

Dr. Leslie Allen, Lamentations, Session 7, Lamentations 3:17-23

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This is Dr. Leslie Allen in his teaching on the book of Lamentations. This is session 7, Lamentations 3:17-23.

In our previous video, we made a start on Lamentations chapter 3 and we managed to get as far as verse 16.

Now, I want to move on to verses 17 to 24. This is very much a continuation of what we were talking about previously, but from a far different angle. 1 through 16, we called a testimony, the report of a guilt-related individual prayer lament.

Then, I went on briefly to say that in 17 through 24, we find personal reflections on that lament and the lessons the mentor learned, especially a lesson of hope. It's not strictly fair to call only verses 1 through 16 a testimony because the testimony is strictly carried on, and the mentor is still speaking about his own experience. Of course, he's really addressing the congregation, although he won't mention them and bring them directly into view until verse 40. Let us test and examine our ways.

But still, he has the congregation very much in mind, and they are meant to be listening intently to what he's saying. We said last time that they would have been very interested to hear of this testimony, which covered the mentor's own previous personal experience on similar grounds to what they were experiencing after the tragedy that culminated in 586, the fall of Jerusalem. We said previously that in the testimony, we really need past tenses because the mentor is speaking of an old experience that's relevant to the present.

And so, it is in these verses here, we need past tenses over against the present tenses such as we have in the New Revised Standard Version and the New International Version. And here in this new section, the mentor is reflecting. After his prayer lament, he wants to re-evaluate what he'd said.

That was only a partial factor, according to what he'd been saying before. But in fact, he needed to come to a positive frame of mind, and that was what happened in his experience. And he's going on to explain this.

Verses 17 through 24 fall into two sections. Very obviously, if you look carefully, 17 through 20 speaks of negative convictions that he had very much in line with his testimony. And those were his initial reflections.

But then, verses 21 through 24, he's able to move on to positive convictions in an amazing way. And so, at first he thinks on the same negative lines that his lament had followed. But, he mentions a whole series of losses that he'd experienced in this previous experience of his.

And so, the lack of peace. Verse 17, my soul was bereft of peace. I forgot what happiness was.

I said gone is my glory and all that I had hoped for from the Lord. And so, no peace. That was the first loss.

The second loss is no happiness or, in the NIV, prosperity. There's more to it than that because the Hebrew word really speaks about something good, good fortune. And the importance of this particular word is that he is going to reverse his thinking.

Pretty obviously, good fortune had left him. But before very long, he's going to speak of other good things that can enter and did enter his experience as he thought about that lamentable crisis. So, there was no peace, shalom, the wholeness of a satisfying life, no good thing, no good fortune.

And then, the third loss is glory, my glory. Or in the NIV, my splendor. Well, one meaning of this Hebrew word is life expectancy.

And I think that fits very well here. Gone was my life expectancy. I had no prospects for my life in the future.

And the next step in my life would be, in fact, death. And so, this is the gloomy conclusion that he had. And then, lastly, very significantly, gone is all I had hoped for from the Lord, expectations.

He'd lost his expectations, his positive expectations in his spiritual life. His relationship with God seemed to have deteriorated, and he was shaking his head in sorrow. This business of expectation we've seen before is very important in any experience of grief because loss always entails a loss of expectation and the loss of prospects.

Life is not going to be the same as it was before. And here, there's this dimension that God had given him expectations and now they seem to be gone and there was nothing to look forward to. And so, a whole range of negative convictions.

And he carries on in this sad vein in verses 19 and 20. The thought of my affliction and my homelessness is wormwood and gall. My soul continually thinks of it and is bowed down within me.

He picks up some words which we, in fact, have already met earlier in the book of Lamentations. In the NIV, it's my affliction and my wandering. And that may ring a bell for us because back in chapter 1, in verse 7, it was said of Jerusalem, this same pair of words.

Jerusalem remembers the days of her affliction and wandering. And back there, we suggested that it was a psychological term of restlessness, that when you are afflicted in time of grief, you can't settle to anything. Your mind flits from one bad thing to another bad thing and you're not settled in your mind to concentrate on any one thing.

And the interesting thing is, it's the same pair of words that have been used in Jerusalem. And so, the mentor is saying, I've been there in my own experience. I've had a parallel experience.

And this was relevant, of course, because Jerusalem, in part, stood for the congregation, that remnant who had been left behind in Judah while others had been exiled to Babylon. And they had been through affliction and wandering, restlessness. And so, these are very much keywords that get repeated here by the mentor as he's talking about his negative convictions.

And he says it's wormwood and gall. These are metaphors for emotional distress caused by the disaster that he'd been involved in, that crisis he'd been involved in. He mentioned this before, towards the end of his lament testimony in verse 15.

He's filled me with bitterness. He sated me with wormwood. And we were seeing there that this Artemisia shrub was bitter.

But now, he combines it with gall, which is actually acid reflux that comes up to the stomach into the throat. And oh my, it's a bitter experience. It burns the throat.

And these are metaphors for this negative experience that he feels, this emotional distress that he feels as a result of his suffering. And then, in verse 20, my soul continually thinks of it and is bowed down within me. There's this engrossing, obsessive series of negative thoughts, and he can't get beyond them.

It permanently seems to occupy his mind. But he's got more to say. So far, the congregation would say, Amen.

Yes, you're thinking and talking about things that we know of in our own experience. But he moves further. He goes on into positive territory, and he introduces it in verse 22.

But this I call to mind, and therefore, I have hope. And he brings in this word, hope. All the way through so far, we've really been thinking in terms of despair, of distress, of which a part is despair.

But now he can dare to speak of hope, not for the congregation, but for himself in his own experience. And this, at least, is interesting and something the congregation would be prepared to do. All right, that was your experience. Tell us a bit more about this.

And the new RSV, at the end of verse 21, has a colon. So, this is, in fact, pointing forward, and so does the NIV. It's pointing forward.

And he's going to explain what this hope consists of. And so, he's preparing his readers, and he's moving on beyond his own wounding that came to healing. And there was a change, not a change in circumstances.

The crisis was still there. It wasn't as if everything, the sun came out and all was well again. No, he was in the same miserable situation, but his attitude changed.

And there's no indication, as I say, there's any change in his outward circumstances. The crisis hadn't gone away. But he can move on in his personal attitude, and he can overcome in his mind and heart.

And so, he can think of hope for the future instead of despair over his present crisis, which was a mark of all the earlier parts of the testimony of lament. He can get beyond negativity, and he can move on to something else. He can think outside the box of his present suffering.

So, what's this, what is this hope? He's very much got the interest of the congregation. How can this be? It's incredible. It doesn't make sense.

And first of all, he thinks theologically. And he says, the steadfast love of the Lord never ceases. His mercies never come to an end.

They're new every morning. Great is thy faithfulness. What's he talking about? How can this be? Well, now, there are a number of things to say about this first clause: the steadfast love of the Lord never ceases.

When we looked at that testimony, we said it was a report of a lament. It wasn't the actual lament, but it was being reported afterward. It didn't actually correspond to a real lament.

Something was left out, and that was the affirmation of faith. Very often, in prayer laments, which speak of crisis, there's an affirmation of faith, which speaks of trust in God in this situation. I am a believer.

I believe that you can bring me beyond this situation. And what the mentor has done is to detach that positive element, looking forward, hopefully, to a brighter future if God so wills. He puts it separately, and these positive convictions are put after that whole negative barrage of speaking.

And so, we could look at a psalm like Psalm 86 and verse 5, and there's in verse 4, gladden the soul of your servant, for to you, O Lord, I lift up my soul. This is a personal lament. It goes on to say in verse 5 of Psalm 86, for you, O Lord, are good and forgiving, abounding in steadfast love to all who call on you.

God answers prayer in a positive way, so please answer my prayer and let me see something of your steadfast love. So, there we have that affirmation of faith, for you are good and forgiving, abounding in steadfast love. And we have another example in Psalm 130 and verse 7, O Israel, hope in the Lord.

This comes at the end of a personal lament, and there's a movement to include the congregation. O Israel, hope in the Lord, for with the Lord there is steadfast love. With him, there is great power to redeem.

It is he who will redeem Israel from all its iniquities. Looking forward to a positive future in an affirmation of faith. And sometimes, it's made a part of a prayerful petition that the psalmist brings in Psalm 25 and verse 7. Do not remember the sins of my youth or my transgressions.

According to your steadfast love, remember me for your goodness sake, O Lord. And here, as in one of the two earlier psalms, we get a mixing together, a pairing of steadfast love and good. And this is what we're going to find eventually in Lamentations chapter 3. And then in Psalm 51 and verse 1, have mercy on me, O God.

According to your steadfast love, according to your abundant mercy, blot out my transgressions. And so there, incorporated in a petition to God, there's an appeal for God to intervene in a positive way and to change things. And so there are these affirmations of faith and petitions which bring a reference to God's steadfast love.

And here, it's in this report, this continuing report, about the mentor's previous experience. It's deliberately put in the personal reflection separately to point out a contrast between negative reactions and positive attitudes. And a movement, his own movement, the mentor's own movement beyond negativity. There's a textual problem in this first line of verse 22.

On the other hand, the NIV very much sticks with our present Hebrew text. And what does it have? It says that because of the Lord's great love, we are not consumed. Because of the Lord's great love, we are not consumed.

And that's what the Hebrew text says. And it goes back to the King James Version. And if you look at the King James Version, you note that it has a practice of putting in italics words that are not actually there in Hebrew, but you need to supply them to make some sense of the text.

In the King James Version, because of this, it is put in italics. It's not there. So, we've got a very disjointed statement here.

Steadfast love, and then we're not consumed. So that's one problem. The other is this sudden switch to we.

He's not going to talk about we and us until verses 40 following. And it's very much a factor of his individual experience and the congregation has no part in it.

And so, we look again at the textual evidence. In fact, there are two ancient versions that put it differently, such as this first line. And it says, the steadfast love of the Lord never ceases.

And that very much matches that next half line. His masses never come to an end. And I think that's the way to go in point of fact. All right.

It's actually a plural. That steadfast love in the Hebrew is actually a plural. And you've got this abstract noun, steadfast love.

What does it mean in the plural? Well, it means acts of steadfast love. And that I think would fit very, very well here for a reason, I should say. Steadfast love, the NRSV version of a key positive theological term for God, the nature of God.

Steadfast love, it's a covenant love. Some render it commitment, God's commitment to his people, Israel. And we're coming into the realm of theology here.

The NIV has got great love, which is plausible because the plural of an abstract noun in Hebrew can indicate intensity. And so great love. By itself, there's nothing wrong with it.

I'm not completely happy with it, though, because it goes on to use a plural. His mercies never come to an end. Mercies, this picks up the King James Version word, is really compassion. And in the plural, acts of compassion.

The NIV actually says his compassions never fail. And I don't know that there is a plural of the word, the abstract word compassion. So, it's his acts of compassion.

And these plurals are very much picked up, and this never ceases. There's an act of steadfast love, there's an act of compassion here, another act of steadfast love here, another act of compassion. And so, the acts of steadfast love of the Lord never cease.

His acts of compassion never come to an end. Well, this is making a theological statement, but we wonder what it's to do. But certainly, the mentor found relief, and he found blessing by thinking of this theological factor, as indeed many of the Psalms do.

And he interprets it in terms of a future beyond his negative past. That negative past is not at the end of his road, but beyond that, there is something positive. And he's thinking very much that there's a permanence about God's steadfast love.

There's a permanence about God's compassion. He'd been suffering the wrath of God, but he said in verse one of chapter three, but in point of fact, we looked at the word wrath and anger before in an earlier video. And we saw that it's not part of the nature of God as such.

It's a reaction to human wrongdoing. If there's no human wrongdoing, there's no anger where God is concerned. It's a reaction, but it isn't part of the permanent nature of God.

And so here, quite recently, the mentor speaks of the permanence of these attributes. For now, he's been experienced the wrath of God. Indeed, he is now in this crisis experiencing that because this is a guilt-related problem that he's been experiencing.

But over against that, there's that permanence of these great attributes of God, steadfast love, and compassion. And so, aha, there's a possibility that a probability even, they will come back, and there will be a limit to that wrath of God, and it won't last forever, unlike these regular attributes. He goes on to say they are new every morning.

They are new every morning. And here, he's speaking of his own experience, that verse 22 has come true in his own life. And perhaps a congregation look in amazement.

Well, you've been talking of going through a wretched time. How can it be true? I'll tell you how it's been true. I'm still alive.

I'm a survivor. I'm a survivor. Now, he hadn't always thought on those lines.

Back in verse 6, God made me sit in darkness like the dead of long ago. He thought of himself as good as dead. And the next step would be a literal funeral for him because he had no prospects where life was concerned.

But now, he thinks again, I'm not actually dead. I'm alive. And there may well be significance in that.

God has spared me. God hasn't killed me in his wrath. Here I am, alive.

And this seems to be significant. I'm still waking up every morning. I'm still alive.

And I see here the saving grace of God. And he regards his survival as nothing less than God's gift. And here, we have to bear something in mind that we haven't mentioned before.

That word steadfast love, it has a variety of meaning. And sometimes, in fact, very often, it refers to the saving grace of God. Yes.

But then sometimes, it refers to the keeping grace of God. And sometimes, the keeping grace of God in preserving life. For instance, in Psalm 119 and verse 159, what do we read there? Preserve my life according to your steadfast love.

Preserve my life according to your steadfast love. And God had preserved his life. My, he was half dead, but he was half alive.

He was half alive. His cup was half empty, but it meant it was half full. And so, he's able to look on the bright side here.

They're new every morning. I'm a survivor. And he takes this seriously.

And he's going to apply it to the congregation in verse 39. We are all still survivors. You are survivors, as well as me.

This terrible catastrophe. So many died in warfare, in the siege, and so on, in the occupation. So many have died.

Starvation and various factors have led to the death of our comrades. But we're alive. And so, he says in verse 39, why should any who draw breath complain about the punishment of their sins? The NIV says something similar but perhaps easier to understand.

Where was it? It is verse 39. Why should the living complain when punished for their sins? If they're still alive, this is something to celebrate. And so, he applies it to the congregation there.

It's an application of his own conviction, in his own experience. I am alive, and I think God has a purpose in keeping me alive, and there is a future for me. And so, this is the basis of hope.

Where does he get it from? Where does this come from? All this was piling up of theological, positive theological terms. Well, scholars agree, it's harking back to Exodus chapter 34 and verse 6, where Moses is given a revelation of God. God passes before him, and God proclaims, the Lord, the Lord, a God merciful and gracious, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love and faithfulness.

Keeping steadfast love for the thousandth generation, forgiving iniquity and transgression and sin. And all that vocabulary that's being used there in verse 22 comes straight from Exodus 34 and verse 6. Steadfast love, mercy, merciful, it's an adjective there, back in Exodus, and faithfulness. It's all there, that same cluster of terms.

Steadfast love, merciful, faithfulness. And so, there it is. And we have to be very aware that when a scripture is quoted, we have intertextuality here.

But when a text is quoted, there's not only a reference, hopefully, to the text but also to the context. And what's the context of Exodus 34? It comes after Exodus 32. And that was the terrible sin of the golden calf.

Israel rejected God and worshipped the golden calf instead. And so, one might think, well, that's the end of everything. And even God dares to think in that way.

Oh, please, please. I know it's terrible, but please give them another chance. And God says in Exodus 34, right, I will.

And I will show them further examples of my steadfast love, compassion, and faithfulness. And so, Exodus 34 and verse 6 are very relevant because, in the congregation's experience, it was guilt that lay behind that punishment that led to 586 BC. As the pre-exilic prophets have said, as Deuteronomy 28 would look forward to, all this had been explained earlier in Manifestations, that guilt factor.

And the testimony of the mentor earlier in chapter 3 was guilt related to this wrath of God punishing human sin in his case. But there we are. There's this great precedent in the scripture of Exodus 34 and verse 6. All is not lost.

There was a future for Israel after their worshipping of the golden calf. And so, there may well be a future for the congregation. And certainly, in his own experience, he grasped that to himself and very much wants to celebrate this old text as relevant for him.

We haven't noticed a switch of pronouns in verses 22 to 23. It's speaking of the Lord, Yahweh, in the third person. His mercies never come to an end.

But then, great is your faithfulness. There's a sudden switch. There's a sudden turning to God.

And he comes to prayer. He hadn't been praying before. Even his lament was a third-person report about God in his own experience, in his own negative experience.

But now, there is this switching. And a little bit later on, I want to think about the significance of that. But before I do, it may have occurred to Christians listening to me that they're very familiar with that verse, that part of the verse, great is your faithfulness.

Because it's so often celebrated in a hymn, great is thy faithfulness. It is a hymn that was composed back in the 1920s.

And it's a beautiful hymn, beautifully written. And it's got a lovely, vigorous tune to it. And congregations sing it out lustily.

I've got to say, I don't like that hymn. And that may seem to be almost heretical to say that. So, what do I mean, why don't I like that hymn? I think it's very much abusing the text here.

It's very much misusing the text. And I want to refer to a discovery made by Walter Brueggemann in the Psalms that the Psalms cover a variety of life settings. And there are three life settings, and you've got to be aware of that.

So, if we're preaching on the psalm, we have to ask, what's the life setting? What sort of life situation is presupposed here? Brueggemann suggested there are three life settings that distinguish psalms from each other. And the first is orientation, where life is pretty good. Life is pretty good, and there is not much to complain about.

Always some little things going wrong, but life's pretty good. Orientation. And we celebrate the blessing of God in such situations.

And we sing things of praise. And they all presuppose the season of orientation. But then, almost half the psalms aren't there in that situation.

But they have fallen into disorientation, crisis has invaded the individual's life or the community's life. And 65 of the 150 psalms are concerned with disorientation. And, oh my, that's quite different.

And you don't think so much of blessing now. You want salvation. You want God to rescue you from this crisis.

And these are the names in the psalms that we don't often read, that they are looking for this salvation, this rescue, deliverance from crisis, which invades their life in the form of disorientation. And then Brueggemann went on to say there is reorientation. Afterward, disorientation doesn't last forever, but it gives way to reorientation.

And perhaps this is especially true in the Thanksgiving psalms, where the one who prays, or the group that prays, comes back to God and says, ah, you brought me through. Thank you, God. And they bring a thank offering and offer that animal sacrifice as saying thank you to God.

Well now, where are we in these seasons of life and lamentation? We know full well we're in the season of disorientation. Life is very grim and is out of an experience of crisis, is out of lament that the text is speaking there. But that hymn has switched seasons, and it thinks instead of the season of orientation.

Everything's good. Life's full of blessings. And so, it says, summer and winter, springtime and harvest, sun, moon, and stars in their courses above, join with all nature in manifold witness to thy great faithfulness, mercy, and love.

And so great is thy faithfulness. Morning by morning, new mercies, I see. All I have needed, thy hand hath provided.

Great is thy faithfulness, Lord, unto me. Pardon for sin and a peace that endureth. Thy own dear presence to cheer and to guide.

Strength for today and bright hope for tomorrow. Blessings all mine with ten thousand beside. It's in the context of blessing.

It's in the context of orientation, and it completely misuses that text. It removes the lament situation.

And perhaps this is a feature in our worship that we tend to do that. It's all celebration, whereas in that congregation, there may be many who are, in fact, suffering inside, and their suffering needs to be recognized and acknowledged and brought to God. And so there we are.

There's this transfer. And so, if I were taking the service, I would never choose great is thy faithfulness because I feel let down. It's using a text but ignoring the context.

And this is something terrible. It's got rid of the lament. It's got rid of the crisis.

It's got rid of the disorientation. So, we need to be wary. But we will be going on to think about this switch of pronouns, your faithfulness.

Anyway, let's now have a review of these two stanzas in 22 and 23. It's a rich passage. It's his second thought.

After those first grim thoughts, very much there's moving along in line with the sounds of lament that found a place for a future beyond crisis, hopefully in terms of God's steadfast love and God's compassion and God's faithfulness. And so, he looks again at that negativity, and now he sees God's overall purposes, which are for good. And he's going to dare to use the word good in verses 25, 26 and 27.

There's this change of attitude, this realization that he is a survival survivor, and in fact, he's come to a turning point.

When we were looking at the Greek process and the series of processes, we said that hopefully there would be closure at the end. Well, there's never closure in lamentations. We don't reach that delightful point.

But there is a turning point, a turning point, and we described it. The pain is felt as bad as ever, but a more positive future can be envisioned. And so there is a resolve in the direction of change.

And that perfectly describes what is happening in 22 and 23, chapter 3, and what's going on here. There's a psalm which is rather similar in some ways. It's Psalm 73.

And there was the psalmist very much lamenting, and he had a theological problem which really grieved him. And it was a providential problem, too, that he saw wicked people around him, and they were getting on very well in life, and they were healthy, and everything was prospering, and their whole being echoed success. Whereas he'd been as good a believer as he could have been, but life was terrible for him, and he'd been terribly sick.

And he thinks of the problem of providence, and he says, how can this be? How can this be? And can I believe in such a God? And he says, frankly, near the beginning of the psalm, as for me, my feet had almost slipped. I'd nearly lost my foothold, for I ended the arrogant when I saw the prosperity of the wicked. And he says, all day long, I've been afflicted, and every morning brings new punishments.

And how can this be? This is not fair. So, he's got this complaint about this whole situation. But then he thinks again, and this is in verses 15 through 17.

He reaches a turning point, and there's a parallel here to Lamentations 3. If I'd spoken out like that, I would have betrayed your children, and I would have said, well, I'm losing my faith, and oh dear, they would have been worried, and oh my, perhaps they would have been tempted to lose their faith as well. So, I can't go along this line for their sake. So that's his first reaction.

But when I tried to understand all this, it troubled me deeply. I was left with my solitary problem, and how could it be resolved? Until I entered the sanctuary of God and understood their final destiny. He went to a festival.

He was still going to services, and he went to this festival service, and presumably he heard wonderful hymns sung by the choir, the rabbinical choir, about the power of God and how providence eventually wins through. And he came to believe again. He came to believe again.

He said, I entered the sanctuary of God, and then I understood their final destiny. And so, he says, things are going to change around here, and I can believe that God is going to bring about changes, and I can trust this God of the future rather than this grim God of the present that I seem to be experiencing. And so there was this turning point.

And in Lamentations, as I say, it was survival. The fact that he felt that God was keeping him alive. God did not let him die in all that catastrophe of warfare, invasion, siege, and starvation.

He was still waking up every morning, and God must have some purpose in keeping him alive. True, his crisis wasn't much of a life, but it was something positive as God's continuing gift. And he saw it as a sort of seabed for what God could do in his own future.

It was a gift that would grow into something better and stronger, a gift that points in a positive and hopeful direction, and it was evidence that God was at work in his life.

Let me tell you about an experience I had in my chaplaincy work. I was visiting the critical care section of the neonatal unit at the hospital, and every Friday, I would go and see this same premature baby because the parents had asked that the chaplain should go and visit and pray over him. So, in keeping with the parents' wishes, I was visiting a premature baby and praying aloud beside his crib.

He looked a pitiable sight, depending on a respirator to compensate for his undeveloped lungs. He was a picture of ill health. His nurse never seemed to be around to ask about little John's progress or the lack of it.

One day, I found her attending to him and was able to ask. She had nothing to say at first and then simply said, where there's life, there's hope. Not much of an answer, I thought at the time, but afterward, I incorporated it into my prayers at the baby's side as something to cling to.

And there's something rather similar here. Where there's life, there's hope. This is the point that the mentor arrives at, not simply for his own sake, but it's also a message for the congregation to take into account.

We've seen in these two verses that a change of attitude is grounded in the character of God. It's not only the punisher of sin, but also ultimately loving and blessing. These are the permanent parts of God's nature.

He draws on Exodus 34 and verse 6, with its sinister background and that lovely, gracious promise that rings out from God. These create new expectations about God and the way that God deals with his people. And this, as I say, is what the mentor needed to do.

The old expectations had collapsed. Zion theology, that permanent divinity dynasty, oh my, yes, it had gone. The blessing of Israel in the promised land, oh my, very little of it in evidence now.

So, what was left? And for the congregation at the moment, it was nothing. But the mentor is building up the case. Yes, there is something.

Yes, there is something. There, I won't stop, and we will carry on next time.

This is Dr. Leslie Allen in his teaching on the book of Lamentations. This is session 7, Lamentations 3:17-23.