

All Bad Things Must Come to an End

In the name of him whose steadfast love never ceases, dear friends in Christ: If the name is any indication, it should come as no surprise that Lamentations, from which today's Old Testament lesson comes, is by far the saddest book of the Bible. For that reason – and perhaps also because it's tucked away in a corner of the Bible most people are unfamiliar with anyway – I'm guessing that most of us don't know much about it. I mean, who wants to read the Bible to become depressed, right? Instead we tend to zero in on the happy, uplifting, and encouraging parts; the glad tidings of great joy. We read those parts over and over again and neglect the darker chapters. But let me suggest that's a mistake. Our lives are not happy all the time. We all have to endure seasons of sorrow, loss, and grief. And in the Holy Scriptures we find God's Word that addresses us in all our seasons. I've found too that it's better to know in advance what God's Word says especially about the darker seasons before you have to face them. That way you're better equipped to deal with them when they come. With that in mind, let's turn our attention to today's reading from Lamentations.

To fully appreciate it, though, I'm going to have to give you a brief overview of the whole book. What it is is an epilogue to the ministry of the prophet Jeremiah. To him fell the unenviable task of being God's final spokesman to the people of Judah and of Jerusalem in particular before the Exile and the Babylonian Captivity. Jeremiah was to express in the strongest terms possible what the Lord was threatening to do to his people if they continued in their sin and idolatry and refused to repent. The trouble was that the people of Jerusalem had an attitude. They thought they could get away with anything because the Temple of God was in their city. After all, it was the dwelling place of God on earth. And one thing they knew was that the Lord would never allow his Temple to be desecrated by an enemy. Perish the thought! The thing is it was already being desecrated. God's own people were doing it. They had set up pagan idols in the Temple. They were practicing all the wicked stuff the pagans did there: cultic prostitution, the sacrifice of infants, witchcraft and sorcery – all the stuff the Lord had expressly prohibited they were doing right in the Lord's House and throughout all Jerusalem. And the Lord told them through Jeremiah, "If you don't knock it off and return to me and to me alone, I'm going to withdraw my presence from the Temple and let the enemy have at you. They'll besiege this city, knock down its walls, and destroy this Temple; and those of you who don't die by starvation during the siege or by the sword when the city falls will be sold into slavery and dragged off in chains to a foreign land."

That was Jeremiah's dire message. And handful of people listened to him and got out of Dodge. They believed him and were spared. The vast majority said, "Naw. It'll never happen." They were wrong. Everything Jeremiah had foretold happened. So Lamentations is his epic poem of mourning for Jerusalem and her inhabitants. As you read it you can almost see him wandering through the smoldering ruins of the city being very careful not to step in the sticky pools of blood that stain its streets. Throughout the five chapters he gives vent to his profound sadness while describing in horrifically graphic detail the misery of the siege, the savage brutality of the final fall of the city, and the suffering of the enslaved survivors.

And he obviously put a lot of thought into what he wrote. You see, the whole book of Lamentations is arranged as an elaborate acrostic. What I mean is this: the first two chapters and the last two chapters have exactly 22 verses, corresponding to the number of letters in the Hebrew alphabet. And in chapters 1, 2, and 4 each successive verse begins with the next letter

of the alphabet. So the first verse begins with A, the second with B, and so on. It's like he's trying to continue the pattern in fifth and last chapter, but he's just too distraught to keep it up, so it collapses there a bit. But the idea is this: by forcing himself to work through the whole alphabet he's trying to embrace and express the entire range of human sorrow and sadness. It's from A to Z gloom, despair, and agony on me.

Now, for the third chapter, the one in the center, he intensifies what he's doing. This chapter has 66 verses that are still arranged acrostically, but this time it's three verses that begin with the letter A, followed by three verses that begin with B, and so on. And as the pattern is intensified, so is the subject matter. It also gets more personal. In the other chapters he speaks of Jerusalem in the third person, referring to the city as a she: "How lonely sits the city that was full of people! How like a widow she has become, she who was once great among the nations." In the third chapter he switches to the first person: "I am the man who has seen affliction under the rod of his wrath; he has driven and brought me into darkness without any light; surely against me he turns his hand again and again for the whole day long. He has made my flesh and my skin waste away; he has broken my bones; he has besieged and enveloped me with bitterness and tribulation; he has made me dwell in darkness like the dead of long ago."

Pretty wretched stuff; and believe it or not, it gets worse as it continues. And as you read through it, you're wondering is the prophet referring to himself and his own suffering because of what he's witnessing? Or is he putting himself in the sandals of one of those who endured the fall of the city? Or has he personified the city itself and is speaking for it? The answer is probably all of the above. Jeremiah is attempting to give voice to all the world's misery and grief as it suffers in abject agony under the curse of sin and the righteous wrath of God.

But then, when you're expecting it to keep getting worse, you suddenly break through to today's text, which are the twelve verses that lie at very center of Jeremiah's elaborate poem of lament. And it's like the eye of the hurricane. All around swirls nothing but gloom, doom, and disaster; but here in the center are calm words of comfort and 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."

You see what he's done? In the very middle of all human suffering is the Lord's steadfast love. That's the anchor. That's what's driving the whole train. That's the reason for our very existence. And that's the one inexhaustible reality upon which we can always rely. God's love for his children never ends. It has no bounds. To be sure, the Lord's bringing this disaster on his people was an act of love. As any parent knows, loving a child means having to apply discipline and correction. You don't want to do it. It often hurts you more than the child who needs the discipline. But you do it because you love the child and are trying to keep them from something that's even worse.

So it was with the Lord and the people of Jerusalem. They were in full blown rebellion, and despite all his pleas and warnings, they refused to listen. So he took them to the woodshed. He had to. He prefers to draw with the carrot; but when necessary – when his people make it necessary – he must use the stick. He brought on them a physical disaster in order to bring them to repentance and thus save their immortal souls.

And he does the same with you and me. As sinners we always want to abuse God's grace. Like the people of Jerusalem, we want to be called God's children; but we don't want to live like it. We've got our idols that we fear, love, and trust in more than the Lord. We don't love

our neighbors as ourselves. And we certainly don't want to forgive them as freely and completely as we have been forgiven. Now, all that being said, how would we be if we were always only rewarded for our bad behavior? If nothing bad or unpleasant ever happened to us? Why, we'd only get worse. And farther away from the Lord.

Thus the Lord is compelled in love to give us afflictions of various kinds. He does it to keep us humble, repentant, and relying on him and his grace. And we are to see in the middle of all our afflictions the Lord's steadfast love. That's the one constant. Which is why Jeremiah goes on to say, "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 in silence when it is laid on him." What he's saying is that the Lord disciplines us for our good. So when he brings us into suffering or difficulty of some kind, we are to trust that he has a good purpose for it. He's preserving us from something even worse. And we should bear whatever it is he's placed upon us patiently knowing that it won't last. In God's good time, when he knows it's right, he will restore us. The prophet goes so far as to say of the one who is afflicted, "Let him put his mouth in the dust—there is yet hope." That is to say even if God brings you to death itself, it won't last. It can't. For the children of God, for those called according to his purposes, nothing bad ever does. For us all bad things must come to an end because the one thing that endures is the Lord's steadfast love for us. Indeed, as Jeremiah declares in the middle of his lament, "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."

And of course nowhere do we see the Lord's steadfast love so clearly displayed than on the cross where Jesus bore the yoke of affliction on our behalf. There he faced the storm of God's wrath against our sin. There he gave his cheek to the one who strikes. He was filled with insults. But what he suffered at the hands of men was small compared to the anguish he received from his Father when he was rejected and he cried out in bitter lament, "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?" So great is the Father's love for us that he cast off his own Son. He was cast off for a time so that we never will be. And yet Jesus bore even this for us calmly and patiently, waiting in perfect hope and confidence for the salvation he knew must come. He knew it because he knew the Father's steadfast love never ceases, and therefore all bad things must come to an end.

So may we also rely on the Lord's steadfast love in the midst of our afflictions, and bear with patience whatever crosses he may assign us for our good. In Jesus' name. Amen.

Soli Deo Gloria!