

Route Sixty-Six

Part Twenty-Five

Lamentations

Death of a Nation, Birth of a Kingdom

(John 5:39 Lamentations 3:22-25)

With Study Questions

*Pastor Paul Viggiano
Branch of Hope Church
2370 W. Carson Street, #100
Torrance, CA 90501
(310) 212-6999
pastorpaul@branchofhope.org
www.branchofhope.org*

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You search the Scriptures, for in them you think you have eternal life; and these are they which testify of Me (John 5:39).

The steadfast love of the Lord never ceases; his mercies never come to an end;²³ they are new every morning; great is your faithfulness.²⁴ “The Lord is my portion,” says my soul, “therefore I will hope in him.”²⁵ The Lord is good to those who wait for him, to the soul who seeks him (Lamentations 3:22-25).

Introduction

Perhaps I am hoping against hope that someday Reformation Day will surpass the popularity of Halloween. Not that I am seeking to invoke a false, man-made holiday (for Christians, their only true holiday is the Lord’s Day). Yet there is something to be said for commemorating significant historical events, either in the life of families or cultures.

Having read Lamentations during a week where two starkly different types of activities were running the gamut of dialogue (Halloween and Reformation Day), my mind was rattling between darkness and the light, life and death. For Lamentations very much chronicles the painful intimacy behind, what might be called, the *Death of a Nation*. But so like the theme of new life, sown through God’s history of redemption contained in His word, the darkness and death is not final. The *Death of a Nation* foretells *The Birth of a Kingdom*.

Again, I pondered the Reformation. How early in the sixteenth century the city motto of Geneva was “*Post Tenebras Spero Lucem*.” After darkness I hope for light. But when the Reformation had its affect upon that community, the motto changed. The new motto was “*Post Tenebras*

Lux." After Darkness Light. The difference may appear slight, but it is massive.

Our tendency to view the difference to be minor may have to do with the weak way the word, "hope" (*elpis* in Greek) is often used. We regularly use hope to express a faint wish or desire for some unlikely outcome. But in the Scriptures the word conveys a sure expectation of an unseen or future event or promise. One has current hope due to the surety of a promise of something unseen or future.

For example, in medicine a patient may be experiencing the weak hope of recovery because their insurance company is holding back, or the physician gives the procedure a small chance of success. But, by analogy, a Biblical hope would be more akin to the doctor communicating, as you go under, that he has done this surgery over a thousand times and has every time succeeded.

The distinction between "*Post Tenebras Spero Lucem*" and "*Post Tenebras Lux*" were adages which showed how the assurance of the Gospel had been recaptured. The tenor of the faith leading into the Reformation was one of self-dependence. Perhaps not entirely self-dependence and maybe not even primarily self-dependence, but self-dependence nonetheless. It only takes a bit of poison to contaminate the cup. And there is nothing that contaminates the cup of blessing found in Christ than to seek to interject a bit of self!

The glory and peace of the Gospel which motivated the change from a hapless hope to a blessed assurance was the knowledge that we are "**justified**" (*dikaio*-declared righteous before God) by faith alone in Christ alone. Our hope is not found in the will or strength of man but in the promise of God. This promise is founded and fulfilled in the love, grace and power of the cross of Christ, alone.

This all seems so simple, yet it is ever the fight of the faithful to maintain this message, this news, this Gospel. But one might ask, "where are the good works?" Simply put, good works are the necessary fruit of salvation, not the seed or ground of salvation. And when a people abandon the faith they will inevitably and necessarily abandon the practice-and that is the order.

Or to more fully present the vicissitudes of redemptive history in the Old Testament. God calls a fallen people out of the darkness and they, for a time, will believe and walk in a manner consistent with that belief/faith.

In time (perhaps generations), they begin to walk away from the faith which is always accompanied by dark actions-very dark. But God has made a promise to His beloved that this darkness will not ultimately prevail. After the darkness there will be light-ultimately and finally the light of Christ.

For it is the God who commanded light to shine out of darkness, who has shone in our hearts to *give* the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ (2 Corinthians 4:6).

Survey of Lamentations

It may be argued that in the peaks and valleys of redemptive history, Lamentations lies in the bottom of the lowest valley. It is the death of a nation. It opens with the grim description:

How lonely sits the city *That was full of people!* *How* like a widow is she, *Who was great among the nations* (Lamentations 1:1a)!

In a series of poems, Jerusalem's plight is presented through acrostics, likely designed for memory. The first, second, fourth and fifth chapters have twenty-two verses. The third chapter has sixty-six. In the first, second and fourth chapter each verse begins with the corresponding letter of the Hebrew alphabet, which contains twenty-two letters (in English it would be A for 1 or B for 2, etc.). In the third chapter the Hebrew alphabet acrostic is contained in every three verses. The fifth chapter does not contain the acrostic but still has twenty-two verses.

These poems also give varying perspectives. We observe Jerusalem's affliction through the eyes of the prophet, from Jerusalem's own eyes, from the perspective of Jehovah's righteous anger and so forth. The event of Lamentations is the destruction and humiliation of Jerusalem by the Babylonians in 587 B. C.

What we read of in this sorrowful book is how the Lord afflicted His own covenant people due to their transgressions. Truly, it can be said that they were led into captivity for their own good. This is how God would

preserve the remnant, lest the entire nation become as Sodom. Captivity has its own way of producing and preserving true salt. But it is not as if this was a pleasant ordeal.

In her destruction, she would be reminded of the pleasantries of her past **“that she had in the days of old” (Lamentations 1:7b)**. How easily and quickly we forget what leads to a happy and healthy culture! We learn how Jerusalem became short-sighted.

...she took no thought of her future; therefore her fall is terrible (Lamentations 1:9).

There are numerous ways one can bring a cautionary remembrance of a statement like this to bear in our lives. First and foremost, is our eternal future. The path of darkness directs to an eternally dark and damned destiny while the path of the light will find its ultimately destination in true light, glory and endless joy. But there is also a call to think of the future in terms of history.

Much of today's economic plight (it is argued by some) can be traced back to a statement made by a man advising Roosevelt during the thirties and forties. The statement being, “In the long run we are all dead.” There is some debate as to what he meant by that, but my only point here is how dangerous and unhealthy it is to fail to consider the future. Something that some of the more popular brands of eschatology today have contributed to.

As we read on in Lamentations, we learn that, often times, the means by which God brings His judgment to nations is not by earthquakes and lightning, but by other nations. In this case, Babylon. And though we haven't the time, in one sermon, to plunge ourselves into deep descriptions of each type of affliction, the judgment is so severe that it is highly uncomfortable to even mention in a public message. Suffice it to say that the hand of oppression becomes so terrible that the most intimate familial relationships go beyond most of our worst nightmares (see Lamentations 2:20).

Going back now to the events in Jerusalem which lead to this righteous, yet severe judgment, we get a glimpse of condition of the practice of the true faith. The Scriptures are not unclear that the world would view the church with contempt. But we live in an age where even believers view the church as expendable. There is a Biblical form of

judgment where God gives us what we desire (Romans 1). And if we desire true impiety, God will grant it.

He has done violence to His tabernacle, As if it were a garden; He has destroyed His place of assembly; The Lord has caused The appointed feasts and Sabbaths to be forgotten in Zion. In His burning indignation He has spurned the king and the priest (Lamentations 2:6).

It is a great and popular error which says that if we ask God to leave, He will do the gentlemanly thing and obey our wishes. In a certain sense we may say that God leaves. He leaves us to ourselves and to the creation of our own religions which, in our guile, we won't call religion but reason or sensibilities or the will of the people. It is a great judgment when God brings our minds to forget His word and sacraments. And the resultant condition is much repeated in Lamentations:

You have moved my soul far from peace; I have forgotten prosperity. ¹⁸ And I said, "My strength and my hope Have perished from the Lord" (Lamentations 3:17, 18).

The never-ending quest for a soul endowed with peace may be offered but is never delivered by the world of the things of the world. How true the words of Augustine,

Thou hast made us for thyself, O Lord, and our heart is restless until it finds its rest in thee.

You will sometimes heard it argued that the blessings and curses as applied to nations based upon their faithlessness and rebellion, was unique to Israel and should not be applied to nations throughout history. Yet the surrounding nations were judged and brought to nothing due to their rebellion against God and there is no good reason to conclude that God no longer has anything to do with nations in terms of their longevity and blessedness. It will be true throughout the course of history:

Blessed is the nation whose God is the Lord (Psalm 33:12).

Christ in Lamentations

As mentioned earlier, *Post Tenebras Lux* is clearly a theme in Lamentations. And there would be a deliverance for Israel and the rebuilding of the city, the wall and the temple. But all of those temporal blessings were designed to bring their hearts to the true **“light of the world” (John 8:12)**, who is Christ Himself.

When Jesus taught that the Old Testament testified of Him, how can but appreciate one of the most comforting and well-known passages in all of Scripture, which jumps out like a trumpet in the midst of a dirge.

The steadfast love of the Lord never ceases; his mercies never come to an end; ²³ they are new every morning; great is your faithfulness. ²⁴ “The Lord is my portion,” says my soul, “therefore I will hope in him.” ²⁵ The Lord is good to those who wait for him, to the soul who seeks him (Lamentations 3:22-25).

Kingdoms come and go. The faithfulness of the most altruistic, philanthropic, ardent and self-controlled believer is marked with failure and iniquity. But the **“steadfast love of the Lord never ceases.”** We grow impatient of others and, if we’re honest, we come to the end of our ropes even in our self-examination. But **“his mercies never come to an end.”**

I’ve grown quite fond of saying his mercies **“are new every morning because our sins are new every night.”** Though we should never view God’s mercy and grace a license for sin (1 Peter 2:16), it is beyond comfort to know (as one translation puts it) **“His compassions fail not” (Lamentations 3:22 NKJV)**. It is worth noting that God’s mercies being new every morning is a bit of a literary device for the benefit of the reader. It’s not as if God runs out of mercy at the end of a long day. It is I, who need to wake up and be reminded.

As if he is speaking in his deepest honesty, he is telling us what his soul says: **“The Lord is my portion.”** **“Portion”** is a funny word and can be

used many ways. It can refer to the spoils of war or food eaten in a ceremonial meal. It can refer to an inheritance or an affiliation in a person's company or community. Almost anyone of those translations would be appropriately refer to Christ. We belong to Him, He belongs to us, His inheritance is ours and we ever feed upon Him for the nourishment of our souls.

The Lord is my chosen portion and my cup (Psalm 16:5).

All of this is why it is fitting and wise that we **"hope in Him."** For it is not as if all these rich blessings are bestowed indiscriminately upon humanity. It may be called a sign that this belongs to **"the soul who seeks Him."** And how does one seek after Christ? It is a conscious setting of one mind and heart on the Person of Christ presented in the Scriptures. It is a believing that He died and died for you – commonly referred to as faith. And it involves a willingness to follow Him in lifelong obedience as our wise and loving Master-commonly referred to as practice.

For those who are in this grace, after the darkness, there will be light indeed.

Questions for Study

1. Compare and contrast the two Latin phrases, *Post Tenebras Spero Lucem* and *Post Tenebras Lux*. What do they mean and why did one replace the other (pages 2, 3)?
2. How do we misunderstand and misuse the word 'hope' (page 3)?
3. What role does good works place in the life of a Christian? What role does it not play (pages 3, 4)?
4. What was the condition of Jerusalem when Lamentations was written? Why was Jerusalem in that condition (pages 4-6)?
5. In what ways do we see Christ in Lamentations (pages 7, 8)?