

## *Lamentations*

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The title—**Lamentations**—suggests human sadness. There is, however, something else here—divine faithfulness. At the heart of this short book, we find this great declaration—‘Great is thy faithfulness’ (3:23). Knowing God as the God of great faithfulness involves looking beyond our circumstances and our feelings. Israel’s circumstances were depressing. Jerusalem had fallen. The Temple had been destroyed. Depression seemed to be the mood of the moment. Humanly speaking, things did not look good. Israel had known better times. The Lord’s people had wandered from the Lord. The people of God knew little of the power of God. This was not, however, the whole story. The faithful God had not given up on his wayward people. He assured them that they would again have good reason to say—‘Great is thy faithfulness’.

We could easily miss the five chapters of Lamentations. Hidden away between the fifty two chapters of Jeremiah and the forty eight chapters of Ezekiel, they hardly catch the eye. The title—**Lamentations**—hardly grabs our attention. It would be a great pity—for us—if we overlooked this testimony to God’s faithfulness. Here, we have a message of great contemporary relevance. Lamentations was written at a time, strikingly similar to our own day. God’s people had been taken captive. They lived in an alien environment. This is the story of our own nation in the last decade of the twentieth century. We live in a secularized society, a society in which there is little sense of God’s presence. Our society is a materialistic society, a society which has made money its ‘god’. The people of God are a people under pressure. We are tempted to become prisoners of our circumstances, prisoners of our feelings. We look at our circumstances, and we feel ‘desolate’ (1:4) and ‘despised’ (1:11). In our discouragement, we cry to God: ‘O Lord, behold my affliction, for the enemy has triumphed!’ (1:9). What did God say to Israel in their time of distress? He spoke to them of his great faithfulness, his readiness to revive his work. This is the message which we must hear in our day. It is a message which will draw out from our hearts that great confession of faith—‘Great is thy faithfulness’.

How are we to live for Christ in the late twentieth century? We must live with realism, and we must live by faith. We need realism if we are to look honestly at our present circumstances. Looking beyond those circumstances calls for faith—faith in the God of great faithfulness. The Church’s present situation is aptly yet sadly described in the words—‘How the gold has grown dim’ (4:1). We can come to God only in confession of sin—‘O Lord... see our disgrace’ (5:1). We look at our secularized society, and we acknowledge that ‘our inheritance has been turned over to strangers’ (5:2). We look at the secularization of the Church, and we acknowledge that ‘our homes (have been turned over) to aliens’ (5:2). We look into our own hearts and lives, and we acknowledge that ‘the joy of our hearts has ceased; (and) our dancing has been turned to mourning’ (5:15). In the world of today and the Church of today, it is not easy to rejoice in our hearts. It is even more difficult to be joyful in testifying for the Lord. We must seek a positive answer to the question, ‘How shall we sing the Lord’s song in a foreign land?’ (Psalm 137:4).

Israel’s difficulty in singing the Lord’s song is emphasized by the sad fact that ‘Mount Zion... lies desolate’ (5:8). This is the situation, which is described in Psalm 137:1— ‘By the waters of Babylon, there we sat down and wept, when we remembered Zion’. In this

situation, the 'tormentors' of God's people mockingly say, 'Sing us one of the songs of Zion!' (Psalm 137:3). When we are faced with similar circumstances, we are forced to ask, 'How shall we sing the Lord's song in a foreign land?' How are we to do this? Are we to hide our heads in the sand, run away from our difficult circumstances and escape into pious emotion? This is what we must not do. We must face our circumstances honestly. This is realism. We dare not ignore the reality of our situation. There is, however, another reality of which we must take account—the reality of God, the God concerning whom we say, with faith, 'Great is thy faithfulness'. By faith, we look beyond our circumstances to our God: 'But thou, O Lord, dost reign for ever; thy throne endures to all generations' (5:19).

To believe in God's faithfulness is to believe that his 'throne endures to all generations'. God is still on the throne. There is no question of 'God used to be on the throne, but now he is no longer on the throne'. We have heard what the so-called 'Death of God' theologians have had to say for themselves. We have also heard what the book of Lamentations says for God: 'Great is thy faithfulness'. Having heard the voice of God, in the midst of the voices of unbelief, we affirm our faith in the living God. God is still on the throne. For ever, he reigns. His throne endures to all generations. This is the faith which inspired Israel in their captivity. This is the faith with which we move toward the twenty first century. It is the faith which transforms our feelings. By faith, we bring our feelings to God. Like Israel, we may feel forgotten and forsaken (5:20). In God's presence, we exchange our feelings—**forgotten and forsaken**—for his blessings—**restoration and renewal**: 'Restore us to thyself, O Lord... Renew our days as of old!' (5:21) In the Lord's presence, we become convinced of God's faithfulness. He has not forgotten us, and he will not forget us. He has not forsaken us, and he will not forsake us.

In our prayer for restoration and renewal, we bring

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our circumstances and feelings to God, refusing to be overwhelmed by them. We pray with urgency, conscious of our great need of restoration and renewal. Prisoners of circumstances and feelings, we pray—with faith—that the chains will start falling and the changes will start happening. In prayer, we look back—with thanksgiving—to past blessings, and we look forward—in hope—to future blessing. We remember what God has done in 'days ... of old', and our faith grows—God reigns for ever and his throne endures to all generations. Strengthened in faith, we pray, 'Renew our days as of old!' The restoration and renewal for which we must pray is the restoration **of our walk with God**—'He restores my soul. He leads me in paths of righteousness for his name's sake' (Psalm 23:3)—and the renewal of **our witness for God**—'Wilt thou not revive us again, that thy people may rejoice in thee?' (Psalm 85:6).

Walking with God and witnessing for God, we are sustained by the joy of the Lord. In this Book with such an unpromising name—'Lamentations'—the joy of the Lord comes shining through. Looking beyond our circumstances to the Lord, we are able to joyfully affirm our faith: 'The steadfast love of the Lord never ceases, his mercies never come to an end' (3:22). The steadfast love of the Lord may also be described as his faithful love. His love is love, unchanged, unchanging and unchangeable. Rejoicing in such love, we praise God's faithfulness: 'Great is thy faithfulness' (3:23). Through the faithful love of God, we are given a testimony: 'The Lord is my portion'. With this testimony, we face the future with the courage of faith: 'I will hope in him' (3:24).

In our walk with God, this testimony—"The Lord is my portion"—is an expression of the joyful faith which finds its true satisfaction in the Lord. We speak of 'a good portion' and 'a satisfying meal'. Those who have found that 'none but Christ can satisfy' have this testimony: '**The Lord** is my portion'. Assured of God's faithful love—a love which is completely trustworthy, utterly reliable and entirely dependable, we confidently affirm, 'The Lord is my portion'. This faith is no secondhand faith. It may be a faith which reflects on the Lord's dealing with the whole body of his people but it is, nevertheless, a personal faith—"The Lord is **my** portion'. In Christ, we have received the full portion of God's blessing. As 'his sons (and daughters) through Jesus Christ', we have received 'every spiritual blessing' (Ephesians 1:4-5). For once, the 'child's portion' is the 'full portion!' Knowing Christ as 'the bread of life' (John 6:35) and 'the living water' (John 4:10, 13-14 and John 7:37-38), we gladly say 'The Lord is my **portion**'.

Those who have begun to walk with God are also to witness for him. Those who have the personal testimony 'The Lord is my portion'—are to say to others, 'O taste and see that the Lord is good' (Psalm 34:8). We have found Christ. We are to share him with others. We have come to know Christ. We are to make him known. Surprising though it may seem, the Book of Lamentations can be of some value in the preaching of the gospel. A book bearing the unlikely title—"Lamentations"—hardly creates the impression that it will be of any real use in the proclamation of 'good news'. The desolation of God's people in the late twentieth century is so reminiscent of the desolation of which we read in Lamentations. Many watch what is going on in our generation, and they wonder, 'Where is the Word of the Lord' in all this? (Jeremiah 17:15) The sadness which pervades so much of Lamentations reflects the mood of many of the Lord's people in our day—longing for better times, for the 'days... of old' (5:21).

Ours is an age of many questions and, so it seems, few answers. Lamentations is a book which ends with questions, 'Why dost thou forget us for ever, why dost thou so long forsake us? ... Or hast thou utterly rejected us? Art thou exceedingly angry with us?' (5:20, 22). So often, modern man expects no answer to his questions. In Lamentations, these questions are set in the context of believing affirmation—"But thou, O Lord, dost reign for ever; thy throne endures to all generations" (5:19)—and earnest prayer—"Restore us to thyself, O Lord, that we may be restored! Renew our days as of old!" (5:21). How are we to bring good news to a world that is living with questions, a world that shows little inclination to believe the confession of faith—"Thou, O Lord, doest reign for ever"—and little interest in praying the fervent prayer—"Restore us to thyself, O Lord"?

This is a question which calls for a practical response. It demands a response which will take into account the questions which men and women are asking in this generation. To speak of questions—some spoken in the context of prayer and faith, and others asked with little expectation of an answer—is to acknowledge that there are many different types of questions. This may be brought out clearly through a brief review of the questions asked in the Book of Lamentations. In 1:12, we have a question put to those who despise the Lord's people, 'Is it nothing to you, all you who pass by?'. In 2:12, there is the question asked by 'infants and babes faint(ing) in the streets of the city'. (2:11) 'Where is bread and wine?' In 2:13, there are questions which raise the question of the comfort and restoration of a fallen people: 'What can I say for you, to what compare you, O daughter of Jerusalem? What can I liken to you that may comfort you, O virgin daughter of Zion? For vast as the sea is your ruin; who can restore you?' The question of the cynics who 'hiss and wag their heads at the daughter of Jerusalem' is found in 2:15—"Is this the city which was called the perfection of beauty, the joy of all the earth?'. In 2:20, we have

questions asked in the mood of prayerful moral indignation: 'Look, O Lord, and see! With whom hast thou dealt thus? Should women eat their offspring, the children of their tender care? Should priest and prophet be slain in the sanctuary of the Lord?' Moving into the third chapter, we find this trilogy of questions at vs. 37-39: 'Who has commanded and it came to pass, unless the Lord has ordained it? Is it not from the mouth of the Most High that good and evil come? Why should a living man complain, a man, about the punishment of his sins?' There are so many different questions being asked today. They are being asked by different people. They are being asked in different ways and with different expectations.

What do the question of Lamentations have to say to our day, a day of many questions? They may prompt

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the modern questioner to think about the question he's not asking as well as the questions he is asking—'Perhaps, there is a God who has his own questions to put to me.' Lamentations asks its questions within the context of the great declaration of faith: 'Great is thy faithfulness' (3:23). This combination of intense questioning and confident faith might well increase the questioner's expectation of an answer—an answer which while it may leave some questions unresolved, opens the doors to faith. As we face modern man's questions, we must 'be ready always to give an answer to every man who asks us to give a reason for our hope' (1 Peter 3:15). In giving an answer, we dare not imagine that we can ever hope to give a complete answer to every question. We must always remember that 'the secret things belong to the Lord our God; but the things that are revealed belong to us' (Deuteronomy 29:29). The answer which we give is not our answer. It is God's answer. Man's question has been answered by God. He has answered it in person. The God of faithfulness—the Word made flesh (John 1:1, 14)—is God's answer to man's question. The answer which we give must always be a Christ-centred answer.

We may now focus special attention on two of the questions asked in Lamentations 'Is it nothing to you, all you who pass by?' (1:12), and 'Where is bread and wine?' (2:12). We read these questions in connection with two other questions, the first two questions asked in the Bible: 'the serpent ... said to the woman, "Did God say ... ?"' (Genesis 3:1), and 'the Lord God called to the man..., "Where are you?"' (Genesis 3:9). Taking these four questions together, we may find a helpful pattern for thinking about Christian witness in today's world.

The Bible's first question was asked by neither God nor man. It was asked by 'the serpent'—'that ancient serpent, who is the Devil and Satan' (Revelation 20:2). We do not introduce the devil here in order to provide ourselves with an excuse for our unbelief. After all, scripture tells us that 'each person is tempted when he is lured and enticed by his own desire' (James 1:14). Rather, we speak of Satan's question—'Did God say?' in order to emphasize that many of today's questions arise from unbelief, and not from faith seeking understanding. We speak of the Satanic origin of the Bible's first question in order to stress that, in today's world, we are involved in spiritual warfare (Ephesians 6:12), when we seek to bring the modern questioner from one form of questioning—the questioning of unbelief—to another very different form of questioning—faith seeking understanding. We must reckon with the activity of Satan when we encounter the questioning which arises from unbelief—the god of this world has blinded the minds of the unbelievers, to keep them from seeing the light of the gospel of the glory of Christ' (2 Corinthians 4:4). How is the

problem of unbelief to be overcome? Unbelief gives way to faith, only when God is at work in the human heart: 'it is the God who said, "Let light shine out of darkness," who has shone in our hearts to give the light of the glory of God in the face of Christ' (2 Corinthians 4:6).

The emergence of faith in the human heart is the work of 'the Lord, who made heaven and earth' (Psalm 121:2). If we are to combat unbelief effectively, our evangelism must be God-centred. We proclaim the God of love, the God who sent his Son 'to seek and to save the lost' (Luke 19:10). God has not changed. He is still the God of love. He still calls out to the lost, 'Where are you?'. In love, he still invites the sinner to return to him. His love is a yearning love, a passionate love, a love which says to the indifferent: 'Is it nothing to you, all you who pass by?'. His love for us is a love which draws out from our hearts a returning love—'Loving him who first loved me'. Touched by the love of God, the modern questioner finds that the character of his questioning begins to change. The question of the unbeliever gives way to the question of the seeker: 'Where is bread and wine?'.

There is a hunger and thirst which the world cannot satisfy, a hunger and thirst which can be satisfied only by the One whose body was broken for us and whose blood was shed for us. 'Where is bread and wine?' It is not the 'bread' and 'wine' of this world, which satisfies the deepest need of the human heart. It is Jesus Christ 'the bread of Life' (John 6:48), 'the true vine' (John 15:1). 'Where is bread and wine?' This is the question of the seeking heart. To those who are truly seeking, Jesus says, 'You will find' (Matthew 7:7). Why do we start asking the seeker's question? His love lays hold on us. What do we find when we truly seek? His love. The love which prompted us to seek is the love which we find in Jesus Christ. Evangelism, when it is —truly God-centred, will also be **Christ-centred**.

Evangelism, which is both God-centred and Christ-centred, becomes effective through **the power of the Holy Spirit**. It is witness for Christ, which is grounded in walking in the Spirit. True evangelism is grounded in **care and prayer**. If we truly desire to see the mighty blessing of God in our day, we must care for those who are living without Christ, and we must pray for them. Caring and praying—both are vital if we are to be really used by the Lord to bring his blessing into the lives of others. Caring for those who have yet to find the Saviour, we invite them to consider the question of 1:12—'Is it nothing to you, all you who pass by?'. Praying for them, we pray that they will ask the seeker's question—'Where is bread and wine?' (2:12). Caring and praying, we are—by our lives and our words—to invite men and women to consider Jesus Christ and to discover for themselves what he can do in their lives. As we seek to be faithful to God in our Christian walk and witness, we will discover—despite all the difficulties facing the Christian Faith and the Christian Church—the great truth which lies at the heart of Lamentations—'Great is thy faithfulness'.

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