

Lamentations 3: Biblical Reading and Reflections

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[0 : 00] Lamentations chapter 3 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.

He drove into my kidneys the arrows of his quiver. I have become the laughingstock 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.

[1 : 23] 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.

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.

[2 : 23] 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.

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 test 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.

[3 : 30] 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. 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, waters 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. You have seen the wrong done to me, O Lord.

[4 : 31] Judge my cause. You have seen all their vengeance, all their plots against me. You have heard their taunts, O Lord, all their plots against me. The lips and thoughts of my assailants are

against me all the day long.

Behold their sitting and their rising. I am the object of their taunts. You will repay them, O Lord, according to the work of their hands. You will give them dullness of heart.

Your curse will be on them. You will pursue them in anger and destroy them from under your heavens, O Lord. Like the chapters that precede it, Lamentations chapter 3 has an acrostic pattern. Although it is more pronounced than chapters 1 or 2, it has 22 sets of three lines. Each set of three lines begins with the same letter in alphabetical sequence through the Hebrew alphabet.

It is the central section of the entire book. It does not have the same dirge elements of the other chapters of the book. But it does have elements of instruction, individual and communal lament and wisdom.

[5 : 33] Its more disparate structures and genres mean that the unity of the chapter is most readily apparent in the tightness of its literary structure. If we look more closely, we will also see the unity of a movement.

Within the chapter, there are a number of changes and points of view. It begins with the first-person singular speech in verses 1 to 24, moves to third-person masculine speech in verses 25 to 39, then to first-person plural speech in verses 40 to 47, before reverting to first-person singular speech in verses 48 to 66.

These changes in point of view represent natural transitions in the material of the chapter, but they don't require a change in the speaker, as the same person is almost certainly speaking throughout. It is very important to recognise the transitions, however, as they represent psychological transitions in the speaker. There are 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 judgement upon him.

But the name of the Lord only appears once, in verse 18. In verses 22 to 39, the I and me of the speaker disappears, and third-person masculine singular references to the righteous sufferer join the third-person masculine references to the Lord.

[6 : 57] But now the Lord is repeatedly named, not merely appearing in pronouns as he or him. This section involves a wisdom-flavoured reflection upon the manner of wise suffering, and what the sufferer has learned from it.

The transition here is noteworthy. It's followed by a 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.

What may seem to be just meaningless changes in pronouns actually traces the movement of the heart of the writer. The tensions of the chapter are finally resolved as the speaker resituates his first-person references in a hopeful second-person address to the Lord, in which the Lord's name is repeatedly mentioned.

This chapter, which is 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 and the speaker retreats to the background.

[8 : 13] In the first half 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 hanging over our reading of the 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.

Comparing chapter 2 verses 11 to 19 with chapter 3 can be illuminating, as there are several similarities 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 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. [9 : 30] 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. I'm inclined to hear the voice of Jeremiah himself here, representing the entire people in himself.

Jeremiah is the suffering prophet, and large sections of the book of Jeremiah describe the sufferings of the prophet himself, often in the most charged language. For instance, Jeremiah is led as a lamb to the slaughter in chapter 11 verse 19 of his prophecy.

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 in chapter 20, for instance.

He also has a number of individual laments, or complaints, or confessions, as they have been called, of the type that we find in the Psalms. Jeremiah is the weeping prophet, the one 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 their suffering upon himself.

In Lamentations chapter 3, I believe that we are seeing an aspect of this. Jeremiah is the prophet who feels the painful blows of the judgment of the Lord before they fall upon the people.

[10 : 47] In Lamentations chapter 3, he is giving voice to his experience. The speaker has been made to dwell in darkness like the dead on account of God's wrath. He has repeatedly been 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. He also cornered him, blocking off all of his paths. God, the unnamed adversary of the prophet, acts 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 might remind us of the bitterness of the herbs of the Passover connected with Israel's affliction in Egypt. He has lost all peace, and his old hope in the Lord has perished.

It's crisis time, and how will he respond? In the verses that follow, the prophet moves beyond the crisis of his lament and the extinguishing of his hope, to refounding his confidence upon the character of God, beginning to address the Lord.

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 the prophet's crisis.

[12 : 07] 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 imagine God as if he were an old man in the heavens, but the eternity of God is a youthful thing, a constant bubbling up, where possibilities aren't exhausted, nor do they fade or become threadbare.

They are always being restored. We may grow old, but God does not. The prophet turns to this God as his portion, and consequently his hope. Even as the earthly inheritance of Israel crumbles and perishes before its enemies, the Lord who is their portion endures in his unaltered youthfulness.

Having so refounded his hope, the prophet turns to reflect upon what is good. Each verse from verse 25 to 27 begins with the word good, recognizing at the outset God's goodness, not just in a bare objective sense, but also in a relational sense, that God is good to those who wait for and seek him.

He turns to the goodness of acting accordingly, 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 clearly is applying to his own experience. He ought to sit alone in silence, taking up the language used to describe the city of Jerusalem itself in chapter 1 verse 1, submitting to judgment and taking its blows upon himself.

[13 : 48] From this, the prophet articulates a threefold rationale in the next section, each beginning with four. The Lord will not cast off forever. Though he causes grief, he will have compassion.

Finally, the Lord does not take delight in afflicting men. He wishes to bless them. God does not want to crush people underfoot, to deny them justice, or to prevent their case from being heard by him.

Judgment is not God's primary mode of action. 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.

He is beaten as Jeremiah, and as Jeremiah was like a lamb led to the slaughter to be cut off from the land of the living, so also was Christ. He suffered on account of the people and with them.

[14:50] He felt the painful burden of the Lord's calling upon him, and in places like chapter 20, he bitterly laments his life. Finally, as we have seen in Lamentations chapter 3, Jeremiah 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 the embodiment of the fallen city of Jerusalem in Lamentations. Taking up Lamentations chapter 3 verse 19 and chapter 2 verse 15, Matthew presents Jesus as the embodiment of the fallen city of Jerusalem.

Jesus is presented as suffering the judgment of Jerusalem's exile himself. Jesus is the one who suffers a fate like the fate he declares will fall upon Jerusalem in the Olivet Discourse.

The sky will be darkened over him. He will be 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 chapter 3, a confidence in God, even in that deepest of tribulation and distress, enables Jesus to await the mercies and steadfast love of the Lord's new morning, a morning when the desolate city would be restored, and a third day on which the destroyed temple would be razed again.

[16:09] As I've already noted, the psychological movement of the passage can be traced 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 reference to God, he, his, him.

But the Lord's name is not used. An inflection point in the prophet's lament arises when he starts to address himself. He's 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 can speak into his situation.

That interior voice is not the immediate voice of suffering and distress. It's a voice that can bring up the resources of memory, conscience, faith, and reason, and establish some clarifying distance upon his experience, speaking into it with insight 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.

[17:19] The prophet now reflects upon firm truths that exceed his present situation. He can grasp onto these, and live out patterns of behavior appropriate to sufferers.

Verses 25 to 30, The prophet goes on to acknowledge 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 are in no position to blame him for the punishment of our sins. Indeed, for a living man to do so is to neglect the grace by which he continues to enjoy life.

This is a source of comfort, as the prophet recognizes 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 under 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, the sufferer also begins to recognize his own culpability. His suffering is related to the punishment of his sins. No longer questioning the Lord's goodness, he sees his own responsibility.

[18:48] And at this point, a further shift can occur. 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.

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 here calls people to the same 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. It is now being brought before the Lord and calling for his intervention.

[20 : 04] He has done X, shifts to You have done X. When the prophet returns to the first-person singular and relates his suffering again, a new element appears.

He is now awaiting the Lord who will see his tears. His tears are no longer futile and bitter, but 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 imagery are being hunted with which he began the chapter. However, now it is not the Lord who is hunting him, but his enemies. And he is seeking 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.

And 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.

[21 : 08] The experience of being cast into or being trapped within the pit is one that is often employed as a metaphor in places like the Psalms. For instance, Psalm 88 verses 6 to 7.

Being cast into a pit was also an experience that Jeremiah himself 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 is now the Lord that the prophet flees to in all of his distress. The deeply personal character of the deliverance that the prophet experiences at the end of the chapter mirrors the deeply personal crisis that he experiences at its 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. This is the pivotal chapter of the book.

In this chapter the key corner is being turned. 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.

[22 : 19] It reminds us of 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.

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. Our saviour descended into a deeper and far more terrible pit, a pit whose captives had never been released.

However, even as the gaping war of Sheol sought to swallow him up, Jesus looked with confidence to the father who had afflicted him, seeking his redemption from the grave.

A question to consider, how can we follow the pattern of the prophet's address to himself in this chapter, learning to move beyond the immediacy of our distress? A question to consider,