

BIBLE BACKGROUND

Lamentations 3:22-33

Lamentations, and perhaps there was an older title, is from the Greek. In the Hebrew Bible it is, coming from the opening word of the text and meaning 'Ah!' or 'How!' Authorship is traditionally assigned to Jeremiah because of 2Chron. 35:25, which describes the prophet's poetic activity in supplying King Josiah with laments. Herbert suggests that style and content preclude Jeremiah (563).

The situation that Lamentations alludes to seems to be the period after the utter devastation of Jerusalem and the temple by the Babylonians in 587BC and before the new hope of Cyrus II's proclamation of 538BC. The book was probably used as a ritual of repentance and the fast days associated with it persisted in post-exilic times (Zech. 7:3-5; 8:19).

Chapter 3 follows a disciplined acrostic pattern as in chapters 1,2, and 4 though without the typical opening. Each of the 22 letters of the Hebrew alphabet are represented in turn and each letter is repeated three times so that there are 66 lines in the Hebrew and 66 verses in the English, or putting it another way, 22 groups of three lines, three lines making up a complete verse in the Hebrew. For example, there is an at the beginning of verses 22, 23 and 24. The and the are inverted. This odd feature has no explanation. To add one more permutation, the fifth poem (ch. 5) has the same number of lines as the alphabet but is not an acrostic.

The poems, expressed in a heartfelt and personal manner, were composed in to be prayed by the community. They suitably communicated to the Lord the grief and also the hope its members were experiencing.

The third song is an individual lament, but surely has a corporate character. Verse one opens with the sentence, 'I am the man who has seen affliction by the rod of his wrath' yet one cannot ignore the imagery that evokes the siege and destruction of the holy city. In verse 18 we hear a strong echo of the fall of Jerusalem's mighty buildings, its palace and fortifications: 'So I say, "My splendour is gone and all that I had hoped from the Lord." 'The phrase 'he has besieged me' (v. 5) pictures the machinery used against the walls of the city. Indeed verses 40-48 are in the first-person plural and therefore we ought not to overlook the communal nature of this lament.

The Revised Common Lectionary suggests we start at verse 23 even though verse 23 is in the middle of a three-line song-verse. Verse 22 is the preferred starting point.

The context of the pericope is a litany of the Lord's punishment and actions of wrath against 'the man who has seen affliction'. The catalogue of complaints is reminiscent of the Psalms of Lament and also Job's accusations against the Lord. However, there is no suggestion that the Lord's character is at fault but rather an acceptance seen elsewhere in Israel's faith that the Lord is responsible for both life and death, peace and calamity (1Sam. 2:7). This does not preclude either, Satan's role as a servant of God's will (cf. Job).

Disaster raises the issue of the nature of God. Our statements about the Lord who punishes must be made with great care so that he is not slandered as a punishing Lord as many within and without the church often claim. Some say they like the New Testament God but not the Old Testament Lord as though there are two God's, one of which we can ignore. There are many difficult passages where the Lord's punishment seems to be the cause of bloodshed and cruelty. I have come to the conclusion that God's wrath described in Scripture is what we would normally consider the natural consequences of human sin. Scripture's purpose in saying that God is punishing is to reveal that God's anger is involved in what we would all too readily see as natural causes.

In what way, then, is God's wrath involved in response to human rebellion? Rather than his judgement directly causing human suffering, his judgement is seen in his refusal to intervene with his saving action (cf. Deut. 31:17; Isa. 1:15). In viewing the destruction of Israel as events that would have happened, it frees us from accepting that there is some fault in God's nature. Luther understood God's wrath as his 'alien work'. Therefore, we can say that the

Lord's nature as Saviour is his default setting and the situation of pain and bloodshed is our human default setting. Moreover, the life and redemption we do enjoy are unnatural in this world and come solely as the Lord's gracious initiatives on our behalf.

Verse 22. 'Because of the steadfast love of Yahweh we are not finished, for his acts of kindness are not at an end.'

The Lord's kindnesses () lie behind the survival of the remnant. A favourite word for **the Lord's steadfast love**, here in the plural, remind us that God's kindness leads to a multiplicity of loving acts. This is the love that leads the Lord to save Israel from slavery in Egypt and establish a covenant with her. It is also the same love that moves him to remain true to his people. Far from a static attribute of God, the of the Lord grows and reproduces the more human life sinks into misery and depravity. Paul can say of the Lord's love: 'where sin increased, grace increased all the more' (Rom. 5:20 cf. also with Spurgeon's sermons on grace). Normally we do not expect a flame to shine brighter when poisonous gases fill the room or health to bloom in a contagious diseases ward, but that is what happens with the of the Lord. Therefore, God's people may come close to destruction but the church is not consumed (2 Cor. 4:8,9). The Lord only needs a remnant, a seed (Jn. 12:24), or a blackened stump (Isa. 11:1) in order to create a new beginning.

All earthly resources and human strengths can be used up and come to an end (the law of entropy). But **the Lord's compassions** () can never be exhausted. As much as Israel drew on the Lord's supply of mercy by its sin and offensive behaviour, the level of the Lord's motherly like feelings for Israel remained the same. Paul hoped that the Ephesians would grasp how infinite and inexhaustible the Lord's love is (3:17-19; cf. Ps. 57:10).

, **loving compassions**, come from the Hebrew word for womb and suggests the love between related people. The Lord brought Israel into being and into a personal relationship through the covenants and these were always her hope when her thoughts couldn't go any further than the despicable offences against his love. There is no hint in this verse that Israel can presume on God's love as though it is the Father's job to forgive. Rather, when her responses of faith had come to an end, the relationship still existed from God's side. And on that basis a future for Israel could begin again.

Verse 23 'They are new every morning. Great is your faithfulness.'

Though the Hebrew day began at night (unlike Easter morning believers), the new light of the day reminded the battered leftovers of Israel that the Lord's acts of compassion and kindness were freshly available for them. In times of great stress and human breakdown, the morning could have been greeted with depression and loss of interest. How powerful the renewal of the Lord's womb-feelings was for his defeated children!

'Great is your faithfulness' (). Those in worship have to break out of third person liturgical formulae and speak to the Lord in second person address. has its roots in a word that gives us our 'amen'. Doxology can be a description of the Lord's character but also it can be an exclamation of adoration. How free these statements were may be up for conjecture but in references like Ezra. 3:11 there seems to some room for improvisation. Shouting in church may not be culturally natural but some latitude for congregational response and feedback could be encouraged.

The early Christian hymn that went,

If we are faithless,
he will remain faithful,
for he cannot disown himself (2Tim. 2:13)

reveals that should people abandon the Lord, he cannot abandon them. When Israel in effect no longer existed as God's people as it must have seemed post 587BC, God would still exist. On this basis Israel could hope. All that really mattered was the being of God who announced 'I am the Lord' (Isa. 42:8).

Israel's confession that 'the Lord is one' (Deut. 6:4) is a statement, among other things, that in his singleness the Lord is faithful to himself. And his faithfulness goes further by indicating

that should everything around God descend into chaotic nothingness as Israel experienced, her existence could yet be found in him, that is, within his being. For in any case, outside of him, nothing exists (Eph. 1:22,23).

Verse 24. 'I resolved to believe that Yahweh is my portion, therefore I will wait for him.'

The degraded poor, in whom the Spirit creates faith from the Lord's faithfulness, decide to live in the Lord, within the territory or **portion** () of his being. The Levites had no territorial allotment for 'the Lord was their inheritance' (Nu. 18:20-21), meaning the living of the Levites and the Aaronic priesthood would be paid for by the tithes and offering of the remaining eleven tribes. But here the thought goes deeper; the gracious Lord himself with all his faithfulness will be the life-sustaining power of the remnant.

Waiting (hiphil -), then, would not be a foolish act. Waiting is the greatest act of faith. Abraham and Sarah waited 25 years for Isaac! Though waiting implies endurance, it is mostly the hopeful expectation that the Lord's promise of salvation and his word of grace are true and can be depended upon. The Lord Jesus called waiting 'alertness', for the Son of Man will appear suddenly. His resurrection appearances were like this. The unpredictable and overwhelming appearance of the Lord's saving action makes expectant and watchful waiting really essential.

All other realities besides waiting, being material, require only possessing, appreciation, or analysis. The pay cheque does not require faithful waiting. In contrast, the Lord is the reality who breaks in from beyond us, from the place that is out of reach and out of sight from us. The only position, then, for the Lord's people is one of waiting to receive beyond all that we can imagine (Eph. 3:20). Such waiting is not conditional on present circumstances, as Noah waited for a sea to appear on dry land. It rests solely on the saving power of the Lord. Here is a lesson for a church that has experienced a growth that has all but dried up.

Verse 25. Yahweh is good to the one who waits on him, for the person who will seek him.'

This verse and the next two begin with **good** () though here in 25, Yahweh is the subject. Another verb for waiting, a participle with the prefix and 3.m.s. suffix (from). This waiting that brings great tension is never misplaced for the Lord is good. The Lord's kindness is promised to those who remain convinced about him in times of bad news.

Waiting does not imply quietism, however. The word encourages believers to rely on the Lord even when there are human strategies that the Lord could indeed bless, as well as in situations when a source of help is not in sight. Jeremiah 24:6,7 provides a promise of God's goodness that would enable his people to begin with their lives again in hopeful expectation. Jer. 17:5-7 rejects any trust in human resourcefulness. When the Lord's people begin to build, love and work again, it always involves trustful waiting on the Lord. Quietism rejects human actions in God's kingdom. Activism rejects God's presence in human affairs. But waiting on the Lord is active waiting; actions that contain hope. "For I know the plans I have for you," declares the Lord, "plans to prosper you and not to harm you, plans to give you hope and a future." Far from an approach to life and ministry that rejects human initiative, the word of God gives us something to work on and work for while we wait for the Lord to show up, in a manner of speaking. Waiting in our mind often implies listlessness but biblical waiting is excited anticipation of the Lord's presence as we go about doing his will or finding what his will is.

The one who waits is, thus, called a seeker () of the Lord. The verb is 3.f.s. since person () is feminine and while the suffix looks like 1.c.pl. () it is in fact 3.m.s. because of the addition of the nun energicum.

Clearly the Lord is not lost and so the word **seek**, hardly used outside of church circles, refers to spiritual seeking, as one might enquire of the Lord in prayer. Since the Lord is unseen, spiritual looking is the action of the human heart directed towards the transcendent and immanent One. Mostly in Scripture, it is used in the general sense, as in this verse, for describing what a person is living for is revealed by faith and action. Thus, our Lord Jesus says, 'Seek first the kingdom of God and his righteousness' (Matt. 6:33 cf. also Ps. 53:2,3).

This seeking is expounded by the Deuteronomist: 'But if from there you seek the Lord your God, you will find him if you look for him with all your heart and all your soul.'

The Lord promises to be Israel's true foundation for life and that is why she can seek him. When the people of God seek him, they are waiting for him to accomplish the major steps of life as the use of **the man** (needy human being) reminds us. Human beings are unique in that they are ever reaching forward and seeking for what they think is good. But only God is good as Jesus tells us (Matt. 19:17). The experience of real living is found only in him.

In our technological and affluent age, do Christians seek the Lord for their lives? Or do they make a life for themselves? Our constant danger is to relegate God to the margins, to funerals, for example, so that he is the God of the dead and not of the living. The Psalmist urges, 'taste and see that the Lord is good,' (34:8) and so our experience of the Lord should teach us this.

Verse 26. 'It is good that he be strong and remain in silence; to wait for Yahweh's salvation.'

'Remain' and 'wait' have to be inserted to make sense of the text. 'Salvation' () may come from , to cry for help, but it is more likely that it is derived from .

It may seem that a fatalistic suffering in silence is advocated here. The nearness of the Lord's salvation could not make that possible for Israel. The Lord may punish but he is principally Israel's Father and King and therefore his redemptive purposes are always involved when catastrophes strike. A grim outlook on life is not an option for the Lord's children. St. Paul could say of their missionary situation, 'we despaired even of life. Indeed, in our hearts we felt the sentence of death.' Yet in his situation of depression and nervous exhaustion he could identify the grace of his Father at work: 'But this happened that we might not rely on ourselves but on God, who raises the dead.' (2Cor. 1:8,9).

The Lord is the Saviour and so has a deeper meaning than deliverance. Seekers of the Lord do not wait for their fortunes to change in order to feel better. They are in a living relationship with the One who has the power to come to their aid and therefore they find the Spirit's strength as they quietly trust the Lord of history to intervene. God's intervention, then, is properly called **salvation**. It proceeds from the covenantal fellowship the Lord bestows on his people and proceeds from a continuing redemption.

It must be noted, however, that the resurrection is not in view here, but rather God's relationship with his people and the on-going security Israel could have in the Lord.

Verse 27. 'It is good for the man to bear the yoke while he is a youth.'

(**man**) refers to a man in his physical strength. His **youth** () is a plural noun, hence the ending. Israel is a masculine proper noun and perhaps there is the thought here that the remnant labouring under oppressive conditions ought to see itself as a young nation, a nation beginning again.

Armed forces put **yokes** on their captured victims. The yoke mentioned figuratively refers to Israel's vassalage under an enemy occupying power or perhaps to a greater nation such as Persia (cf. Jer. 27:8). In contrast to this yoke of servitude and God's wrath, Jesus' yoke of the gospel is light (Matt. 11:29).

There is a hopeful tone in this verse. Just as one's youth comes to an end, there will come a time for Israel when the Lord will lift her (his) subjection to others. Waiting and bearing the yoke is difficult because no one knows for how long it will be but the Lord assures his people that a pre-determined time will pass. The yoke will not last beyond Israel's strength. 1 Cor. 10:13 is a great comfort: 'And God is faithful; he will not let you be tempted beyond what you can bear.'

The woman with the flow of blood waited for 12 years before Jesus arrived and healed her (Lk. 8:43). The man at the Pool of Siloam had been an invalid for 38 years before the Master commanded him to walk. Our rebirth at baptism guarantees us a total restoration even if we

have to wait till the resurrection. This may seem a distant answer to our prayers yet it is the gospel for our Lord juxtaposed his return next to a speedy answer to our prayers: 'And will not God bring about justice for his chosen ones, who cry out to him day and night? Will he keep putting them off? I tell you, he will see that they get justice and quickly. However, when the Son of Man comes, will he find faith on the earth?' (Lk. 18:7,8). I think this verse has an eschatological meaning for the Lord may not provide an immediate cure but gives us an immediate care.

Verse 28. 'Let him sit in isolation and be silent for [Yahweh] has laid it upon him.'

The first two verbs and are jussive, like the imperfect in form, expressing command.

In the Old Testament, where the 'fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom', one finds many expressions of submission under the Lord's heavy hand of punishment. King David's response to the prophet Gad is quite typical: "I am in deep distress. Let us fall into the hands of the Lord, for his mercy is great; but do not let me fall into the hands of men" (2Sam. 24:14). But as this verse states, far from a stoic endurance of the consequences of human behaviour, David could fall on the compassionate mercy of the Lord, knowing that there was a good chance of God restoring the situation to peace (cf. also 2Sam. 12:22).

Because of our merciful Lord, we cannot interpret this verse as advocating an acquiescent demeanour. It condemns protest and retaliation against the Lord's punishment. In light of the history of prophecy that pointed to the day of judgement on Israel, the Lord's people must see the hand of God at work and not merely in the violence and oppression of its enemies. Though isolated by her suffering, Israel could **silently** look to the same Lord who placed her in this situation, to lift her out of this situation. Literal silence is not the point but an attitude of acceptance of the Lord's discipline. The word of God here prohibits any attempt to return to the past or to forcibly change the present.

The church presently faces the onslaught of a secular and post-modern culture and this may be the punishment for years of liberalism and years of identifying with state powers. But as St. Paul turned his imprisonment into a pulpit, the church today must use its isolation and rejection for the Lord's glory. Rumanian Lutheran pastor Richard Wurmbbrand saw the occupation of his country by radical Marxist communists as a cross, a cross that would be his greatest joy. He did all in his power to counter state sponsored atheism by preaching, visiting barracks, handing out Christian literature until he became such a threat that authorities imprisoned and tortured him for 14 years. A local Baptist church has a ministry to Body, Soul and Spirit conventions held regularly in Launceston. They hold a stall where they offer Christian interpretations of Tarot Cards. This text does not mean that the people of God are paralysed, thinking they can do nothing.

Verse 29. 'Let him put his mouth in dust for [Yahweh] has lifted this upon him.'

The NIV translates the latter half of the verse as: '...there may yet be hope.' means **lift or bear** but the NIV translators have misconstrued this as deliver or exalt. **Upon him** () does not allow for this rendering. The context clearly supports the interpretation of the Lord lifting a burden of wrath on Israel, its yoke, which it must bear with a repentant frame of mind.

Dust can be used to describe a multitude but it often has negative connotations. It was placed on the head as a sign of mourning (Josh. 7:6), referred to a general state of distress, poverty and degradation (1Sam.2:8), bodily mortality (Job 30:19) and the place of the dead (Ps. 22:19). The only parallel to eating dust is in Genesis 3:14 where God cursed the serpent and made it crawl on its belly with its head in the dust. Perhaps this is what the author has in mind. The burden of his wrath will make Israel prostrate, face down in the dust.

The command to humble oneself and be repentant is heard little of in the church today. Even non-Christian writers like Steve Biddulph (*Manhood*, 225) know the value of sins being named and properly grieved over yet the church has lost this first word of the gospel (Mark 1:15). Today loss of meaning may be felt more strongly than guilt but it's there in all people (Gal. 6:7). The church's crises in the financial, membership, sexual and doctrinal areas are the Spirit's megaphone addressing us in loud and clear tones to put its mouth in the dust – if only we have ears to hear.

Verse 30. 'Let him offer his cheek to the one who strikes him; let him accept taunting as his lot.'

The vicarious suffering of the servant in Isaiah 53 and Christ's own passion, which included slapping (Matt. 26:67) and mockery (Matt. 27:41) is not in mind here. This passage concerns deserved suffering.

The purpose of this suffering is important. Since Israel saw it as a just punishment for breaking the Lord's covenant with her, it therefore came from the Lord and had to be borne. On the other hand, New Testament believers would wish to point to the post-resurrection era of the Lord's fatherly discipline rather than the just retribution of the law (Heb. 12:7). When suffering comes because of our witness to Christ then submission (Heb. 12:9) to the Lord's discipline produces a Christ-like character (Heb. 12:10,11; Rom. 5:3-5). However, we are also aware that Christians deliberately break God's holy law and like Israel, we must accept psychological and physical distress as just consequences. But will the Lord refuse to intervene as Saviour?

Verse 31. 'For the Lord will not reject forever.'

Lord appears about 450 times and about 6,700 times in the Old Testament. was the favoured name for God until about 330BC when was considered more respectful. Lamentations uses 14 times and Psalms 55. So, it was more popular in prayer and worship than in narrative. Originally it was probably 'my Lord' but the sentiment of personal relationship gave way to recognition of God's position and hence 'Lord of all'. Finally, through association with , it was an accepted substitute for God's name and to distinguish it from common usage (master), it was intensified to , a plural of rank.

We are reminded of Ex. 20:5,6: 'for I the Lord your God, am a jealous God, punishing the children for the sin of the fathers to the third and a fourth generation of those who hate me, but showing love to a thousand generations of those who love me and keep my commandments.' The Lord's loving kindness and desire to save Israel from the trouble she brought on herself was greater than his desire to punish, which was alien to his character. While the Lord was just and merciful, he was more merciful than just and so Israel could hope that rejection was not , **forever**, that it was finite and quantifiable but that the Lord's grace was without limit.

Nathan, the prophet, pronounced the death of David's and Bathsheba's child, yet the king could think, "Who knows? The Lord maybe gracious to me and let the child live." (2Sam. 12:22). In the same way, the people of God know that in their Lord lies a heart that can reverse the consequences of sin. Therefore, there is always hope.

Verse 32. For if he causes grief, he will have compassion. His loving kindness is overflowing.

The inspiring words for the Lord's grace found in verse 22, are mentioned again. The **compassion** that the Lord has deep inside him () must overcome his judgement, which is on the surface. The writer does not see oppression as a seasonal thing; eventually the law of probabilities should turn the wheel of life towards better circumstances. Rather, on behalf of the faithful, the writer confesses that it is the multitudinous love of God () that will bring about the end of suffering. The loving kindness of God is motivated by the Lord's willingness to act as the Redeemer of his people, to save them from sin and trouble. Jeremiah expressed the Lord's love when God said through him, 'I have loved you with an everlasting love; I have drawn you with loving kindness.' (31:3)

John said that 'God is love' (1Jn. 4:16). The Lord has demonstrated what his essential nature is by entering the curse and destruction our sin brings (1Jn. 3:16 et al.). Faith rests on the being of the Lord not on the circumstances of life. Therefore, affliction is not a fixed judgement for the dynamic, ever active and powerful love of God creates sudden and astonishing transformations in our lives. When we are crushed by our own stupidity or rebellion, our sentence does not last a lifetime. We may see ruin and think that is how things

will always be. But the Lord 'knows everything' and 'God is greater' than the condemnation our hearts tell us we deserve (1Jn. 3:20).

Verse 33. 'For his heart is not in humbling and he doesn't want human children to suffer.'

is the Piel of , which is the same spelling of four different verbs. The first part of this verse literally translated is: **For he does not humble from his heart** (). can mean mind, will, heart or the inner part of a person. (Hiph. and literally meaning, **and he caused to suffer** is an odd spelling when is expected.

Once again, we hear that punishment and judgement are foreign to the Lord's nature. There is an inner struggle that goes on within God as he considers holding Israel accountable for her actions. The scope of this verse goes beyond Israel to all created human beings, literally **sons of man** in the text (). The Lord is everyone's God and the extreme condition of anyone grieves his heart (Ezek. 18:32).

This struggle finds its goal in the inner Trinitarian battle of the cross as the Father shuns his Son and the pain of the Father's wrath is expressed by Jesus in the cry of dereliction (Matt. 27:46). So powerful is the Lord's wrath that it must be annihilated by his own suffering of it. Luther added law and wrath to the three powers sin, death, and the devil. In this world of hubris, wrath has to reside next to love in God's management of humanity as is beautifully expressed in Ex. 34:6,7. But this text in Lamentations among many others indicates that wrath is unnatural to God. It is the heart of the Lord that clearly beats out the message that the days of his wrath are numbered. The deliverance of human kind is his chief goal.

And so, this exegesis ends with the thought we began with; the mystery of God's wrath lying beside his grace. It is through the cross and empty grave that the Spirit allows us to capture a glimpse of the resolution of this conundrum. The Lord doesn't want human children to suffer and therefore he must suffer for them.

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