

Dr. Leslie Allen, Lamentations, Session 6, Lamentations 3:1-16

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This is Dr. Leslie Allen in his teaching on the book of Lamentations. This is session 6, Lamentations 3:1-16.

We come now to chapter three of Lamentations.

We are only going to be studying verses one through 16 at this stage, but it's helpful to glance over the chapter as a whole and examine its complexity in terms of its different parts. I take verses one through 16 as a testimony, a testimony from the mentor, and he reports a guilt-related prayer lament, an individual lament that he himself had prayed on an earlier occasion. And then, in verses 17 through 24, he carries on by personally reflecting on that lament he just repeated, lessons he'd learned; he gives the lessons he learned, and he especially speaks in terms of hope.

Then, in 25 to 49, he moves into what we might call a sermon. He gives general theological teaching that integrates bad experience on the one hand and an expectation of good on the other. He moves on in 40 through 41 to a call to the congregation for penitential prayer that they need to engage in.

Then, in 42 through 47, he offers a model prayer for their suggestion, the sort of prayer that they could give themselves. Moving towards the end, in 48 to 51, he supplies his personal emotional reactions of empathy with the congregation who are suffering. Finally, in 52 through 66, he gives another testimony, now a grievance-based testimony, another individual prayer lament, but based on grievance but very much including hope.

And so that's a run-through of chapter three, and we shall only be looking at verses one through 16 at this particular stage. But we must think more generally about Lamentations 3 as we approach it. It's traditionally the most important chapter because of its central section that majors on hope, where it looks beyond tragedy in a positive way.

In popular thinking, this section is the only part of the value in the whole book for the Christian, and it can be condensed into one quotation about God: Great is thy faithfulness, which has led to the making of a beloved hymn, which we should be talking about. And so there tends to be a narrowing down of Lamentations, which nods to chapter three but only takes seriously a small part in the middle of chapter three. When we turn to contemporary academic thinking about chapter three, scholars want to think more broadly about Lamentations and the role of chapter three in it, which sounds right.

They frequently use, in a negative way, the word privilege. We mustn't privilege chapter three over the rest of Lamentations. Sometimes, scholars claim that chapter three was written later than the rest of the book because it deviates from the other chapters, so we can ignore it as not being the original part of the book.

Sometimes, the point is made that chapter three contains contradictions. Yes, it talks of positive hope, but that's cancelled out by the closing lament, which focuses on human conflict and distress. So, there are ups and downs in chapter three, and we must not privilege the ups and ignore the downs.

Above all, we must not engage in chapter three and ignore the rest of the book because we must bear in mind that chapter four returns to suffering, big time, suffering again. And so there's no slick answer to the problem of grief in Lamentations. One must keep working through its processes, the process of grief, over and over again before one is done with it.

Chapter three is by no means the end of the book. Well, where do I stand in this debate? I would want to make the point that chapter three wants to privilege itself. There's a self-privileging element in chapter three.

What's that? Well, the acrostic takes a special form. Remember the acrostic form that I mentioned? It is featured in chapters one, two, three, and four, and it goes through all the letters of the alphabet: aleph, bath, gimel, and dalet, all the way through the twenty-two letters of the alphabet. Well, there's a new verification that acknowledges this difference.

Now we have sixty-six verses instead of twenty-two. So, we might say, is chapter three times as long as chapter one or chapter two? Well, no, if you look at the space it takes up in the Bible, it doesn't seem to be any longer than chapter one or chapter two. But what this new versification means is that it wants to acknowledge a new acrostic form.

Hitherto, we've been thinking in terms of stanzas, twenty-two stanzas, three-line stanzas. But in chapter one, there's one four-line stanza, and I didn't mention it, but in chapter two, there's another four-line stanza. So, in terms of lines, there are sixty-seven lines in chapter one and sixty-seven in chapter two.

Well, now, the difference in the acrostic is that it doesn't only deal with the beginning of stanzas, which was how the verses were reckoned in chapters one and two, but it does so in terms of lines. Each stanza repeats that initial letter, and so it's like A, A, A in the lines of the first three stanzas, B, B, B in the lines of the second stanza, and so on. And so, there's an intensified acrostic, and the new versification wants to do justice to that.

It's marching along in terms of the acrostic form. And so this is very special, and chapter three is demarcated as very special by this intensification of the acrostic, and we've got to take that seriously. And we must ask again, as we did before, what does it mean? What does it mean? Is it just an interesting way of composing poems? No, it must be more than that.

And I was urging before that it refers to totality. In chapters one and two, and again in chapter four, the totality of suffering and itemized totality are going to be referred to in those chapters. But chapter three wants to go further.

It embraces disaster and distress, but it goes beyond it to new and positive prospects. And so, it enlarges the totality. Grief can come to an end, hopefully, and it points to hope as the way beyond grief.

And so, we must take seriously what's being done here. Who is the speaker in chapter three? Zion no longer speaks. There's no longer a woman speaker anymore, and not in the rest of the book, in fact.

She said her last word in chapter two and verse 22. So, who is speaking? I follow a minority view, an admittedly minority view, and I take the main speaker in chapters one and two as still carrying on in chapter three. And I want to identify him, as you know, with a mentor, the one who is guiding the people through their suffering, and here in this chapter daring them to look beyond the suffering to a possibility, a theological possibility that can well be theirs.

Is there any objective evidence for seeing the main speaker here, that mentor here, the one I identify as a mentor? Well, yes, there is. In 49 to 51 of chapter three, he speaks in a very definite way that is reminiscent of something in chapter two. 349, my eyes will flow without ceasing, without respite, until the Lord from heaven looks down and sees.

My eyes cause me grief at the fate of all the young women in my city. And this is a reaction, a personal reaction to the distress of the fall of Jerusalem. This sounds remarkably similar to what the speaker said back in 2:11.

My eyes are spent with weeping, my stomach churns, my bowels are poured out on the ground because of the destruction of my people, because infants and babes faint in the streets of the city. And so that similarity, I think, lends more than possibility to the notion that the main speaker in the first two chapters, in fact, the mentor in my way of thinking, is carrying on speaking further. I think there's more evidence than that.

In verse one of chapter three, and in the new RSV, it reads, I am the one who has seen affliction, and we'll just stay there. If we look at the new international version, there's a different rendering there, and we need to notice what the difference is and why. It says I am the man who has seen affliction.

And yes, it can well mean that. The Hebrew word here literally means man. And if we look in the Hebrew lexicon as to the range of this word, yes, it's a man in terms of a male, but it can also be used as a person.

Any person, any human being. A person rather than just a male person. And there's linguistic warrant for the use of that word in the Hebrew Bible.

The New RSV, as part of its inclusive program, takes it in that way. I have seen affliction. And yes, it could mean that.

But what happens if we take it as a male person? The NIV, which also engages in the inclusive program, does want to keep the male reference here. I am the man who has seen affliction. And I think this fits in very well because we've just had a woman who has seen affliction.

We have had Zion taking part in that dramatic liturgy, representing Zion and speaking of her sorrows. And I've claimed that she's been acting as a female role model. Well, now, we have a male role model.

That mentor puts himself in the limelight for a while, in these first verses in 1 to 16, and gives a personal testimony, an individual lament of his own, thinking back to when he prayed to God and what that prayer consisted of. And so, not only was Zion told to pray, but now the mentor, the male counterpart of Zion, is bringing his own prayer, or more strictly, a report of his own prayer. Of course, if it were an actual prayer lament, then it would more naturally be addressed to God, as you and your.

But this is a report that the mentor gives, and so God is spoken of in the third person. There's a translation into the third person in this individual lament of verses 1 through 16. Now, here, I want to introduce a notion that I haven't seen elsewhere in any other commentary.

The notion of the wounded healer, which I think is very valuable in our study of lamentations, especially Lamentations 3. The concept of the wounded healer is very much featured in psychology, and it was brought to the fore by the psychiatrist Carl Jung. Carl Jung depended on a very ancient tradition. In Greek mythology, there was a physician, a very good physician, a very clever physician, and he could resuscitate dead people, and he was well known for that.

But he angered the gods, and the gods claimed, life and death is our prerogative. How dare you usurp our prerogative? And so, they wounded him. They wounded him, this physician.

Now, it was picked up by Carl Jung in two ways. And he said, the therapist can be a wounded healer in two quite distinct ways. First of all, the therapist can be wounded by listening to the patient's suffering, and find it overwhelming in turn, so that at the end of the session, he is left worried.

He is left grieving in turn. And that is a real worry. In the work I've done as a chaplain over the years, I've found occasions when I've been overwhelmed by the stories that patients have told me.

And I've gone away, and I cannot just go into another patient's room and start again listening to them. I've got to rest a while. Perhaps I can go back to the pastoral care office and type out a report, and that will help.

Or perhaps I need to debrief and turn to another chaplain and say, I did find that overwhelming, and telling the story will ease that burden that's resting upon me. And so the healer can be wounded in turn. That is very much a reality.

And this seems to be what's happening here in Lamentations 3, in 49 through 51. That the healer himself, the would-be healer under God, is wounded in turn. And he is weeping in turn at this social catastrophe.

But then, too, we can also look back to verse 11 of chapter 2. My eyes are spent with weeping because of the destruction of my people. In verse 13, vast as the sea is your ruin, with what can I compare you? And there, too, in both those passages, in 2 and 3, there's this wounding of the healer. He doesn't escape unscathed by this trouble.

He has compassion for my people, but he's overwhelmed in turn. But Carl Jung had another application of this notion of the wounded healer. That is, someone who is wounded can become a healer and become a good healer because he has been wounded.

And I think this is coming out in the testimonies at the beginning of chapter 3 and the end of chapter 3, that the mentor refers to his own wounding in previous days, apart from the destruction of the city. There were bad scenes that he went through which took a lot of getting over, and he tells them, he tells the congregation about that. So he's claiming, in trying to heal you, I am the wounded healer.

This reminds me of Alcoholics Anonymous because they have a very strong principle: It takes an alcoholic to help an alcoholic. In their great little book on the 12 steps, you find quotations such as this: Showing others who suffer how we were given help

is the very thing that makes life so worthwhile to us now. Having been wounded, we can turn to healing others.

And then, in God's hands, the dark past is the greatest possession you have, the key to life and happiness for others. And so, the recovering alcoholic, the ex-alcoholic, has within him or her the capacity to help others through. And so, the suffering is not wasted, but it can be part of a pastoral learning experience that can say to others, I've been in some respects where you are, and you can trust me to help you through.

This creates an affinity, a rapport. So, we have these laments at the beginning and end, and their value is as testimonies to his own suffering. I've been there.

I've been there. And so, it means that we do need all the way through past tenses. The NRSV has got perfect tenses.

He has done something, but really, it's: He drove and brought me into darkness in verse 2, and so on. It's referring to a past experience that is no longer his. In the commentary, I wrote on lamentations, a liturgy of grief.

This is something that I had to say on the subject of the wounded healer in chapter 3. In this poem, a wounded healer offers his knowledge of God's ways and his experience of them in a context of suffering. At beginning and end, he ministers out of his own suffering and presents himself as an object lesson. As a fellow sufferer, he points the congregation forward to a new wholeness that both he and they yearn to attain.

In turn, we readers who are wounded have the potential to be wounded healers. The scar from our wound, though it may still ache, will provide relief for the raw pain of others. In this testimony, in verses 1 to 16, we have a variety of metaphors.

First of all, we need to say that some laments engage in metaphor very much. And they're useful as generalizations of suffering. You don't find specific references to suffering in the Psalms of Lament, and nobody ever says, I have a bad case of pneumonia that I need healing from God.

But it's quite general. And so, metaphorical language, picture language, is very useful as a way of referring to all different types of suffering. What is the significance of metaphor? Well, C.S. Lewis wrote an essay on metaphor and he suggested that metaphor belongs to the world of the imagination.

The imagination involved in metaphor helps us to understand the reality behind the metaphor. And that understanding doesn't concern truth, but it concerns meaning. It doesn't concern truth, which is the opposite of falsehood, but it concerns meaning, which is the opposite of nonsense.

Reason is the organ of truth. Imagination is the organization of meaning. Metaphors in the Psalms, and not just psalm laments, are concerned with valid meaning and experiencing reality.

Through metaphor, the psalmist's intent is to share their experiences. They want our eyes to light up as we read these imaginative metaphors as they vividly describe their experiences. They want us to say, yes, that's just what it's like.

I can see it now. Metaphors enable that in the Psalms. And so, likewise, here in this testimony reporting a prayer lament, we have a mass of different pictures, a mass of imaginative snapshots.

There's more I want to say about metaphor, but this will do, and we will look through individually, and then we'll come back more generally to the significance of metaphor in this particular place. We need to ask what the tone of this testimony is. There are a number of commentators who see accusation here.

God is cruel. God is a despot. God is a bully.

And we might say, well, why not? Why not? Well, it does speak of wrath. I am the one who has seen affliction, says verse 1, under the rod of God's wrath. This is not the first time we've had this word.

And so, we have to ask again what that wrath is. Usually, in the Old Testament and in the New Testament, it's a reaction to human wrongdoing. Occasionally, it's regarded as inexplicable and amoral.

There's a use in Psalm 102 where there's no reference to sinning in the context where we perhaps should take it in that way, but not very often. And if we take chapter 3 as belonging firmly to the book, well, here it occurs after chapters 1 and 2. Chapter 1 had an emphasis on Zion's sinning. Chapter 2 went further to speak of God's wrath as the reaction to that sinning.

And so, chapter 3 seems to carry on from chapter 2 and to presuppose it. In fact, the NRSV is right. Though it translates under the rod of God's wrath, it says in the footnote literally his, Hebrew has his.

So, there's a leaning back to the wrath of God in chapter 2, which has been associated with Zion's wrongdoing. And so here we are in this testimony. There are these references to God in this hostile way.

We need to ask, well, do the Psalms speak like this? We mentioned in chapter 2 that there was a dependence on prophetic usage where God prophesied, I am going to do

harm to the people of Israel. This negative intervention in those oracles of disaster. But how about the Psalms? Does it fit into a psalm lament? Yes, it does.

We sometimes have reference to God's negative intervention in psalm laments and in psalm thanksgivings, which confess sin. Psalm 32. For day and night your hand was heavy upon me.

Psalm 38, verses 1 and 2. O Lord, do not rebuke me in your anger or discipline me in your wrath for your arrows have sunk into me and your hand has come down on me. Psalm 39 verse 10. Remove your stroke from me.

I am worn down by the blows of your hand. Psalm 51 verse 8. Let the bones you have crushed rejoice. And so, this is a sampling from the Psalms and there are other Psalms too that want to speak in this negative way about God.

God punishing the individual psalmist and the psalmist speaking of it. And here this is very much echoed and so it's in line with certain numbers of the psalm laments. And so, the psalmist and here the mentor who's speaking as a psalmist, he's speaking of extreme suffering that he's been undergoing.

And he does so in a whole series of imaginative ways, metaphorical ways. Verse 1 is a blow from a stick, the rod of God's wrath. And that's like verse 3 where it's a blow from God's hand.

Verse 2 speaks of darkness, being God driving into darkness and that's always a powerful sinister metaphor. And then in verse 4 it speaks of sickness, being sent by God and even fractures, he's broken my bones. Verse 5 in a different type of metaphor it speaks of a siege, you besieged me, he's besieged and enveloped me with bitterness and tribulation.

Verse 6 made me sit in darkness like the dead of long ago. Yes, darkness as in verse 2 but now it's associated with death. But here, it's not literal death; it's a low quality of life when you feel as good as dead, and a number of psalms speak metaphorically about death as a low quality of life.

And the dead of long ago are those long, long dead with no hope of living again. Verse 7 speaks of being imprisoned; he has walled me so that I cannot escape. Even worse, he's put heavy chains on me so that I can't move.

He's locked up and confined, no freedom to move. That's very much a theme of the psalms, and it comes out in Hebrew very often in ways that our English translations don't accurately translate. There's the word translated distress or trouble, *zarah*, it's literally narrowness, being in a narrow place, being confined, being shut in a closet and trouble is narrowness and you can't move.

And then opposite that is being brought into a broad place, being brought into a place of freedom. And there are psalms that speak in this way. Psalm 18 does, for instance, Psalm 18 and verse 19.

He brought me out into a broad place, he delivered me because he delighted me. And this is the opposite, being brought out into a broad place. Then, in Psalm 118 and verse 5, there are two sides to this.

Out of my distress, and it uses not zarah but the same root, out of my distress, out of my narrowness, I called on the Lord, the Lord answered me and set me in a broad place. And so, there's this sense of being confined and hemmed in and over against that, the broad place being able to develop free, free at last. I can do as I need to do and as I want to do.

This is a great contrast that we find in the psalms here and there. Then it moves on to this: verse 8 is a factual experience, not a metaphorical one. Though I call and cry for help, he shuts out my prayer.

There's no understanding as to why the prayer shouldn't be answered. And that, too, is something that often occurs in the psalms. And the blocking of the way, another sort of confinement in verse 9, he's blocked my ways with hewn stones, and I can't move forward.

And there's obstruction. He's made my paths crooked, and there's no straight way forward. Instead of life being an ongoing straight journey, one has to twist and turn to find a possible way through. And then verse 10: As often as in the Psalms, we find illustrations of wild animals, human enemies are often portrayed as wild animals in the Psalms.

And here God is like a wild animal. He's a bear lying in wait for me, a lion in hiding. He led me off my way and tore me in pieces.

He's made me desolate. And then he bent his bow and set me as a mark for his arrow. And in both cases here, there's the sort of preparation, preparation for this bad thing and then doing it.

And so, the bear lying in wait, the lion hiding, and then the pouncing and tearing, being torn in pieces. Then the archer bends his bow and carefully aims, and then the arrow goes forward and shoots him. And so, in verse 13, he shot into my vitals, literally kidneys, the arrows of his quiver.

And then, at 14, he comes to secondary suffering as a result of all this. I've become the laughingstock of all my people. And this, of course, shows it's an individual

lament here, and there were people around him, his own people, who ridicule and mock him.

The object of their taunt songs all day long. And so that too is a factual experience. And then he's filled me with bitterness.

He's sated me with wormwood. Wormwood is actually Artemisia, which is a lovely group of flowers and shrubs. But the leaves are very bitter and you wouldn't want to munch on a leaf, an Artemisia leaf.

It was called wormwood in English because it was a herbal treatment for worms in the intestines. And so, wood for worms to deal with worms. And so, it had a positive value.

But in the ancient world it was just bitter and you wouldn't want to eat it at all. And so here we are. There are all these painful experiences.

And then, in verse 16, he's made my teeth grind on gravel. He knocked me to the ground. He made me bite the dust as it were.

He made me cower in ashes. And so there we are. We've got all these metaphors.

Very vivid. And you can't help listening to them. On and on.

Different amassing of metaphors. They're dramatic. They're even sensational.

And we might want to ask, what's the special purpose in this context? Well, I think the congregation would listen to every word. It's so sensational—all this different way of speaking.

This piling up of metaphors. And I think that's intentional because the mentor wants the congregation to listen. And when I was preparing my commentary on Lamentations, I read any number of books on suffering, technical books and also autobiographies, books and collections of essays.

One essay I read was written by a pastor who had the difficult task of officiating at his son's funeral. And this is how he began. I have been where life hurts the most and cuts the deepest and hits the hardest.

Therefore, listen to me. And I think that's a fine summary of the intention of these first 16 verses of Chapter 3. And the congregation are meant to listen to his own suffering and his own explanation of suffering and take it to their own hearts and to embrace in their own understanding this theological phenomenon of God no longer the friend but God as the enemy. This is the starting point that they must reach.

Their expectations are always the love of God. No, that hasn't happened, and they have to deal with that situation.

But there is a way of dealing with it. And so, they can listen to this man who has thought it through in his own experience, has experienced such a thing himself, and has suffered at God's hands, and so he's well qualified to be their mentor. His interpretation of his own suffering as providential would encourage them to accept his earlier interpretation of their suffering as right and worth taking seriously.

At this point, I need to say that the purpose of Chapter 3 is to pave the way for the mentor's call for them to pray a prayer of repentance, such as verses 40 to 47 will urge them to do. And to confess their own sinfulness on the lines of verse 44 that we shall come to. And certainly, this testimony in 1 to 16, it certainly prepares the way for that praying in a clear way.

It's a prayer of lament that basically presupposes the mentor's own guilt that deserves the wrath of God, and it deserves that negative intervention from God. And so, this is his starting point but by no means the way he's going to finish. But he's going to use it as the rational basis for moving on and moving beyond what he's just said.

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