

Dr. Leslie Allen, Lamentations, Session 14, Lamentations 5:17-22

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This is Dr. Leslie Allen in his teaching on the book of Lamentations. This is session 14, Lamentations 5:17-22.

We come now to the closing section of Lamentations chapter 5, namely verses 17 through 22.

And we've now come to uncharted territory in comparison with the rest of the book. And we might say, oh no, we can feel at home here. We've got a prayer lament. We recognize the petition, the petitions in verse 21, Restore us to yourself, renew our days as of old, in line with verse 1, Remember, O Lord, what has befallen us.

We can recognize verse 19, the affirmation of faith, the affirmation of trust: You, O Lord, reign forever; your throne endures to all generations. We could even include 17 to 18 as a short description of a crisis, such as one does find in a prayer lament. Here, we said that 17 to 18 went together with their whole section before, a long section beginning in verse 2, and that it was a description of a funeral lament now concerning the occupation.

But there's such a switch here at the end of verse 16, and we seem to be starting again with verse 17. And we've got this build-up, this new build-up, because of this, because of these things, because of Mount Zion, which lies desolate in verse 18. And we turn to a new topic, and we go back now.

We've forgotten the occupation, so far as the text goes. And the congregation is looking round and remembering that they're in that ruined city, that ruined court of the Jerusalem temple, I think, and there it is. They've gone back to this whole thing about this general disaster that had befallen them, which had culminated in the ruin of Jerusalem and the destruction of the temple.

And so, there's very much a new start. And so, I think that in 17 and 18, we can align more with a psalm lament and the comparatively brief description of crisis that we find there. And it's this demarcation with this new introduction in 17 because of the hint that we're starting again with a psalm lament situation.

But there's something we've left out. We have not adequately explained the text in terms of a psalm lament because this is a different ballgame now from most of the prayer laments in the, from many of the prayer laments in the psalms. And it's the negativity of verses 20 and 22.

Why have you forgotten us completely? Why have you forsaken us these many days? And then verse 22, Unless you have utterly rejected us and are angry with us beyond measure. There are two types of psalm lament. And when we've spoken of psalm laments earlier in relating to the text, it's been the general psalm lament, which is rejecting a crisis and asking for God's help.

But that won't take us all the way where this ending of the book of Lamentations is concerned. Now, we have to look further and recognize that here we have a subtype of the Psalms of lament. We briefly introduced this when we were talking about the relationship of the psalms to lamentations at the beginning and at the very beginning of our video course.

But now we've got to look into it more exactly. And there's a great book which was written by a man called Craig Broyles. And it's called *The Conflict of Faith and Experience in the Psalms*.

What that book does is look at psalms that correspond to the ending of Lamentations 5. And he told us that there are 65 psalm laments. And 44 of those are general psalm laments. But 21 belong to a subtype which we can call psalms of complaint.

And here, it's not a complaint about a human situation, merely a complaint against human enemies and how one is suffering in a human way. But it's a complaint against God, psalms of complaint against God. And there are 21 examples in the book of Psalms.

This resource is now claimed in this congregational prayer. One-third of the laments in the Psalms belong to this type, complaining to God about God, both communal laments and individual laments. And in fact, they are marked by two questions.

And sometimes it's just one question, and sometimes it's both questions. And we can look at Psalm 74, for instance. And what do we find there? Well, we find this question: why? In verse 1 of Psalm 74, Oh God, why do you cast us off forever? Why does your anger smoke against the sheep of your pasture? That's double why.

And, of course, we've got a double why in verse 20. Why have you forgotten us completely? Why have you forsaken us these many days? So that's Psalm 74 in verse 1. And then, in verse 11 of Psalm 74, Why do you hold back your hand? Why do you keep your hand in your bosom? And I think I had occasion to mention that verse when we were introducing these psalms of complaint. But now we can see the parallelism.

There's a double why that we had in 74.: and 74:11. But alongside that, in verse 10, How long, oh God, is the foe to scoff? Is the enemy to revile your name forever? How

long? How long? And when we were introducing these psalms of complaint much earlier in our video course, we said that this is why it is not seeking for information. That it's a way of protest and a way of bewilderment. And this is how long it is saying, it's all too much.

Enough already. We cannot cope anymore. Well, we have the double why.

We don't actually have the how long, but it's there in spirit in that second half line in verse 20. Why have you forsaken us these many days? It's all been too long, God. We just can't take anymore.

And we might ask a general question. Why should there be a complaint against God in this particular situation? And it's pretty clear, and it's pretty obvious from the content of Lamentations that much of it is concerned with looking back and the psychological grief that has come from that past situation of that siege of Jerusalem. Eighteen long months and the suffering that that meant for the people who were cooped up in that capital city.

But having said that, there's this movement in chapter 3 in a minimal way and in chapter 5 in a maximal way of speaking about a post-war situation. And so what had been engrossing the mentors' attention and also the congregation's hearts earlier on, that's not the end of it. That's not the end of it.

But there's more, there's more, there's more. And it's all carrying on in a terrible way, this objective grief, this objective grounds for their grief. It's still happening in this harassment that they're finding, and they just can't take it anymore.

And so, we can understand this enough already, you know, that was bad enough, but it just seems to carry on and on, this objective suffering of ours, and we can't take it anymore. And so it seems very, very reasonable that that should be happening in fact. All right.

Is there anything more that we should say about these Psalms of Complaint? Yes. What were the particular complaints that you found in the Psalms? Well, I'll just give some general answers without specific references. God has failed to answer long and fervent prayers.

God is absent when he's most needed. God is present, but only as a negative force. The believer is likely to die and have his relationship with God terminated.

The suffering involves humiliation, and this makes it too much or it's otherwise excessive. And so, these are various reasons that come to the fore and a number of them we can fancy as being echoed in spirit behind this complaint element, complaining against God. And so we find 17 to 22, these closing verses, they

contained important clues about the genre, and we can see it's not merely a Psalm of Lament as we thought it might be from verse 1 with these petitions to God, but as we analyze how it turns out, as it comes back to prayer, as it comes back to a more obviously prayer lament form, we see that it's following a particular model, this subtype of complaint against God.

This helps us to do justice to the exegesis before us because we can find parallels to what's being said in the Psalms. And let me say, as I was saying at the beginning of our course, that there are these traditions that the congregation and the mentor can take hold of and make use of to help them through their sufferings. And we have to ask whether there are sufficient traditions in our own Christian history and fellowship to enable us to get through, and I think very often the answer is no.

Well, we'll come back to the general notion of protest and complaint to God. And what I like to call a challenge. God is being challenged here.

We'll come back to it when we've done our general exegesis. Verses 17 and 18 very much go together. Commentators are not at all sure.

It seems to me pretty clear, and there are commentators who say the same, that 17 and 18 go together. And it's this repeated style of this preposition. Because of this, our hearts are sick, and because of these things, our eyes have grown dim, then a colon. What is it? Because of Mount Zion, which lies desolate. And so there's a carryover between 17 and 18 with the repetition of that preposition there.

And so, it's clear, but we've got this careful introduction to this new theme, this new element, which in Lamentations is an old element, the desolation of Mount Zion. And so, this and these things, they seem to be looking forward to verse 18, pretty obviously. And the NIV takes the same line.

Because of this our hearts are faint, because of these things our eyes grow dim, for Mount Zion which lies desolate. But it lets us down because it should have repeated that preposition in the Hebrew, which is just the same, but the NRSV is better at this point. Because of, because of, because of Mount Zion.

And we come to the point. And so there's this looking forward, looking forward. What is it? What is it? And at last, we come in verse 18.

But before we come to that, we've got to look at it. And there's a sentiment of grief here, isn't there? Because of this, our hearts are sick. That sickness of heart is that grief that's being felt.

And because of this, our eyes have grown dim. This is an idiom that we don't, I think, use ourselves. And what we have to realize is that in the Old Testament, the eyes can be the organs of psychological perception.

And here, in this case, it can refer to a failure to understand. We're virtually blind. The word blind, both in the Old Testament and New Testament, is used in a sort of spiritual sense of having an understanding from God's point of view as to what's going on.

But we don't use this particular idiom of our eyes being dim. We have got an opposite metaphor. We can speak of somebody being bright-eyed and bushy-tailed.

And there's somebody who's fully up to what's going on. And I think it includes the fact that one has a full understanding. One can fully cope with what's going on, in fact.

We sometimes talk of a sight for sore eyes and perhaps sore eyes are the equivalent of dim eyes here. All right, and so it's our failure to understand what's going on. And this lack of understanding, it does pave the way for the expression of complaint.

We don't understand what's going on. And so, why in verse 20? It very much expresses this bewilderment already it's hinted at the end of verse 17. Because of Mount Zion which lies desolate, jackals prowl over it.

And so, what is part of an urban area is now a rural area. It's just a wilderness and it's the haunt of animals, wild animals in fact. There's some uncertainty as to the precise meaning of Mount Zion.

Earlier we've only had Zion which was called a city right back in chapter 1 and verse 1. How lonely sits the city that once was full of people. And so it could be the city. But it may be that it's differentiated and there's another exegetical option.

It may be it's the Temple Mount, the hill on which the temple stood. And perhaps that word mount differentiates. In the Old Testament generally a few times Mount Zion refers to the city of Jerusalem but many times more, quite a few times more, Mount Zion refers to the temple, the temple area in fact.

And so, we're not sure which way to go. It's difficult to decide. But it doesn't affect the overall exegesis very much.

If it's the city, it's the city including the temple or it may be the temple area itself. And we have to realize if it's the city, but part of the problem was that capital, that former capital of Judah and earlier of all Israel was the capital no longer. The capital had been moved up to Mizpah, eight miles to the north.

That was the capital of post-war Judah. And so yes, how lonely sits the city said chapter 1 and verse 1. And so, it's either the city or the city temple. And so, this is what's causing the distress because what lies around is so vivid a reminder of the disaster that's been suffered.

It lies desolate, and it lies desolate. Now, we come to something, an element that is important for the whole of lamentations. It's the Hebrew adjective shamem, which I like to render devastated, devastated.

Sometimes, it's used in an objective sense, and sometimes, it's used in a subjective sense of our feelings, our psychological feelings. This is a word either in the adjectival form shamem or, in one case, as a verb, which runs all through the book, devastated. And we might summarize the situation in terms of devastation.

And it's such a valuable word because, as in the Hebrew, it covers both an objective phenomenon and then the subjective reaction, devastation. And I'll just go through the examples. We didn't say it before, and it's more convenient to put it under one heading and to deal with it once.

And so, in the end, it's reasonable to take notice of it. Here, it's used for Mount Zion, and this is obviously the objective description: Jackals prowl over it. And so, this is very much the result of what had happened in an objective sense.

But we had it in verse four of chapter one. All her gates are desolate. The roads to Zion mourn, and no one comes to the festivals.

All her gates are desolate. And there's an objective foundation here because the gates have been ruined, and they're not functioning to keep out the invader that collapsed. But along with this, there's a metaphor here.

The gates are desolate because it's along with the roads to Zion mourning. And so, there's a metaphor of the subjective sense which overlays that objective sense. And so you get a delicious combination there.

Then, in 1:13, we've got three examples in chapter one. He has left me stunned. Stunned, it's this word shamim.

And here is the subjective reaction. This is Zion speaking. I'm stunned, I'm devastated by all that's gone on.

And then two in verse 16, my children are desolate for the enemy has prevailed. Once again, my children, those people left behind in Judah and who were meeting for this liturgy, this service. My children, says Zion, are desolate.

And they're devastated. And once again, it's subjective meaning. And then in chapter three, we've got to wait to chapter three and verse 11, where the mentor is giving his first testimony of the crisis, an individual crisis that he'd been brought into.

He led me off my way and tore me to pieces like a bear or a lion. He's made me desolate, left me devastated. And once again, it's this subjective meaning for that particular word.

In chapter four, in verse five, it's not the adjective, but it's a verb associated with it. Those who feasted on delicacies perish in the streets. They lie devastated in the streets.

That was 4:5. And then lastly, 5:18. And there's an interesting parallel. Do you remember Tamar, Princess Tamar, the daughter of David, how she was raped by her half-brother Amnon? And the full brother of Tamar was Absalom. And he came to... When he heard of it, he very much took Tamar under his wing because he was so devastated.

And it's this word in the feminine, and she had a nervous breakdown that she never got over. And her brother Absalom took her into his own home and looked after her forevermore. And when Absalom came to have a daughter, what name did he give to her? Tamar, his beloved sister, Aunt Tamar.

And as a tribute to her, the sister that lived in his home. And so there we are. There's a concrete illustration of devastation, this raped woman who could never get over it.

And so, it's a very powerful word. And it's this word that comes for the last time. Mount Zion is devastated.

And so, it's a keyword in the book. All right. And so, we have this shocking circumstance, the devastation of Mount Zion and the prowling animals there.

And, of course, this is a great source of grief because it cuts across centuries of history and theology and spiritual normality because over against that we have Zion theology. All is going to be well. All is going to be well for Zion.

And so, it creates a crisis in terms of expectation and in terms of belief as to where God stood in relation to Zion. And so that is a shocking thing in itself. This is all part of this situation that leads to protest and challenge when we come to verse 20.

But before we do that, in verse 19, we have an affirmation of faith. But you, O Lord, reign forever. Your throne endures to all generations.

And as I say, this is an affirmation of trust, as we generally find in the prayer of lament. But in that subtype, the prayer of challenge, the prayer of complaint against God, it takes on another role. It takes on a persuasive role.

This, God, is what we expect you to be. Why aren't you being it? Reigning forever. Your throne is enduring to all generations.

And there's very much a persuasive element here. And this is very much something that belongs to Zion theology. But before we look at that, let's look at this element of complaint in an actual psalm.

Psalm 89 is a royal psalm challenging God. It starts not with an affirmation of faith but something related to it: a hymn, a great hymn about God's power.

It weaves into that hymn of God's power, the covenant that was made with David, and this everlasting royal dynasty based on David's line. And the royal speaker says, ah, but it all's come to nothing, hasn't it? You made these great promises. And we have this hymn celebrating your power.

But there's a terrible but in verse 38. But now you have spurned and rejected him. You are full of wrath against your anointed.

So why aren't you what you claim to be? Why aren't you what you promised? Why haven't you kept your promise? And we see in that hymn that there's that protest there and that challenge there. You're using this hymn against God in point of fact. How can this happen? And so, it spells out what God should be doing and what he should not be doing and say, no, this is wrong, God.

And there's confronting God with the way that he's been traditionally described in a statement of praise. And so, this is a helpful background to what we find here in verse 19 and how this affirmation of faith is going to lead on to a sense of bewilderment that why hasn't it been proved true? And that verse 18, it belongs to Zion theology. For instance, in Psalm 42 and verse 48, rather.

Psalm 48 and verse 2. There's this celebration of Mount Zion, the city of the great king. The city of the great king. And God's kingship is celebrated as part of Zion theology.

Outside the particular songs of Zion, we find this Zionistic element very much there. And Psalm 9, for instance, describes God as enthroned in Zion. There we are, kingship related to Zion.

That's the NIV and that's now regarded as preferable to what the NRSV has, who dwells in Zion. No, Yahweh is enthroned in Zion. And in the prophetic books,

sometimes there are references to God who is eventually going to manifest his kingship in Zion in the future.

Isaiah 24, verse 23. The Lord of hosts will reign on Mount Zion and in Jerusalem. Micah 4, verse 7. The Lord will reign in Mount Zion now and forevermore.

God's kingship is closely associated with the temple. Six times in the Old Testament, the Ark of the Covenant is described as the place where Yahweh is enthroned on the cherubim.

And Psalm 99, in verse 1, says, The Lord is king, let the nations tremble. He sits enthroned upon the cherubim, let the earth quake. And it goes on to say, the Lord is great in Zion.

And then, in Psalm 24, which may well have originated in an Ark procession, the Psalm is a liturgy associated with an Ark procession. Four times it says, in verses 7 to 9, it's the King of Glory coming in, represented by that Ark of the Covenant. And so, it's a very dominant theme, this question of divine kingship.

And here, as I say, the affirmation of faith, in itself, is a protest. It's an implicit protest. And saying, God, you're not living up to those promises and to our general theological beliefs, which functioned in our theology for centuries.

What happened? How can this be true? And so, having formulated that challenge, that objective challenge, they can now, in verse 19, they can now bring out the nature of the problem that this doesn't cohere. We do expect Zion theology to be in operation. You might say, well, we've had Zion theology before in the book, and we seem to be getting the argument that it's an expectation that hasn't come true now, but part of grief is sometimes to tolerate that situation and realize that we need a new set of expectations.

In fact, the mentor had provided this in chapter 3, going back to Exodus 34 and verse 6, with its sinister background of the worship of the golden calf. How sinister that story is. But saying there's a way back to God, there's this back door back to forgiveness and acceptance.

Indeed, in chapter 5, implicitly, the congregation is taking hold of that situation, and the mentor has said there's a need for prayer as the human side of your coming back and being accepted by God, and the congregation accepts that. But they haven't said no. They haven't said a permanent no to that old expectation.

And in a way, that's what one might expect, because if we look at exilic prophecy and at post-exilic prophecy, we find that there's a return to Zion theology, and in what we call Second Isaiah, which seems to go back to the exilic period in Babylon, in the

context of the Judeans there in exile, there's very much a promise of a future for Zion. And so, it's the cornerstone of the prophet's thinking. You're going to go back to Jerusalem, and all will be well once more.

And so, Zion theology is very much prized. Then too, in Isaiah chapter 62, which now seems to be post-exilic, the whole chapter is really a reaffirmation of Zion theology. And so, both of those prophetic areas are saying you can hold on to Zion theology as a prospect for the future.

And Isaiah 62 says, for Zion's sake I will not keep silent, for Jerusalem's sake, I will not rest, until her vindication shines out like the dawn, and her salvation like a burning torch. And that's only the first verse, but the whole chapter is devoted to a celebration in a predictive way of Zion theology coming to the fore once more and coming true again. And so, we can say that the congregation is in good company. We really expect Zion theology to be in operation, and we expect you to eventually keep your promises.

And there's this persuasive harking back to God's kingship in the context of Zion theology and saying surely it ought to be in operation once more. But now we have this protest, this explicit protest. Why have you forgotten us completely? Why have you forsaken us these many days? And here that word remember, that word forgotten, it's the opposite of that word remember.

Remember, back in verse one meant to ignore. And so here again, don't ignore us, but this is what you've been doing. Why have you forgotten us completely? Why no longer remember us and bear us in mind and work out these great traditions in our lives? And so, we have this: the prayer takes the explicit form of challenge here.

And then the other verb, the other negative verb, why have you forsaken us these many days? The absence of God's presence in blessing and in salvation. And all through the book, here and there through the book in major parts, we've had an emphasis on the negative presence of God, God there punishing. There was one place in 3:56 where the mentor was concerned when he said, God, you heard my plea; you came near when I called you; you said do not fear.

But that's the only place where we have a positive presence. But there's this, there's this hope for this positive presence of God and they cannot understand why it is that it's not so. Psalm 22 is a prayer of protest and challenge and it begins in that forceful way.

My God, my God, why have you forsaken me? My God, it spells out the relationship, and the expectation of that relationship is that there should be that close bond of blessing and salvation, but over against that. My God, my God, but why have you forsaken me? It doesn't hang together, deliberately doesn't hang together, that my

God should act in this way. And so, these are implicit petitions for God to do otherwise.

It's time for God to reveal himself as the one who's Israel's God and on Israel's side and to show his royal power. What we need to see, we might say, the congregation is being overbold here. How dare they speak of this, speak like this in prayer.

But what we've got to realize is that this is implicitly based on chapter 3 in various ways. Chapter 3 gives a warrant to the congregation's appeals and challenges in Chapter 5 in three ways. First of all, chapter 3 it's spelled out, the mentor had spelled out God's two-part plan.

First, the Lord had to punish and then he was going to go on to say first the bad and then the good. And so, this is the implicit plea you might say for good to happen. And then secondly, chapter 3 had pointed to the permanence of God's covenant love, God's steadfast love.

And so, underlying this challenge in the process is what the mentor has assured them of. This makes them look to the future with an expectation that God will act differently and no longer act in this negative way. Then, thirdly, there'd been talk of this backdoor approach to God's acceptance once more after confessing sin.

They confessed their sin twice in this last poem already. And so now it was time to be accepted once more. And so, verse 21, Restore us to yourself, O Lord, that we may be restored.

Renew our days as of old. There's something a bit tentative here at the beginning of verse 21. Yes, confession and repentance are necessary.

Yes, this human congregation have got to work out that human side of confession and repentance. But it's not going to take the congregation all the way, but only part of the way. God needs to respond by restoring.

We want to be restored, but it can only happen if God restores us. And this reminds me, I said I was going to come back to it. In chapter 3 and in verse 29 at the end there, there may yet be hope.

There may yet be hope. And there was this element of contingency there. And there was this tentativeness there.

We saw that one reason for it was theological. It's up to God how he reacts. We can present strong theological arguments, but we can't force God to do something, to do what we want.

Not our will, but your will be done. But please do restore us. We do ask you to do it, please.

But there's dependence upon God here. God has to react to these human actions, which are good in themselves. Confession and repentance depend on the sovereignty of God.

He can do it, or he cannot do it. But please do it. It's like an attorney in a court of law who will present the strongest possible arguments on behalf of his or her client.

But the judge and jury may decide otherwise. And so, it's up to them. It's up to them.

The attorney has to do the best he can, but ultimately, it's up to the judge and jury to return the verdict that they think is right. So, restore us to yourself, oh God, that we may be restored. It's not an automatic thing.

I said before, God isn't a thought machine, but God, what do you want? What do you want? Are you going to answer? And so, there's submission to God at this point and a recognition of God's sovereignty. And then it says finally, renew our days as of old. They want a spiritual restoration.

Yes, they do. But they want existential, objective, political, and all sorts of words one could use. An outward restoration too.

And that's what they want. Please bring things back to normal. Renew our days as of old.

And I get a bit more cautious about that prayer. It's the sort of prayer that everybody who grieves would want to make, what they hope for. Take me back to normality again.

But usually, that old normality is gone in some respects, depending on what the grief is in a small way or in a big way. And there's going to be a new normal, and the old normal has passed away. But grievers automatically think I want the good old days to come back.

But they won't necessarily come back. But that's a little element that the congregation would eventually have to learn. And then, finally, protest again.

Unless you utterly rejected us and are angry with us beyond measure. And they end up with this challenge to God. And we look for parallels for this in the Psalms of Lament that are challenges to God in the Book of Psalms.

And we find it occurring all over the place. And sometimes, it's in the form of a question. I think of Psalm 74 and verse 1. It occurs in connection with this question: why? Why do you cast us off forever? Why do you cast us off forever? And it's taken as a fact.

And there's this protest and challenge against it. Why have you rejected us forever? Oh God. Sometimes, it's not in the form of a question.

It's in the form of an imperative, and we find that in Psalm 44 and verse 23.

I think I've got the wrong reference at that point. But the text actually says do not reject us forever. Do not reject us forever.

There, I think, somewhere in Psalm 44. So, it can happen as an imperative. But it can also occur as a statement.

And it seems to be, it is a statement here in verse 22 of Lamentations 5. And here, we go back to Psalm 89, that royal psalm of complaint. And in verse 38. But now you have spurned and rejected him, present Davidic king.

You are full of wrath against your anointed. You have rejected him. And it's this statement which is the parallel, the more exact parallel for this double challenge here.

And this is the ultimate challenge in this particular psalm. And it's meant as a motivation for God to anger, to answer, and change his negative purposes to positive ones inside. And to say, no, I haven't rejected you.

I haven't rejected you utterly. No, I won't be angry with you permanently. And there's a fascinating parallel for that that brings that out in Isaiah chapter 49 and verses 14 and 15.

Zion said the Lord has forsaken me. There we are, outside a challenging psalm of complaint. We've got it in the prophetic context.

Zion said the Lord has forsaken me. My God has forgotten me. And God answers.

Can a woman forget her nursing child or show no compassion for the child of her womb? Even though I may forget these, I will not forget you. And so, the challenge is brought. The statement from Zion, the Lord has forsaken me.

My God has forgotten me. And God says, no, I haven't. No, I haven't.

And, of course, this is the force of the challenge in all the psalms of complaint and here in Isaiah 49. Yes, it's actually 49, isn't it? 49, 14, and 15. And God says, no, not so.

And it reminds me, we could think of a parallel in a human situation. A married couple not getting on very well. And one of the spouses is suspicious of the other.

There seems to be some indication that he or she is interested in somebody else or he or she is so devoted to their work, his or her work that the other spouse is being ignored. And there may be an outburst. You don't love me anymore.

You don't love me anymore—that negative statement. And there may be some objective evidence in the spouse's mind.

But there's more to it than that because the expectation is that the other spouse will turn around and say, oh, I do. Of course, I love you. You must realize I've never stopped loving you.

And this is the explicit context in Isaiah 49. And this is the implicit hoped for context here in the end of Lamentations 5. Unless you've utterly rejected us and are angry with us beyond measure, the hope is that eventually there will come an answer, an answer to prayer and a response to God that says, oh no, I haven't. And really, in the Old Testament canon, as we said earlier at the beginning, making use of intertextuality, in Second Isaiah, we get a prophetic text that deliberately harks back to the negativity of Lamentations and turns the language into positive affirmations on behalf of the exiles, that there is a future for them.

They are going to go back home. And so, this is where we are. What sounds so negative has really got a positive intent.

We could draw a parallel with the situation I think I referred to earlier when we were talking in an introductory way about Psalms of Complaint. I made a reference to Mark 4, verse 38, where the disciples say don't you care? We're drowning. Don't you care that we're drowning? And Jesus was asleep.

It was as if he couldn't care less. But, in fact, what happened? Jesus woke up and stopped the storm. And he was virtually saying, of course, I care.

I won't let you drown. And there was this objective event that happens of Jesus stopping the storm. But it was the equivalent of an affirmation of love and support for his disciples.

And so, and then there's a further fact here. I said earlier that the congregation's prayer is dependent upon chapter 3. The mentor has led the way. And specifically,

the mentor has led the way in this matter of rejection because what did he say back in chapter 3 and verse 31? The Lord will not reject forever.

He rejected you now. But the Lord will not reject you forever. And this is the basis for this challenge.

Unless you've utterly rejected us, they've got the mentor behind them with his affirmation. No, that's not true.

But it looks like it. It looks so much like it. And they bring that challenge to God.

Well, now, let's, in closing, think about complaints, protests, and challenges brought to God in a more general way. We broached it in chapter 3 and in verse 39. And we were saying there that verse said, why should anyone who draws breath complain about the punishment of their sins? You're survivors.

You're survivors. You haven't died. There's already a hint of some prospect for you.

God may well have good things for you in your future lives. So, why should any who draw breath complain about the punishment of their sins? There's something beyond punishment. But that word complain we fixed on.

The only other case in the Old Testament was back in Numbers chapter 11 and verse 1. And there it was an illegitimate claim. And it brought forth punishment from God in point of fact. And we contrasted it with other examples in Exodus and in Numbers where there were legitimate complaints.

We haven't got any food. We haven't got any water. Okay, I'll provide you with it.

And those are quite rational. So, there are complaints that Jesus that God rather accepts and there are complaints that that God does not accept. And here this is this is an acceptable type of complaint.

It's very much part of the Old Testament. And we get that example in Mark 4.38. I also think I mentioned some other examples when we were looking at it in an introductory way. But it's something that Christianity has abandoned, I think.

And it sounds disrespectful. Oh no. You don't talk to God like that.

And think of think of a pastor praying this sort of prayer. Oh no. That's so disrespectful.

Oh no, God doesn't like that sort of prayer. And it's rather interesting. We looked at Mark's account of that storm at sea.

Don't you care that we perish? Matthew and Luke also have that same narrative, but they tone it down. The complaint is gone in Matthew and Luke. The protest is gone.

And this almost looks like a foretaste of what happens has happened in Christianity generally. Judaism has taken up a complaint and used it especially in times of persecution. And it occurs complaint, protest to God occurs in rabbinic texts and prayers.

Complaints get incorporated. There's an interesting example in Fiddler on the Roof. That Jewish story of persecution.

No doubt many of us have seen the play or seen the film. And that poor Milk man his horse gets lame and can't draw the milk cart. And the milkman has got to get between the shafts and pull the cart himself to deliver the milk to his customers.

And he says the complaint is here. Very much a Jewish form of complaint. Today I am a horse.

Dear Lord, did you have to make my poor old horse lose his shoe just before the Sabbath? That wasn't nice. It's enough that you pick on me. Bless me with five daughters.

A life of poverty. What have you got against my horse? Sometimes I think when things are too quiet up there, you say to yourself, let's see what kind of mischief I can play on my friend. And though that's presented in a humorous way, it is a challenge to God.

And then later on in the script, he says dear God, did you have to send me news like that? Bad news. Today of all days. It's true we are the chosen people, but once in a while, can't you choose somebody else? And there we are.

There's that challenge. Though there's humor there, it's still a part of Judaism. I think it's a reaction to persecution.

And perhaps Christianity has given up complaining to God because it hasn't had enough persecution. It's been the dominant religion in its own areas, and it's held its way over others. And our job is to evangelize.

We're the top dog. We are to evangelize those who don't agree with us. And that can be that can be not helpful.

Sometimes persecution can help the church forward. And certainly, the New Testament had that point of view that there were benefits in persecution. And it was for Judaism.

It's true of the Old Testament, and we find a few examples in the New Testament. So, let's take this to heart. Next time, we should be looking at Lamentations from a Christian perspective.

This is Dr. Leslie Allen in his teaching on the book of Lamentations. This is session 14, Lamentations 5:17-22.