

Lamentations 3:37-58: Biblical Reading and Reflections

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[0 : 00] Lamentations chapter 3 verses 37 to 58 Who has spoken and it came to pass, unless the Lord has commanded it? Is it not from the mouth of the Most High that good and bad come?

Why should a living man complain, a man about the punishment of his sins? Let us turn and examine our ways, and return to the Lord. Let us lift up our hearts and hands to God in heaven. We have transgressed and rebelled, and you have not forgiven. You have wrapped yourself with anger and pursued us, killing without pity. You have wrapped yourself with a cloud, so that no prayer can pass through.

You have made us scum and garbage among the peoples. All our enemies open their mouths against us. Panic and pitfall have come upon us, devastation and destruction.

My eyes flow with rivers of tears, because of the destruction of the daughter of my people. My eyes will flow without ceasing, without respite, until the Lord from heaven looks down and sees.

[1 : 04] My eyes cause me grief at the fate of all the daughters of my city. I have been hunted like a bird, by those who were my enemies without cause. They flung me alive into the pit, and cast stones on me.

Water closed over my head. I said, I am lost. I called on your name, O Lord. From the depths of the pit, you heard my plea. Do not close your ear to my cry for help.

You came near when I called on you. You said, Do not fear. You have taken up my cause, O Lord. You have redeemed my life. Lamentations chapter 3, as we have already seen, follows an acrostic pattern.

Each set of three verses begins with a particular letter of the Hebrew alphabet, an alphabetical sequence from the beginning of the alphabet to the end. It's the central chapter of the book, and describes within itself a movement from despair beneath God's judgment to confident appeal to the Lord.

It begins with the first person lament of the prophet, speaking as one who has personally been buffeted by the blows of God's wrath. The prophet isn't merely declaring a dirge over the fallen city, but speaks as the party under the direct judgment of God himself.

[2 : 16] The psychological movement of the passage can be traced, as we've seen, in the shifting pronouns and names. It begins with first person singular pronouns, I and me, and a flurry of third person singular masculine pronouns in relationship to God, he, his, him.

But the Lord's name is not used. There is an inflection point in the prophet's lament that arises when he starts to address himself. No longer trapped in the immediacy of his trials, he can address the truth of the character of the Lord to himself and take comfort from it.

In entering into conversation with his soul, another voice, as it were, can speak to his situation. That interior voice that isn't the immediate voice of suffering and distress, but a voice that can bring up the resources of memory, of conscience, faith and reason, and establish some clarifying distance upon experience, speaking into it with insight and truth that transcends it.

As that voice takes its place in the conversation, the first person singular, the I and the me, is replaced by a third person singular, he and him, and the name of the Lord and his character pierces the darkness of the suffering prophet's distress.

The prophet now reflects upon firm truths that exceed his present situation, truths that he can grasp onto, and patterns of behaviour appropriate to sufferers that he can live out.

[3 : 40] In verses 25 to 30 we see this, In today's passage this continues.

The prophet acknowledges that all events ultimately come from the hand of the Lord, and that nothing exceeds the Lord's power. Both good fortune and disaster are ultimately from the Lord, and we're in no position to blame him for the punishment of our sins.

Indeed, for a living man to do this is to neglect the grace by which he continues to enjoy life. He hasn't been destroyed. He hasn't been cut off yet. This is a source of comfort then, as the prophet recognises that he and his people are not the playthings of a capricious fate, but that even the worst things that could befall them ultimately come from the providence of a gracious and good creator, who does not delight in destruction or disaster, and who can restore the sufferer and bring balm to all wounds.

At this point then, the sufferer also begins to recognise his own culpability. His suffering, in this case, is related to the punishment of his sins and the sins of his people. No longer questioning the Lord's goodness, he can see his own responsibility.

And at this point, a further shift occurs. The prophet, who began with the immediacy of bitter first-person lament, before addressing the truth of the Lord to himself and re-situating his experience in terms of more objective truths, now shifts to the first-person plural and from reflection to exhortation.

[5 : 30] Let us test and examine our ways and return to the Lord. Let us lift up our hearts and hands to God in heaven. The prophet is calling the people to the same sort of self-examination and reflection that he has just been engaging in.

They must stop fleeing from the Lord and return to him, presenting themselves to him in fervent prayer. And now, the Lord, who was the veiled cause of the prophet's distress in the first 18 verses, and the comforting object of his meditation in the verses that followed, becomes the object of personal address.

The third-person pronouns, he and him, are replaced by second-person address, you. He is no longer talking about God. He is exhorting and leading the community in praying to the Lord.

Now, when he recounts his suffering and the suffering of his people, it is no longer merely sterile lament, but it is being brought before the Lord and calling for the Lord's intervention.

So, when he would formally say, He has done X, it shifts to, You have done X. When the prophet returns to the first-person singular and relates his suffering again, a new element appears.

[6 : 45] He is awaiting the Lord who will see his tears. His tears are no longer futile and bitter, but they are a sort of prayer poured out before the Lord, calling upon him to see the sufferer and to act on his behalf.

He also returns to the language and the imagery that he began the chapter with, the imagery of being hunted. However, now it is not the Lord who is hunting him, but his enemies who are hunting him, and he is hunting out the Lord in his crisis.

The prophet has been flung alive into the pit, the realm of death, by those who were his enemies without cause. He has been buried and overwhelmed, as though drowning in the watery abyss of death.

In that position, he calls upon the name of the Lord. The Lord came near when the prophet called, and reassured him, telling him not to fear. The prophet can then declare with reawakened confidence and hope that the Lord has taken up his cause and redeemed his life.

The experience of being cast into or being trapped within the pit is one that is often employed as a metaphor in places such as the Psalms, for instance in Psalm 88 verses 6 to 7.

[7 : 54] Being cast into a pit was also an experience that Jeremiah had personally had in Jeremiah chapter 38, when he was placed in a cistern. The veiled he and the afflicted me with which the chapter began has become the you unveiled in salvation and the delivered me.

The God that the prophet was fleeing from as his hunter in the beginning of the chapter has become the Lord that the prophet flees to in all of his distress at the end.

The deeply personal character of the deliverance that the prophet experiences at the end of the chapter mirrors the deeply personal crisis that he experienced at the beginning.

The Lord's answer to him is an assurance to the entire people that they can turn back to the Lord and find relief in the same manner. The prophetic sufferer who was trapped by his enemies felt the bitter blows of the Lord's punishment for the people's sins and called to the Lord in his distress reminds us of our Saviour, Jesus Christ.

Jeremiah and Joseph might have called upon the Lord in the darkness of their pits using words similar to those of the psalmist. Daniel in the lion's den was heard by God and protected from the

lion's mouths.

[9 : 08] Jonah in the watery abyss of the sea, in the belly of a great fish also called upon the name of the Lord and was delivered from it. In Jonah chapter 2 verses 5 to 6 for instance we read The waters closed in over me to take my life.

The deep surrounded me. Weeds were wrapped about my head at the roots of the mountains. I went down to the land whose bars closed upon me forever. Yet you brought up my life from the pit, O Lord my God.

On this holy Saturday our Saviour lay in a deeper and more terrible pit. A pit whose captives had never been released. Trapped in the prison of a tomb held by the iron clutches of death and as if that weren't enough guarded by Roman soldiers Jesus was delivered from the shackles of death for his fervent prayers.

Hebrews chapter 5 verse 7 reads In the days of his flesh Jesus offered up prayers and supplications with loud cries and tears to him who was able to save him from death and he was heard because of his reverence.

On the cross Jesus addressed his father with the opening words of Psalm 22 My God, my God, why have you forsaken me? Even as the father treated his son as if an enemy and veiled the face of his pleasure the punishment of the rebellious city falling upon his shoulders the son resolutely turned his face towards his father and sought him in his distress confident in his goodness and praying for his deliverance.

[10 : 44] At the very moment of death where it would seem that the blow of God's judgment had fallen most heavily upon his shoulders Jesus called out Father, into your hands I commit my spirit.

Even as the gaping maw of Sheol sought to swallow him up Jesus looked with confidence to the father who had afflicted him seeking his redemption from the grave from the greatest exile of all. Holy Saturday is the agonizing silence the deathly stillness that lies between the prayers of the dying Christ and their answer on Easter morning.

We so quickly pass over Holy Saturday moving from Good Friday to Easter Sunday without towering in that terrible space in between. Yet it is in the darkness of Holy Saturday that we so often find ourselves in a time when all hope has been extinguished when the devastating blow has fallen no recovery seems possible and all prayers have been unanswered.

There is a passage from crisis to the restoration of hope one in which we must pass under the shadow of death to be united with our Lord in the cruel silence of the Holy Saturday tomb.

[11 : 57] Let us lift up our hearts and our hands as we look to his deliverance. A question to consider what are some of the practical ways that we can develop our ability to speak God's truth into the suffocating immediacy of our own experience?

