferer. To the Lord.

[5 : 49] Now named. And then beyond that. To exhorting the people. Let us. Turn to the Lord. And then following that. A return to the first person. Singular voice once again.

But now. Addressing God. As you. Speaking to God directly. And appealing to his covenant name. In confidence. Merely studying. The pronouns.

And the names. Within this chapter. Will give us a sense. Of the movement. That's taking place.

This chapter. The pivotal chapter. Of the book. Thus represents. A movement. From the voice.

Of futile lament. To a positive. And hopeful. Address to the Lord. The intensity. Of the first person. Singular crisis. That opens the chapter. Where the Lord's identity.

Is largely eclipsed. By the bitterness. Of the speaker's experience. Is answered. By the intensity. Of the confident. Address of that person. To the Lord. At the end. Where the Lord. Is foregrounded.

[6 : 41] And the speaker. Retreats to the background. In our section. Of the passage. The speaker shifts. From a description. Of his experience. Of suffering. And the heaviness. Of the Lord's hand.

Upon him. To a discussion. Of how a person. Should respond. In such circumstances. Of the Lord's. Steadfast love. And character. And how the Lord. Acts towards. Such sufferers.

Reminding himself. Of the Lord's goodness. Perhaps one of the greatest questions. That hangs over. Our reading of this text. Is the identity. Of the man. Who describes his experience. From verse

1 onwards.

While the book of Lamentations. Is about the desolation. Of Jerusalem. And the captivity of Judah. The speaker here. Presents himself. As the direct. Personal target. Of God's wrath. Is this a personification.

Of the nation. Or of Jerusalem. I don't think so. Comparing chapter 2. Verses 11 to 19. With chapter 3. Can be illuminating. As there are a number. Of similarities.

[7 : 36] To be observed. Between these earlier verses. And sections of chapter 3. For instance. The resemblance. Between chapter 2. Verse 11. And chapter 3. Verses 48 to 51.

The speaker. In chapter 2. Verse 11. Closely identifies. With Jerusalem's suffering. Even if not yet. With the intensity. That we see. At the beginning. Of chapter 3. The speaker.

Of the opening verses. Of this chapter. Seems to have been. Singled out. By the Lord. For judgment. Despite the fact. That the judgment. In question. Was one that fell upon. The entire people. He stands for the whole people.

Even though he is just one person. He doesn't seem to be. A personification. Of Jerusalem. Or Judah. Nor a generic person. Just the man. In general. I'm inclined. To hear the voice.

Of Jeremiah himself. Here. Representing the entire people. In himself. If we look through. The prophecy. Of Jeremiah. We'll see. That Jeremiah. Is the suffering prophet. Large sections.

[8 : 33] Of the book of Jeremiah. Describe the suffering. Of the prophet himself. Often in charged language. For instance. He is led. As a lamb. To the slaughter. In Jeremiah 11. Verse 19.

Jeremiah. Is a man. Who in contrast. To most of the rest. Of the prophets. Consistently bears his soul. He describes. The heaviness. With which the message. Of the Lord. Lies upon him. For instance.

In chapter 20. He also has a number. Of individual laments. Of the type. That we find. In the Psalms. Jeremiah. Is the weeping prophet. The one. Who is established.

By God. To stand against. The people of his day. As a fortified city. An iron pillar. And bronze walls. But who is also. Established. To stand for the people. As he takes.

The blows. Of God's judgment. Upon himself. In bearing. The prophecies. Against them. In Lamentations. Chapter 3. I believe. We're seeing this. Jeremiah. Jeremiah is the prophet.

[9 : 26] Who feels. Those painful blows. Of the judgments. Of the Lord. Before they fall. Upon the people. And in Lamentations. Chapter 3. He's giving voice. To his experience. The speaker.

Has been made. To dwell. In darkness. Like the dead. On account of God's wrath. In the first six verses. He's been repeatedly. Struck. By the hand of the Lord. Just as the city.

Was besieged. And enveloped. By the Babylonians. So the prophet. Was besieged. And enveloped. By divine judgment. He has been brought down. As it were. To the state of the dead. God brought the prophet.

Into darkness. But also cornered him. Blocking off all of his paths. God is the unnamed adversary. Of the prophet. Acting towards the prophet. As a hunter. Towards its prey.

Tracking him down. Lying in wait for him. And destroying him. God has given him bitterness. And gravel to eat. The bitterness. Like the bitterness. Of the herbs. Of the Passover. Connected with Israel's.

[10 : 20] Affliction in Egypt. He has lost all peace. And his old hope. In the Lord has perished. It's crisis time. How will he respond? And in the verses that follow.

The prophet moves beyond. The crisis of his lament. And the extinction of his hope. To refounding his confidence. Upon the character of God. Beginning to address the Lord directly.

He rediscovers his confidence. By reflecting upon the Lord's covenant. Faithfulness and mercies. Reversing his loss of hope. In verse 18. God's character is unchanging.

Despite his crisis. God's steadfast love. And mercies. Never come to an end. But they are also new. Every morning. They're everlastingly. Renewed. They never grow old.

Or fade. Some people can imagine God. As if God were an old man. In the heavens. But the eternity of God. Is a youthful thing. It's a constant bubbling up.

[11 : 16] Possibilities aren't exhausted. But are restored. We grow old. But God does not. And the prophet turns to this God. As his portion. And consequently his hope.

God is his inheritance. The city of Jerusalem. The nation of Judah. May come to an end. But God. The inheritance of his people. Does not fade. Or fail.

Even as the earthly inheritance of Israel. Crumbles and perishes. Before its enemies. The Lord who is their portion. Endures in his unaltered youthfulness. So as he refounds his hope.

The prophet turns to reflect upon what is good. Each verse from verse 25 to 27. Begins with that word. The word good. Recognizing at the outset God's goodness.

Not just in an objective sense. But in a relational sense. That God is good to those who wait for and seek him. The prophet turns to the goodness of acting accordingly.

[12 : 14] Of waiting patiently for God's salvation. And bearing his judgment. In this section the first person singular of the prophet. Has been replaced by a third person masculine singular.

As the prophet is drawn beyond the immediacy of his own suffering. To reflect upon enduring truths. In a wisdom like discourse. These claims are followed by a threefold general exhortation to the sufferer.

Which the prophet is clearly applying to his own experience. But he is speaking in a more objective way here. To recognize what is true more generally. And then to relate that to his experience. He is no longer caught up within the immediacy of his own suffering and bitterness.

He ought to sit alone in silence. The sufferer. Taking up the language used to describe the city of Jerusalem itself. In chapter 1 verse 1. To submit to judgment. And to take its blows upon himself.

From this the prophet articulates a threefold rationale in the next section. Each beginning with the word for. For the Lord will not cast off forever.

[13 : 16] He may cause grief. But he will have compassion. And finally the Lord does not take delight in afflicting men. But he wishes to bless them. God does not want to crush people underfoot.

As we see in the verses that follow this. To deny them justice. Or to prevent their case from being heard by him. Judgment is not God's primary mode of action. God wishes the good of his people. Judgment is an exceptional thing that God does not delight in. In the New Testament. And especially in the Gospel of Matthew. Jesus is like Jeremiah. In a great many respects. He declares judgment against the temple. Describing it using the words of Jeremiah. As a den of robbers. He again alludes to Jeremiah chapter 8 verse 13. In his judgment on the fig tree. In the final days of his life. He is the prophet weeping over Jerusalem. And warning it of its impending judgment. Like Jeremiah he is physically beaten. And as Jeremiah was a lamb led to the slaughter.

[14 : 16] To be cut off from the land of the living. In Jeremiah chapter 11 verses 18 to 20. So was Christ in fulfillment of Isaiah 53. He suffers on account of the people.

And with them. He feels the painful burden of the Lord's calling upon him. And in places like Jeremiah 20. The prophet bitterly laments his experience. Finally.

As we have seen in Lamentations 3. He feels within himself. The full force of the tragedy of the destruction of Jerusalem. As if he himself were the city. Matthew's crucifixion account.

Alludes to Lamentations and Jeremiah. At a number of points. Lamentations chapter 3 verse 19. Lamentations chapter 2 verse 15. Jesus is as it were.

The embodiment of the fallen city of Jerusalem in Lamentations. He is presented as suffering. The judgment of Jerusalem's exile himself. The fate predicted to Jerusalem.

[15 : 13] In Jeremiah chapter 18 verse 16. Jesus is the one who suffers a fate. Like the fate he declares will fall upon Jerusalem. In the Olivet discourse. The sky is darkened over him.

He is surrounded by his enemies on all sides. As the greater Jeremiah. He bears the force of the day of the Lord. That awaits the unfaithful city. Taking that judgment upon himself.

Yet just as Jeremiah. In Lamentations 3. A confidence in God. Even in the deepest tribulation and distress. Enables Jesus to await the mercies.

A question to consider.

What are some of the explicit allusions. That you can hear to Lamentations. In the gospels accounts of the crucifixion.