

Dr. Leslie Allen, Lamentations, Session 8, Lamentations 3:23-33

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This is Dr. Leslie Allen in his teaching on the book of Lamentations. This is session 8, Lamentations 3:23-33.

All that the mentor has been saying so far in chapter 3 and moving on further in chapter 3, it's all a prelude to a call to a prayer for repentance.

Repentance is the key human factor that the mentor is going to stress as he moves on further in Chapter 3. This, in fact, will be shown to be the way back to God's favor to confess one's sins and to be able to start again with God and find a God of grace, a God of faithfulness, and a God of compassion. In the scriptures there are two ways of being accepted by God. One way is pointed out in Psalm 34, Psalm 34, and verses 17 through 19.

And notice what the wording is. When the righteous cry for help, the Lord hears and rescues them from all their troubles. The Lord is near to the brokenhearted and saves the crushed in spirit.

Do you notice how it starts? The righteous, the righteous. And there's this call to live good lives. Then you will have acceptance from God, and then you will find that God rescues you from any troubles that come your way.

We can call this the front door of acceptance by God. The front door is entered with good conduct when a believer has lived responsibly. But that doesn't always work.

There is a back door. The back door is used by believers who are facing up to a bad conscience and are ready to confess their shortcomings. In fact, Exodus 34, 6, if we think about it in terms of its context, describes what we might call an emergency approach to God when the front door is firmly shut, and there's no way of going through that front door, of being in line with God and with God's blessings and God's salvation from the crisis.

And so, believers who are praying prayers of repentance are using the back door. But against that, this is only a second possibility, and the more ideal possibility is to go through the front door. And actually, the first letter of John speaks of both possibilities.

It speaks of the back door in chapter 1. If we confess our sins, verse 9 of 1 John 1, if we confess our sins, he who is faithful and just will forgive us our sins and cleanse us

from all unrighteousness. That's the back door approach. But then, in chapter 5, he speaks of the front door.

The Apostle John speaks of the front door. The love of God is this, verse 3, that we obey his commandments and his commandments are not burdensome. He says that by this, we know we love the children of God when we love God and obey his commandments.

That's a front-door approach. God accepts us when we're in that situation. But believers, we need not only chapter 5 but also chapter 1, the front door and the open door, the front door and the back door.

But very much, there's this coming in through the back door. But fortunately, there is a back door approach. Fortunately, there is a way forward.

And this is what Lamentations is talking about. In fact, there's a chorus that I used to sing when I was at church in the young people's meeting as a teenager. There's a way back to God from the dark paths of sin.

There's a door that is open, and you may go in. Calvary's cross is where you begin when you come as a sinner to Jesus. And that's the Christian version of the back door.

And it not only applies to becoming a Christian, but also when we are Christians, as 1 John 1 points out. We saw that there was this emphasis upon survival that verse 39 is going to apply to the congregation. And all the way through, the mentor has the congregation in mind as he speaks of his own situation.

And he wants to say, like me, you have to accept you're being punished for your sins. And why should anyone who draws breath, who is living, complain about the punishment of their sins? And I had to realize that my sins were being punished, and this was the consequence. But let's mention now that pronoun switch in verse 23, great is your faithfulness.

After these third-person references to God, there's a sudden emotional switch, and the mentor feels driven to turn directly to God himself. There's a parallel, at least something similar, not the same, in Psalm 23. And here again, it's not often noticed.

The Lord is my shepherd. He leads me on the right path. It goes on in the third person.

But then, in verse 2, though I walk through the darkest valley, I fear no evil for you are with me. Your rod and your staff comfort me. And it goes on in this you pattern.

But there's this sudden switch at verse 4, and we wonder why that switch comes. When I preach on Psalm 23, I like to use the illustration of a little boy who's learned to walk. He can walk, and he goes out with his mother. He can hold her hand now. He can walk forward and look back at his mother some way behind, and he feels safe. But then suddenly, he sees a big dog coming towards him.

It's on a leash, so perhaps it won't hurt him, but it might. But he's scared by that big dog, and he goes back and waits for his mother to catch up, and he puts his hand in his mother's hand. And there's this direct turning to his mother that he needs that mother in that context of anxiety.

So, there's that switch there. But this switch is rather different in motivation. In Lamentations 3.23, great is your faithfulness.

It's grateful appreciation. It's turning to God and saying, thank you God. Thank you God.

But in both cases, there's a switch to a prayer style. So now, let's move on to verse 24. The Lord is my portion, says my soul, therefore I will hope in him.

And this is something that appears in a number of places in the Old Testament, and we have to realize that, basically, it harks back to a verse in Numbers and a situation in the book of Numbers. Numbers chapter 18 and verse 20. That situation is about when the Israelites come into the land.

The 11 tribes can be reassured they're going to have land to use for their crops, and so food is going to be assured. But not for the tribe of Levi. Not for the tribe of Levi.

They don't have any land assigned to them. They're not going to be farmers. All their time is going to be taken up in organizing the sanctuary and being responsible there.

A full-time job for them. And so this is where this statement comes from. The Lord says to the tribe of Levi, you shall have no allotment in their land, nor shall you have any share among them.

I am your share and your possession among the Israelites. What this means, of course, is that the Israelites were responsible for bringing tithes, first offerings, and gifts to God. Much of it would be in the form of fruit and vegetables, and they would bring it along with a portion of the animal offerings.

They would bring it to the sanctuary as gifts to God, and God would pass it on to the tribe of Levi representatives who were on duty in the sanctuary at that time, and that would be their food. But it came from God. It came from God.

It came through God, one might say, but it was because they were responsible for the worship that they were receiving. So, no allotment in their land and not having any share. But I am your share.

I am your possession among the Israelites. Now, this, in fact, became was given a spiritual meaning, and we find in Psalms that it gets picked up as an affirmation of faith, and ordinary believers would apply it spiritually to themselves and say, well, yes, I've got the land. I've got a job.

I've got money coming in, but underneath, it all depends on God. God is my support system, and fundamentally, it's all the gift of God, and so there's this dependence upon God that I have, and I must take that seriously, and that can be a great comfort and for instance, we find in Psalm 142 and verse 5 in the course of a lament I cry to you O Lord I say you are my refuge my portion in the land of the living. I depend on you, Lord.

I depend on you, and so I'm turning to you for help at this time. This is very much a spiritual assurance, and that's what the mentor claims here. The Lord is my portion. I depend on God.

I depend on God's goodness, and so, therefore, I will hope in him, and he uses again this word: hope. Verse 18: gone is all I'd hoped for from the Lord. Those old expectations had passed away, but verse 21, but this I call to mind, and therefore, I have hope.

He picks it up at the end of verse 24. Therefore, I hope in him, that final reference is not superfluous. It's hope.

My hope is God-based, theological, and spiritual, and this is where I stand. All right, and so we've come to a certain point in this.

And so, we've come to a certain point in this. We've come to the end of this testimony, in fact, and in verse 25, although the congregation doesn't get mentioned until verse 40, it's very much speaking to them, and it takes the form of a sort of sermon. But this testimony, which does really extend as far as verse 24, it's a lead-in to generalizing that personal testimony and applying it more directly to the congregation.

It's not just true of me; it's true of any believer the mentor wants to say, and it's true of you, and it's something you can apply to yourselves. He was saying this implicitly in his testimony, but now, it is directly as he turns to it. And so, the testimony is a means to an end, and the congregation must have pricked up their ears, and it was safe in that testimony to listen to what the mentor was saying.

And they obviously identified with him as he talked about his suffering, and hopefully, they would have listened, too, to that surprise ending and accepted his sincerity in going on to speak in a positive way. Hopefully, too, they would start to wonder if that could be true of them. After all, he's appealed to these elements of standard Israelite theology, inciting Exodus 34 in verse 6, and it does make sense.

And so, that testimony is very much a means to an end, and a generalization by itself would not have immediately attracted the attention of the congregation. They're prepared to hear him talk about his own experience. Oh, interesting.

But now, this is a lead-in to a sermon that he can present from 25 onwards. And so, we're moving now to the next part of the chapter, and hopefully, we'll get as far as verse 33, removed from 25 to 33. Here, he's giving some general theological teaching, and he's integrating past negative, bad experiences with the possibility of a good expectation.

And now, as I say, the congregation is directly in view, even though he doesn't mention them. And he's encouraging them to think beyond their present crisis of disaster and distress. And he uses a sort of sermon style.

When we were looking at the literary antecedents of Lamentations, we mentioned that there are wisdom psalms that read very much like sermons. And they're didactic psalms, and they're obviously meant to teach, teaching sermons. And this is the style that the mentor adopts now.

And there are a whole number of these wisdom psalms which speak in this way. Psalm 34, which we just quoted from, and then Psalm 37, 49, 73, which we quoted from, and then 92 and 112. And there's a loose link with wisdom literature proper.

The books of Job, Proverbs, and Ecclesiastes, were written by professional wisdom teachers. And here, it's not wisdom teachers writing and talking, but it's priests. Priests had a double job.

Priests had to deal with worship, all the details of worship, and sacrificing. But they also had to deal with teaching. They were the teachers of Israel.

As we had mentioned in the course of chapter 2 of the lack of instruction, 2.9, guidance is no more. And I said this was the instruction from the priests that this was now lacking after the fall of Jerusalem. And so, this is priestly instruction, which is being spoken of here, which leans on, picks up the style of professional wisdom teachers, and uses it in a wider way.

In fact, the closest parallel to our verses now is, in fact, Psalm 34, which we were just quoting from. Psalm 34 and verses 11 to 22, are, in fact, a wisdom like Psalm. And it's

rather interesting that verse 11 says, come, O children, listen to me, for I will teach you the fear of the Lord.

And it uses the word children or sons, literally sons. And that's the style that Proverbs uses it, that students are addressed as sons. The wisdom teacher is the father figure instructing them.

And so, concerning a wisdom student, the wisdom student would be addressed as the son of the wisdom teacher. This same style is followed in Psalm 34 in verse 11. Come, O children, listen to me.

He's adopting this wisdom style—a sort of sermon based on wisdom thinking. But there's a basic difference.

Because of Psalm 34, we were talking about the front door to acceptance by God and the back door. Lamentations has to adopt that back door and come in through the back door, where the mentor and hopefully the congregation are concerned. But in Psalm 34, it's coming in through the front door, like 1 John chapter 5. And we quoted verse 37 when the righteous cry for help.

But the mentor had been guilty, and he was no longer righteous, and the congregation was no longer righteous. So, they had to come in through the back door. So, there is that difference there, that change in some spiritual or theological principle there, where approaches to God are concerned.

All this, of course, is going to lead to the necessity for repentance. And this positive side is going to depend on confession of sin. And Lamentations 3 is eventually going to come to that point.

But it's moving towards it, and it's creating promises and hope, which is the basis and points forward as the way forward, the way that is achieved by repentance. Verse 25 says the Lord is good to those who wait for him, to the soul that seeks him. And then verse 26 says it is good that one should wait quietly for the salvation of the Lord.

Verse 27, it is good for one to bear the yoke in youth. And the word good, it's a very provocative word. My God, how can the congregation accept that? And how can the mentor say it? And it's the opposite of what he'd said just now, in verse 17.

I've forgotten what happiness, prosperity, and literally goodness. He sets the scene in verse 17 with that negative use of the word good. Outwardly, goodness was a thing of the past.

But he wants to get beyond that and say, even now, there is a way forward that involves goodness. And he speaks theologically, first of all, and it describes the

nature of good. In some of those Psalms references, steadfast love and faithfulness it was linked with God being good.

And so here, the Lord is good to those who wait for him, to the soul that seeks him. To wait for is a synonym for hope. One needs to have this basic hope, this new expectation that there is a positive future beyond what we're going through now.

The Lord is good to those who wait for him, so there's this blessing prospect. But one needs to wait for God, hope in God, have this new positive expectation, and share it.

But it's amplified with the soul that seeks him. And here, there's this first hint, which is going to lead into the call for a prayer of repentance, that we have to do something. And we have to seek God.

In other words, we have to come in prayer to God. That's part of seeking. It's part of waiting, part of looking forward to that hope, of relating to God once more.

And for the mentor, that's going to mean relating to God in prayer. So, the assumption is that God has a positive purpose in view. Because he's good, there's a positive purpose beyond that deserved punishment.

We can glance ahead to verse 38, which sums up God's overall purposes. The mentor has been saying God has future good purposes, but he balances it out in verse 28 and verse 38. Is it not from the mount of the Most High that good and bad come? The NRSV lets us down at this point.

If we look at the new international version, we will find a better rendering in verse 38. Is it not from the mouth of the Most High, that both calamities and good things come? And literally, it's a contrast between bad things and good things. And there's a definite progression there.

And there needs to be that progression as in the NIV. That's the proper order. First the bad and then the good.

That certainly corresponds to the situation of the mentor and his testimony: he is guilty and punished for sins but looks ahead beyond even in his crisis. And it's true of the congregation, as they were in this grim situation of crisis themselves, communal crisis. And they are urged to look beyond that, to look to a positive future.

And so, we need that order. So, what went wrong with the NRSV? Is it not from the mouth of the Most High, that good and bad come? Well, the Hebrew says bad and good, but the translator thought to himself or herself, that's not idiomatic in English. We don't say bad and good, we say good and bad.

So, let's make it stylistically nice. But it's ruined the meaning. And nowhere is it good and bad. It's bad and good.

That's the order that it needs to be. And such the overall purpose, beyond the bad, there is good. And this is what verses 25, 26, and 27 are saying, by introducing this provocative word, good, as an expectation for the future, replacing all those sad expectations that had disappeared in their experience.

And so, there's this human side to that expectation. One needs to relate to God by praying to him. And that's the point in the sermon that the mentor is going to arrive at in verse 45.

But he pursues this idea of goodness. And he speaks of submission to God. It is good that one should wait quietly for the salvation of the Lord.

He uses that blessed word salvation, which in the Old Testament is very much an existential thing that means deliverance from crisis, rescue from a bad, bad experience. And that so often is salvation in the Old Testament, and especially in the Psalms. And so, he uses this grace-laden word, a new grace-laden word, salvation, and connects it with God.

He picks up that psalm language now: salvation. But one needs to wait quietly, submit to God, and accept what needs to be accepted. He realized that punishment was necessary and it's good because he realized that punishment was fair and just.

And so, one has to come to this point of view. And so be encouraged that if you do so, eventually, you will be rescued from the crisis with God's saving help. And verse 27, it is good for you, for one, to bear the yoke in youth.

He'd spoken of that yoke. He mentioned in chapter 1, verse 14, well, it was Zion speaking, wasn't it? My transgressions were bound into a yoke by his hand. They were fastened together.

They weigh on my neck, sapping my strength. And here's looking back to that experience and saying, that was your experience, congregation, wasn't it? That was your experience. And it was good for you to bear that yoke because, again, it was fair and just that you should do so because you were being punished for your sins in point of fact.

And so, it was very necessary, and you deserved it. And the yoke, as in 1:14, as a metaphor for being punished for sin, has to be endured as a necessary burden. In youth he adds that, even in youth.

Youths, young people, are often not mature enough to accept what they deserve, and they react against it. But it's still necessary, even for young people in the congregation, to accept what's been happening and to interpret it right. Now, 27 to 30, if you read it through, it's all governed by that it is good.

It's not just 27 that's good after verse 26, but 28, 29, and 30 syntactically all fit together. It's good for one to bear the yoke in youth, first, yes. And then 28, secondly, to sit alone in silence when the Lord has imposed it, yes.

Thirdly, to put one's mouth to the dust, there may yet be hope. And then fourthly, to give one's cheek to the smiter and be filled with insults. This is all about the grim experience that the congregation had been experiencing.

And the thought very much is that, yes, that this was necessary. This was necessary. And so, one has to accept that this is so.

And in verse 28, to accept the silence of grief, this is going to be opposed by verse 39. Why should any who draw breath complain about the punishment of their sins? You've got to accept it, yes, in silence. And we shall be looking at verse 39 to see exactly what it says.

But we say at the moment it's the opposite has been contrasted in verse 39 to this sitting alone in silence. And then to put one's mouth to the dust, to accept a low quality of life, and to give one's cheek to the smiter, be filled with insults, even to accept persecution and humiliation as part of God's will at this time, but implicitly not forever. Not forever.

Accept it, accept it, accept it. There's something we didn't read out. The second part of verse 29, there may yet be hope.

It comes back to hope, but now it qualifies that hope. There may yet be hope. Oh, oh, there may yet be hope.

And that's rather a comedown, we might think. There's contingency attached to this hope. Might not happen, might not happen.

And we could be worried about that. So, we need very carefully to think about this, there may yet be hope. More literally, perhaps there will be hope.

Perhaps there will be hope. One thing we have to realize is that in the Bible, when repentance is talked about, it's often linked to this divine contingency and linked with, perhaps, it may be, or who knows. Let me read out these texts.

Amos 5:15, hate evil and look and love good. It may be that the Lord will be gracious. So, there's a change necessary and it's really a call to repentance here.

It may be the Lord will be gracious. Joel chapter 2, verses 13 and 14, return to the Lord. Who knows whether he will not turn and relent.

Jonah chapter 3, verses 8 and 9, all shall turn from their wicked ways, was the command of the king of Nineveh to his subjects. Who knows, God may relent and change his mind. He may turn from his fierce anger so that we do not perish.

That's the Old Testament. Listen to the New Testament. Peter is talking to the magician Simon.

Repent of this wickedness of yours and pray to the Lord that if possible, the intent of your heart may be forgiven you. Very much in line with the perhaps and who knows in those Old Testament texts. And then 2 Timothy 2:25, the need for Timothy to correct opponents with gentleness.

God may perhaps grant that they will repent and come to know the truth. I've never heard a preacher using that word perhaps in the context of the need for repentance but it's there in the scriptures Old and New. So, what are we to make of it? Well, there are three aspects that we need to bear in mind here.

First of all, bear in mind God's sovereignty. It's up to the sovereign God when or whether a positive reversal in your circumstances occurs. That's what the mentor wants to say.

We cannot claim it as a right. There's a providential factor beyond our control. We can't demand it. God is not a slot machine.

You put the right coins in, hey presto, the bar of chocolate comes out. We know that's going to happen. It must happen.

If it doesn't happen, we complain to the management. No, it's not like that. There's divine sovereignty.

In the end, it's up to God. And chapter five is going to come back to this point. Something to bear in mind, this theological caveat of divine sovereignty.

So that's one thing to bear in mind. The second thing is something we've already seen, what we call form-critical associations, that there's a type of speaking. When you talk about repentance, you often link it with this qualification.

Perhaps, it may be, who knows. And we went through all those texts in the Old and New Testaments. And it's true that it's not in this particular context. There may yet be hope.

It's not immediately talking about repentance, but it's heading up to the need for repentance. And verse 40, let us return to the Lord. This is where the text is going.

And so, you need that, perhaps. It may be. There may yet be hope. And so, it's a preparation for repentance.

And so, it fits in very well with those other texts. But then, too, it has a rhetorical force. And it's used partly as a persuasive device.

There's a chance that's worth taking. I can't guarantee it. There's a chance that's worth taking.

It's the only one you've got. And I should take it, if I were you, and see if it works for you. And so, there we are.

Dare to take this gamble, if you like, and see where it leads you. And hopefully, it will lead you in a wonderful direction. And so, there's this challenge here.

There may yet be hope. And we need to take that seriously. We come to verses 31 to 33, which begin with the word for.

And really, it's explaining the good of verses 25 through 27. We might say 25 through 30. What is this goodness? What's it based on? How can you say these good things are going to happen? And how can you say the Lord is good? What do you mean by that? And so, why is it good to react in these certain human ways? And how is it that God is good, as verse 25 said? And the first thing we've noticed is that you get a lot of negative words that get reversed here in 31 through 33.

The Lord will not reject forever. Although he causes grief, he will have compassion according to the abundance of his steadfast love, for he does not willingly afflict or grieve anyone. And so, there's positivity coming on the scene over against that negativity, that string of negativity.

And that word forever in verse 31, he will not reject forever. It's saying present circumstances are temporary. Temporary or present punishment from God is accepted as such, but it's a temporary situation.

We've had that idea of God rejecting before in chapter 3, and we're going to have it again in terms of unanswered prayer. In verse 8, though I call and cry for help, he shuts out my prayer. I feel rejected by God.

And then in chapter, in verse 44 of chapter 3, you've wrapped yourself with a cloud so that no prayer can pass through. And this is mentioned of a lack of forgiveness on God's part. But this rejection is not going to last forever.

It's temporary, in point of fact. And that delay in answering prayer was part of the punishment. That not answering prayer was part of the punishment you have to accept as such.

But this is not a mark of God's future dealings with you. He uses this word to describe grief and grieving. And this is a word that he picks up from earlier in the liturgy.

In verse 5, the Lord has made us suffer. It's the same Hebrew word. The Lord has made us suffer with a multitude of transgressions.

And then Zion picked it up in 1:12, the sorrow which the Lord inflicted on the day of his fierce anger. That same Hebrew word that we get twice here is rendered to cause grief and to grieve. And so, it's picking up a verb that's been associated with this whole catastrophe culminating in 586.

And so, over against that, you have compassion. And over against that, you have the abundance of God's steadfast love. Compassion, Exodus 34 verse 6 again.

And Exodus 34 verse 6, something we didn't quite have stated before, the abundance of his steadfast love. The abundance. And back in verses 22 and 23, where so much of Exodus 34 and verse 6 was quoted, in fact, you didn't have that word abundance.

But what does 34.6 of Exodus say? The Lord is abounding in steadfast love. And so, there's this coming back to this theological foundation laid for a repentant Israel to start again with God.

And then, in verse 33, he does not willingly afflict or grieve anyone. That's an interesting expression, willingly. It's a good translation, but not a literal one.

But literally, from his heart. God does not, from his heart, afflict or grieve anyone. And it's saying it's not a natural thing for God to do.

This reminds us of when we were talking about God's wrath. That's something that comes in as a necessary phenomenon, but it's not a natural attribute of God. And so, punishment, all this talk of punishing, sometimes God has to do it.

But it's compassion and steadfast love. They're the regular attributes of God. And we can look forward to a return to experience those.

So, God doesn't afflict because he wants to but because he has to for the sake of justice and fairness. But his heart is elsewhere. It's not what he would like to do.

It's natural instinct. It's to show compassion and steadfast love. But for now, he hasn't been able to do it.

But that's not the sort of person he is in himself. That's not Yahweh's nature, though it's necessary at times. But instead, think in terms of compassion and steadfast love.

That's where your future lies. And so here again, this is part of this new set of expectations, theological expectations. And what better could a nation in covenant fellowship with God expect or take seriously? And, of course, it's all paving the way to that human stage of acceptance and that human stage of repenting, in fact, and sharing God's views about one's own sin.

And then there could be a launching and unleashing of this compassion and this steadfast love. Next time we will be looking at verses 34 through 51.

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