

Surveying the Text: Lamentations

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INTRODUCTION:

This short book is a powerful expression of godly grief. It is also a highly disciplined work of art, and there is something very important that we can learn from this. The authorship of this book is not certain, but a strong tradition connects it to Jeremiah.

THE TEXT:

“This I recall to my mind, therefore have I hope. It is of the Lord’s mercies that we are not consumed, because his compassions fail not. They are new every morning: great is thy faithfulness. The Lord is my portion, saith my soul; therefore will I hope in him. The Lord is good unto them that wait for him, to the soul that seeketh him. It is good that a man should both hope and quietly wait for the salvation of the Lord. It is good for a man that he bear the yoke in his youth. He sitteth alone and keepeth silence, because he hath borne it upon him. He putteth his mouth in the dust; if so be there may be hope. He giveth his cheek to him that smiteth him: he is filled full with reproach. For the Lord will not cast off for ever: But though he cause grief, yet will he have compassion according to the multitude of his mercies” (Lam. 3:21–32).

STRUCTURE OF LAMENTATIONS:

Before addressing the meaning of our text, we must first consider the structure of Lamentations—because the structure of the book helps to determine what this text actually means. The book is structured in two different, complementary ways, and so you will need to bear with me for a moment.

A Hebrew verse is traditionally structured as a couplet made up of two matching lines. The two lines usually match each other in length and thought, and they usually have three stresses each.

*The heavens/declare/the glory of God
The firmament/sheweth/his handywork*

In a lament, or a eulogy, which is what Lamentations is, the pattern is 3/2 instead of 3/3. This helps create a “trailing off” or dying effect.

*He hath inclosed/my ways/with hewn stone,
He hath made crooked/my paths.*

Lamentations does this throughout at the verse level, but it also does it at the macro level with the book as a whole. The book is composed of five laments, corresponding to our

five chapters. The first three of them are acrostic poems, arranged according to the 22 letters of the Hebrew alphabet. Each of them has twenty-two stanzas, with three couplets in each stanza, such that each poem has 66 couplets. In the first two poems, just the first couplet begins with the appropriate letter. In the third poem, *each* couplet in each stanza begins with the corresponding letter. The effect is a quickening or intensifying one. The fourth poem, also an acrostic, only has two couplets per stanza, giving it a total of 44 lines. This creates the immediate effect of the eulogy dying out, just like Jerusalem. In the last poem, the disintegration is complete. It has 22 stanzas, 22 couplets, and the acrostic device is abandoned. Jerusalem is in rubble. Thus the entire book follows a 3/2 pattern.

As if this were not enough, the book changes grammatical voice a number of times, creating 13 units throughout the book. These units form a chiasm, and the seventh of them, the main point of the book, is our text.

They are

1. Zion desolate (1:1-11)
 2. Zion betrayed (1:12-22)
 3. Jehovah's wrath did this (2:1-8)
 4. All suffer, from princes to infants (2:9-12)
 5. Zion should cry out to Jehovah (2:13-22)
 6. Jehovah has afflicted (3:1-20)
 - 7. Jehovah's great love (3:21-32)**
 6. Jehovah afflicts men (3:33-39)
 5. I cry out to Jehovah (3:40-66)
 4. All suffer, from princes to infants (4:1-10)
 3. Jehovah's wrath did this (4:11-16)
 2. Zion betrayed (4:17-22)
 1. Zion desolate (5:1-22).

One other feature is that as we are coming out of the chiasm, when we are in the backstretch, each one of the units contains a note of cautious hope, some mitigating aspect to the surrounding disaster. What we gained at the center of the book, from our text, we are allowed to carry out with us. We walked through a desolate wilderness, found a great treasure, and are invited to carry that treasure out . . . through a desolate wilderness.

SUMMARY OF THE TEXT:

Jeremiah is able to summon up hope because of his *memory* (v. 21). Jerusalem has failed, but God's compassions do not fail. It is because of His mercies that the Jews were not *entirely* consumed (v. 22). Some of them were still alive. God's faithfulness is great; His compassions are new every morning—as Jeremiah points out in the midst of the smoking rubble (v. 23). The Lord Himself is the prophet's portion, and that is the reason for hope (v. 24). To the one who seeks, to the one who waits, God shows Himself to be good (v. 25). This is why it is good that a man should hope and quietly wait for the salvation of the

Lord (v. 26). It is good to endure hardship when young (vv. 27-30), because the Lord will not cast off forever (v. 31). His afflictions are only for a time. Though He does bring grief, His compassion is built upon the multitude of His mercies (v. 32).

THE DISCIPLINES OF GRIEF:

We live in a generation that prizes what it *thinks* is authenticity. Our notions of this owe more to Rousseau than to the Scriptures, and the result is that we tend to believe that the authentic is characterized by what is spontaneous and unpremeditated. A puddle of emotion is more to be praised than anything thought through and carefully crafted. The best way to answer this heresy—and it *is* a heresy—is by learning from the book of Lamentations.

He would be a brave man who described the grief in Lamentations as inauthentic. He would be a fool who thought that the emotions described here were somehow not genuine. What true art does, whether musical or literary, is provide the thinking and honest soul with a “vocabulary” to express what it feels. And when you have a vocabulary of 40,000 words, you can express more honestly than if you had a vocabulary of 5,000 words. Artistry does not provide the honesty. But honesty provides the rationale for seeking out true artistry.



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