

I have urged you to take Lamentations as a model for teaching you how to lament –  
how to mourn and pour out your heart before God.

Lamentations 3 clearly lays out the poet’s distress.

And it is really important that we come to God in our distress –  
with the clear confession that *God has done this to me!*

Some people think that God only does the good things – Satan does the bad things.  
That view offers no hope.

Because it means either that God doesn’t want to help you –  
or that he can’t.

Lamentations 3 offers a very different diagnosis of your troubles!

God has done this to you!

Lamentations 3 deals very forthrightly with the central problem of monotheism!

If there is only one God – and that one God is all-powerful and all-knowing –  
then that means that everything that happens is under his control.

And that means that the bad things – as well as the good things – come from God.

Lamentations 3 has a lot of echoes and parallels with Job.

But whereas Job was the prayer of the *innocent* man – the Suffering Servant,  
Lamentations 3 is the prayer of the *guilty* man in his suffering.

As we saw last time, in verses 1-18, the poet speaks of the LORD in the third person –  
*He* has done all these things to me –

But only in verse 18 does he finally identify the LORD by name.

And also, in verse 18, he concludes this list of all the things that God has done to him,  
with a change in voice, “so I say, ‘My endurance has perished;  
so has my hope from the LORD.’”

It is at least noteworthy that six is the number of man –  
and this is the sixth stanza.

In the sixth stanza, hope perishes.

Then in verses 19-24 we have two stanzas remembering both affliction and comfort –  
and particularly in the 8<sup>th</sup> stanza hope returns

as the poet remembers the steadfast love – the *hesed* – of Yahweh.

And again, at the end of the 8<sup>th</sup> stanza there is this change in voice –  
from the poet to the *soul* of the poet.

(Yes, in one sense, it is the same person speaking,

which convinces me that this is an intentional literary device

used to capture our attention and say, *this is really important!!*)

“The LORD is my portion, says my soul, therefore I will hope in him.”

So hope perishes in the sixth stanza – the stanza of man.  
And hope returns beginning in the seventh stanza (v21),  
and coming to its glorious conclusion in the eighth stanza (v24).

You might think that the poem would stop there!  
How do you say anything more once you have hope?!

Well, now, that's the problem.  
Hope, by definition, exists in the context of affliction.  
It is all nice and good (and true) to say that the steadfast love of the LORD never ceases,  
but I am not experiencing steadfast love and mercy.  
Hope, by definition, refers to something future –  
something that we do not have.  
As Paul will say so well, “Who hopes for what he sees?” (Rom. 8:24).

And so in verses 25-39, the poet turns to his hearers – turns outward –  
and admonishes us to wait for the LORD, to seek him,  
and to wait quietly for the salvation of the LORD.  
(as verse 29 says, “there may yet be hope”).

Remember that God is just – and God is sovereign.  
He will make all things right.

1. **“I Am the Man”: Hope Perishes in the Sixth Stanza (v1-18)**
2. **“Great Is Thy Faithfulness”: Hope Returns in the Eighth Stanza (v19-24)**
3. **“Wait Quietly for the Salvation of the LORD” (v25-39)**

<sup>25</sup> *The LORD is good to those who wait for him,  
to the soul who seeks him.*

<sup>26</sup> *It is good that one should wait quietly  
for the salvation of the LORD.*

<sup>27</sup> *It is good for a man that he bear  
the yoke in his youth.*

This is the problem with having three weeks in between the two parts of this sermon!

Do you remember verses 1-18?!!  
(read)

The LORD has done all those things to me.  
But 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.

Each of these three verses begin not only with the same letter,  
but with the same *word*.  
Good is the LORD to those who wait for him...

Good for the one to wait quietly...  
Good for a man that he bear the yoke...

The affirmation of God's goodness  
does not cancel out the lament of verses 1-18.  
He is not saying that God didn't really do all those things.  
He doesn't let God off the hook.  
Rather he says that *both* are true!

God did all those to me.  
And God is good.

And what is more, it is *good* for a man to bear the yoke in his youth.

God's goodness establishes the fact that it is good for us to endure this suffering.

"For if the God who punishes is the God who is good,  
then punishment cannot be the last word.  
There must be a future worth waiting for – *it is good to wait quietly for the salvation of the LORD.*"  
(Wright, 114)

<sup>28</sup> *Let him sit alone in silence  
when it is laid on him;*  
<sup>29</sup> *let him put his mouth in the dust—  
there may yet be hope;*  
<sup>30</sup> *let him give his cheek to the one who strikes,  
and let him be filled with insults.*

Verse 29 is important here.  
"there may yet be hope."

The poet will not say yet with confidence that *I will be vindicated!*  
He says instead, "there may yet be hope."  
Perhaps.  
Why is there this hesitancy?  
Because while he has already said "I will hope in him" (v24),  
he must also acknowledge that it may not come in his lifetime.

God had promised Abraham that he would bring his descendants out of Egypt  
after 400 years –  
but there were generations who died in Egypt,  
never having seen the salvation of their God!

Jesus has promised that his gospel will go forth to all nations –  
but Rex and Becca have no promise that *they* will see the salvation of Tibet!

In the middle of history, we must endure suffering and insults for the sake of the Lord.

<sup>31</sup> *For the Lord will not  
cast off forever,*  
<sup>32</sup> *but, though he cause grief, he will have compassion  
according to the abundance of his steadfast love;*  
<sup>33</sup> *for he does not afflict from his heart  
or grieve the children of men.*

Here also we see the same word used three times.

But here it is the word “for” –  
For the Lord will not cast off forever.  
For, 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.

What is the poet saying?

Yes, God casts off – for a time.  
Yes, God causes grief.  
Yes, God afflicts his people.

But that is never the end – that is never the goal – that is never the purpose  
of what God is doing.

The final goal – the ultimate purpose – of these afflictions  
is salvation.

He will have compassion – according to the abundance of his steadfast love.  
Because God’s anger – God’s wrath – is always guided by his love.  
“He does not afflict from his heart” –  
means that his heart always has a more fundamental purpose in view.  
Affliction is never for its own sake.

This is the central section of our acrostic poem.

And here – at the center – is the poet’s central affirmation  
of the LORD’s steadfast love – his *hesed* – his covenant loyalty.  
God will be faithful to his promises forever.

As one commentator puts it,

“God gets *no pleasure* from inflicting pain on people –  
his judgments are not the way he *wants* to relate to humanity  
but are his response to human sin.  
Punishment is an ‘alien’ work of God given reluctantly and after numerous warnings.  
In his innermost self, God is full of lovingkindness and mercy,  
and that is how he *wants* to relate to humans...  
This theology forms the basis for hope in the midst of crisis.” (Parry in Wright, 117).

“But the crisis remains.

Theological truth and experienced suffering continue to battle each other.  
‘Herein lies the theological tension residing at the poem’s heart.’” (Wright, 117)

And you see this in the juxtaposition of the next two stanzas:

First, in verses 34-36, we have a clear statement of how God opposes injustice:

<sup>34</sup> *To crush underfoot  
all the prisoners of the earth,*  
<sup>35</sup> *to deny a man justice  
in the presence of the Most High,*  
<sup>36</sup> *to subvert a man in his lawsuit,  
the Lord does not approve.*

You have the right idea here –

but I should point out that the word translated “approve”  
is simply the word “to see.”

The Lord does not *see* these things.

Some commentators object to the translation “approve”  
because the word ‘to see’ *never* means *to approve*.

But the problem is that the English word “to see” completely misses the point here!!

In English, if you say, “the Lord does not see it” –  
it suggests that that God missed something!

But in Hebrew, when the Psalmist cries out,

“O Lord, *see* my distress” –

he is saying “look upon my cry with favor.”

Think back to Exodus – where we heard how the LORD *saw* Israel’s distress.

When God *sees* – that means that he is about to *do* something.

So when the poet here says that the Lord does not *see* these three things,

it *means* that he does not look upon these things with favor.

In other words, the Lord does *not* approve of these three things:

crushing prisoners underfoot,

denying justice,

subverting a man in his lawsuit –

the prophets had all declared God’s judgment against such actions.

And yet, in verses 37-39, we swing to the opposite side:

<sup>37</sup> *Who has spoken and it came to pass,  
unless the Lord has commanded it?*  
<sup>38</sup> *Is it not from the mouth of the Most High  
that good and bad come?*  
<sup>39</sup> *Why should a living man complain,  
a man, about the punishment of his sins?*

These three questions bring us back to the central *problem* of Lamentations 3.

1) Who has spoken and it came to pass, unless the Lord has commanded it?  
Nebuchadnezzar destroyed Jerusalem.

If the Lord had not commanded it, it wouldn't have happened!

Cyrus decreed that the Jews could return home.

If the Lord had not commanded it, it wouldn't have happened.

But further:

2) Is it not from the mouth of the Most High that good and bad come?

If the Lord's command is necessary for anything to happen,

then both good things and bad things come from the mouth of God.

Polytheists have the advantage of saying that because there are many gods,  
you don't have to blame *your god* for the bad stuff!

But monotheism insists that there is only one God –

and this one God is sovereign over all of creation.

And that means that all things – both good and bad –

ultimately come from God.

You can put it this way:

God knows all things from the beginning.

So, if God chose to make *this world*

when he *knew* before he made it, that all these things would happen,

then he *chose* for these things to happen.

His decree is behind *everything* that happens – both good and bad.

Or, as commentators have rightly noted – both *bad and good*.

In English we usually say “good and bad” –

but the order here probably matters!

The point of Lamentations 3 is that God is *faithful*.

“Great Is Thy Faithfulness” IS the central point of this chapter!!

And God promised in Deuteronomy that *after Exile comes restoration*.

After judgment comes salvation.

The cross leads to the empty tomb!

“is it not from the mouth of the Most high that bad and good come?!”

The *good* is still to come!!

And so, v39

3) Why should a living man complain, a man, about the punishment of his sins?

If God is sovereign –

if God rules over all things –

then who are we to complain about the punishment of our sins?

After all, we *have* sinned...

Please note that the poet is *not* saying that we should never complain about anything!

Rather, we should not complain about the punishment of our sins.

And particularly a *living man* should not complain about the punishment of his sins!

After all,  
    *You're not dead yet!!*  
The wages of sin is *death*.  
If you are not dead, then God has not punished your sins as they deserve!

So verses 25-39 provide us with several foundational theological principles:

The Lord is *good*.  
The Lord will have *compassion* according to the abundance of his steadfast love.  
The Lord is *just* – and does not approve of wickedness.  
And yet the Lord is *sovereign* – and so all things come from his mouth.

And so therefore rather than *complain* about the punishment of our sins,  
we must *repent*.

And that is the focus of verses 40-48.  
These three stanzas open with an acknowledgement of sin and rebellion,  
as the poet leads Israel in a prayer of repentance,  
pleading with God to have mercy.

#### 4. “Let Us Return to the LORD”: The Prayer of Repentance (v40-48)

<sup>40</sup> *Let us test and examine our ways,  
and return to the LORD!*

<sup>41</sup> *Let us lift up our hearts and hands  
to God in heaven:*

<sup>42</sup> *“We have transgressed and rebelled,  
and you have not forgiven.”*

Now it's important to say right up front that Lamentations is not the book of Job!

In Job's case, he had done *nothing wrong*.

He did *not* deserve the things that happened to him.

Job *complains* about the *injustice* that happened to him

(and, by the way, the LORD appears at the end of the book  
and says that Job was right!).

But in the case of Israel – in the case of Jerusalem –

as they test and examine their ways,

they realized “We have transgressed and rebelled.”

Israel's deepest problem is *not* the Babylonians.

Israel's deepest problem is their *sin*.

I want you to see how often this is the case for us!

So often, our focus is on all the bad stuff that *others* do to us.

Now, I'm not denying at all that others have done bad stuff to you!

Lamentations 3 has plenty of it!

And we'll go there in just a minute!

But before we go there, we need to see that our problem is in how we respond to bad stuff!

When someone sins against you,  
how do you respond?  
Why do you lose your temper?  
“The other person provoked me.”  
“If people wouldn’t be such idiots, I wouldn’t blow up!”  
How do you respond to the sins of others?

Notice that the first thing that the poet does is confess *our sin*.  
‘We have transgressed and rebelled, and you have not forgiven.’

If we confess our sins, God is faithful and just to forgive us our sins  
and cleanse us from all unrighteousness.

*If we confess our sins!*

The problem is that Israel has not repented!  
Israel has continued in rebellion and transgression!

The poet is *not* saying that Israel has repented, but that God has failed to forgive.  
Rather, he is saying that the destruction of Jerusalem *is* the judgment of God  
*for* their transgression and rebellion.  
For centuries God had forgiven their transgression and rebellion  
(even though their repentance was pretty flimsy!),  
but now God’s patience has run out.

And so Israel’s prayer continues in verses 43-45:

<sup>43</sup> “*You have wrapped yourself with anger and pursued us,  
killing without pity;*  
<sup>44</sup> *you have wrapped yourself with a cloud  
so that no prayer can pass through.*  
<sup>45</sup> *You have made us scum and garbage  
among the peoples.*

So our first problem is our sin.

Our second problem is *God’s anger*.

Verse 43 says that God has covered himself with anger.

Verse 44 says that God has covered himself with a cloud.

Both covering and cloud are terms used in the Exodus  
to refer to God’s *presence* with his people.

But now God is hiding himself from his people

“so that no prayer can pass through.”

We have sinned – and our continued rebellion has resulted in God’s anger with us.

It will not do to say that God is angry with the sin – but not with the sinner.

It will not do to say that God hates sin, but does not hate the sinner.



God's anger and God's love are not opposed to each other.  
God made us in his own image –  
and so God loves us – because we are reflections of him!  
But of course, sin has darkened the image of God in man.  
Sin is utterly opposed to God.  
God hates sin!

And so God is angry with sinners –  
because *we* have spoiled his image –  
*we* have made a mess of his good creation.

Indeed, it is precisely *because* he loves us that he is angry with us!  
God's anger is *always* directed and guided by his love!

Even when he pursues us – “killing without pity.” (v43)  
Because what would have happened if God did *not* judge Jerusalem?  
If God had allowed Israel to continue in their rebellion,  
if God had *never* dealt with Israel's sin,  
then Jesus would never have come.  
Sin would still reign supreme.  
Death would be unconquered.  
And the Devil would still be running this world!

God judges his people because he wants to bring salvation to all the earth!

That doesn't make it easy!

So our first problem is our sin (verses 40-42).  
Our second problem is God's anger (v43-45) – which comes upon us because of our sin!  
Our third problem is the devastation caused by our enemies (v46-48) –  
which comes upon us because of God's anger.

<sup>46</sup> “*All our enemies  
open their mouths against us;*  
<sup>47</sup> *panic and pitfall have come upon us,  
devastation and destruction;*  
<sup>48</sup> *my eyes flow with rivers of tears  
because of the destruction of the daughter of my people.*

The repetition of “eyes flowing” with tears in verses 48-49 shows the transition  
as the poet turns back from the “we” of verses 40-48,  
to the “I” of verses 49-54.

The problem is that there *is no* “us” anymore!  
Most of God's people have been exiled to Babylon.  
Most of the rest have fled to Egypt.  
There is no “us.”  
There is only *me*.

And so my eyes flow with rivers of tears –  
and the section ends with the cry of the poet, “I am lost.”

**5. “I Am Lost”: The Devastation of Jerusalem (v49-54)**

<sup>49</sup> *“My eyes will flow without ceasing,  
without respite,  
<sup>50</sup> until the LORD from heaven  
looks down and sees;  
<sup>51</sup> my eyes cause me grief  
at the fate of all the daughters of my city.*

<sup>52</sup> *“I have been hunted like a bird  
by those who were my enemies without cause;  
<sup>53</sup> they flung me alive into the pit  
and cast stones on me;  
<sup>54</sup> water closed over my head;  
I said, ‘I am lost.’*

This is the 18<sup>th</sup> stanza.

The number 18 is the number of the Hebrew word “life” –  
and that word (“alive”) happens to be the exact middle word of this eighteenth stanza.

But life is precisely the thing that is most precarious in this stanza –  
“they flung me alive into the pit.”

All I can do is weep – all I can do is cry out in grief –  
“until the LORD from heaven looks down and sees.”

And so in the depth of his agony – from the depths of the pit:

**6. “Do Not Fear”: God’s Answer (v55-66)**

<sup>55</sup> *“I called on your name, O LORD,  
from the depths of the pit;  
<sup>56</sup> you heard my plea, ‘Do not close  
your ear to my cry for help!’  
<sup>57</sup> You came near when I called on you;  
you said, ‘Do not fear!’*

Finally, the poem ends in verses 55-66 [four stanzas] with a prayer of confidence.

Because when I said, “I am lost” –  
you said, “Do not fear!”

Okay, here’s another case of theological whiplash!

And you simply *can’t say* that these are two different poems stitched together,  
because *it’s an acrostic poem* –  
it’s designed this way *very intentionally!*

In the middle of my distress –

as I am weeping and wailing – grieving for the destruction of my city –  
as I am calling out on the name of the LORD –

the LORD hears!

Yes, the same LORD who had wrapped himself with a cloud  
so that no prayer could get through –  
now comes near and says, “Do not fear!”

Because we saw earlier in the poem –  
that the Lord will not cast off forever.

We heard earlier in the poem that “the steadfast love of the LORD never ceases;  
his mercies never come to an end;  
they are new every morning;  
great is your faithfulness.” (v22-23)

Lamentations 3 includes *all* the moods of the Christian life!  
That’s why I said that Lamentations 3 teaches us how to lament!  
Because it captures everything!

And here at the end, the final four stanzas focus on *you*, O LORD.

If 55-57 focus on how God *does hear* our prayers  
(even when he has wrapped himself in a cloud so that he can’t!),  
then 58-60 turns to how God *does see* our afflictions!

<sup>58</sup> “*You have taken up my cause, O Lord;  
you have redeemed my life.*

<sup>59</sup> *You have seen the wrong done to me, O LORD;  
judge my cause.*

<sup>60</sup> *You have seen all their vengeance,  
all their plots against me.*

And so the poet asks God to bring justice!  
Judge my cause.

Notice that none of this would have been possible  
without Israel’s repentance.  
So long as Israel is mired in his transgression and rebellion,  
then God cannot take up his cause!

First, God must deal with Israel’s sin – and purify Israel –  
only then can God deal with the plots and the wrongs done to them.

<sup>61</sup> “*You have heard their taunts, O LORD,  
all their plots against me.*

<sup>62</sup> *The lips and thoughts of my assailants  
are against me all the day long.*

<sup>63</sup> *Behold their sitting and their rising;*

*I am the object of their taunts.*

And so in verses 61-63, the poet reminds God of the taunts and plots of his assailants.

This is no mere personal vendetta.

This is talking about those who are trying to destroy God's people –  
and particularly, as we saw last time –

the voice of Lamentations 3 becomes the voice of Jesus –  
so this becomes the voice of the suffering Servant –  
as our Lord Jesus becomes the target of the nations  
as they conspire against the Lord and against His Anointed.

Because again – the *anger* of the LORD is a good thing!

God is angry because people have spoiled his image  
and have corrupted their ways before him.

And so in his anger, God will make things right!

As the poem concludes:

<sup>64</sup> “You will repay them,<sup>[c]</sup> O LORD,  
according to the work of their hands.

<sup>65</sup> You will give them<sup>[d]</sup> dullness of heart;  
your curse will be<sup>[e]</sup> on them.

<sup>66</sup> You will pursue them<sup>[f]</sup> in anger and destroy them  
from under your heavens, O LORD.”<sup>[g]</sup>

There is a proper place for these curses – these imprecations – in the Christian life.

Certainly we pray for the salvation of the lost –  
we pray even for those who persecute us,  
that they may become like Saul of Tarsus,  
whom God called and used mightily in the service of the gospel.

But that is not inconsistent with praying for their destruction.  
Saul of Tarsus had to die.

“I have been crucified with Christ. It is no longer I who live but Christ who lives in me.”

We would prefer that the wicked would repent and believe in the Lord Jesus!  
But their wicked deeds *must stop!*

And if they will not repent, then we ask God to destroy them –  
because otherwise, their wickedness will continue forever!