

## **Dr. Leslie Allen, Lamentations, Session 9, Lamentations 3:34-51**

© 2024 Leslie Allen and Ted Hildebrandt

This is Dr. Leslie Allen in his teaching on the book of Lamentations. This is session 9, Lamentations 3:34-51.

In this video, we will be looking at Lamentations chapter 3 and verses 34 to 51.

But I want to add a footnote, as it were, to chapter 33 and this word willingly, which we said from the heart, the nature of God, the essential nature of God over against what he sometimes needs to do. There are two texts, one in the Old Testament and one in the New Testament, that apply this to repentance. One text is in Ezekiel, chapter 18, verse 23, and then verse 32.

Ezekiel 18:33, 23. Have I any pleasure in the death of the wicked says the Lord God and not rather that they should turn from their ways and live. And then later in verse 32, I have no pleasure in the death of anyone says the Lord God.

This language is picked up in Peter's second letter, 2nd Peter 3, and in verse 9. God is not willing that any should perish but that all should come to repentance. These texts are very much in line with what the mentor is saying in verse 33 of chapter 3. He does not willingly afflict or grieve anyone. But now we move on to our new stanza and a new paragraph.

It's self-contained in verses 34 through 36. When all the prisoners of the land are crushed underfoot, when human rights are perverted in the presence of the Most High, when one's case is subverted, does the Lord not see it? Here, we have a series of temporal clauses with a closing main clause. And questions arise with this particular stanza.

What sort of times are in mind, and which of the times are relevant to lamentations at this particular point? And then, secondly, what does that main clause mean? So, there's the question of investigating these times, when, when, when, and then that final main clause at the end of verse 36. And where that, let's look at that last clause first. In the new RSV, does the Lord not see it? And the NIV is on the same lines.

Would not the Lord see such things? And so, there's agreement between those two versions. But there is ambiguity and it would be possible to take it as a statement. There's no direct reference to an interrogative here.

And so, you could translate it, the Lord does not see. And one commentator takes that over at least and says God is blind. And so there is theological confusion here.

This goes along with a certain interpretation that I haven't mentioned before about that testifying lament earlier on in Chapter 3, that it consists of a series of accusations against God in point of fact rather than implying guilt. And so that's one way one could go, but not one that I, a path that I want to tread down. But it can be taken as a question.

It depends on the tone of voice. Usually, in Hebrew, there's a special little element that's put at the end of the first word in the question, which warns the hearer or reader that there's a question coming. But it can be left out, especially when the main clause is preceded by other clauses.

And we have this phenomenon in English at times. We might say, you're going shopping this afternoon. And our tone of voice indicates that it's a statement.

But we might put it in the form, you're going shopping this afternoon. And that's a question. And so that depends on the tone of voice.

And our problem is that Hebrew doesn't have a question mark. And so there's no indication of a question. And there's no question mark.

And so, there's this ambiguity here. But overall, the sense seems to be that the Lord does not see it as a question. But then there's a third option that we could take it as a statement and give another meaning to that verb see. And a number of commentators and translations do that.

The special meaning of the verb see is that the Lord does not countenance. The Lord does not look at this with approval. And so, we get the same sense at the end as we do with a question.

What persuades me more than the question is in view is that a number of times in the book of Lamentations, we have this verb see with a divine subject. And it always has the meaning elsewhere of taking notice of a problem with a view to doing something about it. And so that's probably the case here.

And that points to a question: does the Lord not see it? But then how about the other problem? What are these temporal clauses referring to? Well, they're not referring evidently to the disaster situation that we've had before. You know, the invasion of Judah, the capture of Jerusalem after a long 18-month siege. We don't seem to be dwelling in the past here.

And that past disaster and the distress that it caused. Instead, it seems to be looking at the contemporary situation of the congregation. For them, the siege was over.

For them, the war was over. And they were in post-war conditions. But trouble still abounded because now they were in an occupied country and they were under military occupation.

And that raised problems of its own. We're going to find that chapter 5 deals with that same contemporary situation. But this stanza paves the way with the present situation in mind.

And so, these general situations are very relevant to the congregation where they are now, rather than being involved in grief, continuing grief as to what had happened, a terrible disaster as it was, or a terrible distress that it caused. You're brought abruptly to the present. And there's mention of the bad treatment of prisoners of war by the occupying army when all the prisoners of the land are crushed underfoot.

This is what they were seeing and experiencing. And this was all part of a general policy, a bad policy expressed in verse 35. Human rights were being perverted.

Human rights were being perverted. These distressing circumstances were ones that they were experiencing all the time, but they were added in the presence of the most high.

This is paving the way for that last final clause. But before we get there, we find another description of the general policy of injustice that the congregation was witnessing and experiencing. When one's case is subverted, you complain to the authorities, and nothing happens.

And so there was new distress at new bad circumstances. But there's this saving expression here, this saving phrase in verse 35, in the presence of the Most High. And this is a new word for God, the omnipotent God, the all-seeing God.

And so that is picked up in that direct question at the end: does the Lord not see it? And so there's this reassurance. As one commentator says, Yahweh is the champion of justice, and he can be trusted to deal with these bad situations. So, there's reassurance here, there's consolation.

And it's a question of grievances. I've mentioned before that all-important prophetic texts in Isaiah chapter 10 involved invasion, foreign invasion in its aftermath, and, in that case, it was the Assyrians. The passage starts off by saying that Assyria is the rod of my anger, and I'm using Assyria to punish Judah.

Yes, okay. But then it goes on to pick up a grievance that the Judeans had, and it says, but Assyria does more than I intended and punished you more than I wanted you to be punished. And so, they, in turn, must be punished.

And so there were these two sides, the punishment of Judah, the excess of punishment on the part of the invading army, and then beyond that, God intervening, the Assyrians needed to be punished in turn. And that two-sided policy, that second part is being picked up here, because here is a grievance, here is a grievance. In terms of this military occupation, one thinks at once of Isaiah chapter 10, and how relevant it is here that such a grievance as this will not be allowed to carry on; it will be dealt with.

So, this powerful God, he knows all about it, and he will not stand for this denial of human rights. God is on your side. And there's a little hint here, make sure you're on God's side by repenting.

And this is the point that he's going to come to before very long. We come to verses 37 to 39, and this is the final stanza before we have the call to prayer in 40 to 41. We might say it's the final point in the sermon before the altar call that comes in verses 40 and 41.

Here, the monitor, the mentor, reverts to the pattern of judgment and salvation that he'd set out in 31 to 33. And he says here, we shall have to look more carefully than just what I'm reading. Who can command and have it done if the Lord is not ordained? Is it not from the mouth of the Most High that good and bad come? Why should anyone who draws breath complain about the punishment of their sins? There's a problem with that question. In fact, that whole question in verse 37, who can command and have it done if the Lord has not ordained it? And the answer obviously is no one, no one.

If the Lord hasn't ordained it, then nobody could command it and get it done. And so that's as it stands. But we have a problem where the Hebrew is concerned, that that word "if" isn't there.

That word "if" has been put in the new RSV and in the NIV to make some sense. But if you don't have that word "if," then you have to think again as to what the meaning is. And it does mean, for instance, that that second clause is not if the Lord has not ordained it, but it's a question, has not the Lord ordained it? And so, who can command and have it done? God.

God is the one who can issue a command and order and have it done. And has not the Lord ordained it? What points me, along with some other commentators, to this alternative explanation is that it's picking up the sort of language that had been used earlier on in Lamentations. In verse 17 of chapter 1, the Lord commands against Jacob that his neighbor should become his foes.

And we related that to pre-exilic prophecy, that there was that proclamation of God's will for the punishment of Judah. And so, the neighbors became Judah's foes. And then in 2:17, we had a similar reference.

The Lord has done what he purposed. He's carried out his threat as he ordained long ago, and we applied that to the pre-exilic prophetic revelation.

And there, that word ordained is the same Hebrew word and the same English word that occurs there in verse 47. And also, to do, the Lord has done, it occurs with that word done. And so, this seems to be a reference to prophetic revelation in pre-exilic times.

And so, this is the warrant for this policy that the mentor is speaking of now. And he goes on in a similar vein. Is it not from the mouth of the Most High, the Omnipotent God again, speaking through the prophets that good and bad come? Well, we critiqued that earlier.

It's really bad and good. This is a two-sided policy of God. The punishment was necessary, but it was not the end.

And in point of fact, there's got this emphasis on good as the prospect, if only Judah repents of its sins. And as I say, it's referring back to pre-exilic prophecy. And especially Hosea, Isaiah, and Jeremiah had pointed to the two-sidedness.

Yes, there was going to be judgment, but then after the judgment would come salvation. And so, this is the final sort of guarantee. It's what the prophets said.

God says this through the prophets, and you can be sure that He will do it. He's the Most High God.

He's brought about the punishment. You can be sure he'll bring about that new good side as well. And so that's a summary of the double prophetic message.

First good, first bad, and then good. And it's reinforced with this powerful title for God, the Most High. But punishment had to be a necessary first step.

And so, verse 39, why should anyone who draws breath complain about the punishment of their sins? Or, as the NIV says, anybody living. You're survivors, and take comfort from that and take reassurance from that. You're survivors, and God has still got a purpose for you.

You didn't die in all that terrible situation of invasion and siege and so on, as so many did. So, draw on that as a starting point for something new that God is going to do in your lives. You're alive, a survivor.

As I rejoiced in my survival, so must you. So why should you complain about the punishment of your sins? Of course, you've got to realize that your sins were being punished, and so come on, you need to repent. But before we go on, we need to stop with that word: complain.

Complain. It's a word that only occurs twice in the Hebrew Bible, and that to me is very significant. In the Pentateuchal narratives, when we learn about Israel in the wilderness, we find them often complaining.

But we don't often reflect the fact that there were two sorts of complaints, and one type of complaint God accepted, the other God said, no way, no way, you shouldn't complain in this way. And this particular verb, complain, occurs just once in the Pentateuchal narratives about a complaint that Israel makes. It's Numbers 11 in verse 1. Now, when the people complained in the hearing, in the hearing of the Lord about their misfortunes, the Lord heard it, and his anger was kindled.

Then, the fire of the Lord burned against them and consumed some outlying parts of the camp. But the people cried out to Moses, and Moses prayed to the Lord, and the fire abated. But there is this drastic reaction.

God says, no, how dare you complain? And he regards it as an illegitimate complaint. And as the chapter goes on, it's a rejection of God's provision of manna. We don't want the manna anymore.

We enjoyed the good food we had back in Egypt, and it's a rejection of the exodus, in point of fact. So, it's an illegitimate complaint, and this is the verb, this same verb, that's used. On the other hand, in Exodus and in Numbers, you find a complaint. In Exodus 15 and 16 and Numbers 16, you find complaints about a genuine need for food and water.

The people say to God, we haven't got any food to eat. Right, said God, I'll provide manna. People complain that we don't have any food, fluids, or water to drink.

Right, says God, I'll provide it. And that's regarded as a legitimate complaint, and another verb is used in those situations. But here is this strongly negative verb, which is a denial, a basic denial, and standing over against God in a very drastic way.

And that's the complaint that occurs here, that's that verb, complaint in the style of Numbers 11 about the punishment of their sin. We're not sinners. How dare you say that? No, we're not.

And so, it's a rejection of God's whole will and explanation of their circumstances. This reminds me of the Holocaust and of one person who was a great champion of

Judaism and champion of the Jewish God, Elie Wiesel. He deplored the Holocaust, and he spoke in strong terms against God that it shouldn't have happened, and how could God dare to let it happen? But he stayed a believer, he stayed a believer, and he wrote very lovingly but very firmly against the large number of Jews who gave up their faith in God.

And he said this is the wrong way to go. There's a way to complain, a right way to complain, and a wrong way to complain. And if it means giving up one's faith in God and taking the stand of a basic no against God, then this should not happen.

And certainly, I don't let it happen in my life. I deplore all that's happened, as you do, but I do not go so far as to give up my faith. And that's very much the sentiment here, that the way forward, the only way forward, was for repentance, getting into a right relationship with God again.

But if they didn't do that, my dot, dot, dot, you know, nothing is said about that, it dare not be said. But the way forward is proclaimed here in verses 40 and 41. And there's a call to penitential prayer.

And the mentor identifies himself with the congregation here. Let us test and examine our ways and return to the Lord. Let us lift up our hearts as well as our hands to God in heaven.

He goes on to say that we have transgressed and repelled, and you have not forgiven. But first of all, 41 to 42, which is the call to penitential prayer. And then 42 to 47, it's a suggestion of a model prayer that one perhaps may bring to God, suggested to the congregation.

But first of all, 40 to 41 is a call. The only way forward on your part is something you need to do before God does his good part. The thing to do is to acknowledge guilt by self-examination. As a result, you will confess your sins and return to the Lord.

You realize you've abandoned God, and you've unleashed that punishment of God. And so, you need to return in repentance by taking over God's own perspective as to where you are. And so, there's a call for sincerity in verse 41: let us lift up our hearts as well as our hands to God in heaven.

And there's a warning: just don't go through the outward motions, lifting your hands to God and saying some form of words, but really mean it and lift up your hearts as well as your hands. There must be an outward response, yes, but it must reflect an inward response as well. And it's very much in line with what had been said earlier in chapter 2 and in verse 19, 2:19.

Arise, cry out in the night, pour out your heart like water before the presence of the Lord, and lift up your hands to him for the lives of your children. And so, lifting the hands, but going along with it, pouring out your heart, so it's meaningful. And, of course, the presupposition, as I've been saying, is that this is a necessary human step if God is to move from bad to good, from punishment to demonstrating his steadfast love.

And this, as I was saying in an earlier video, is the Old Testament's backdoor to God's grace. God accepts a front door approach of good behavior and good intent and so on, but failing that, there's this backdoor approach of conscience and confession, and it's a way back to God, that door that is open. I've said now and then that a helpful parallel in looking at the grief of Judah that the mentor is dealing with a way to do it is to look at what happens in Alcoholics Anonymous.

And I've said, too, that all grief is unique; there's not one standard way of responding to grief. For instance, guilt doesn't often feature in it, and sometimes the guilt can be a wrong factor in terms of self-blame that's unnecessary and, in fact, harmful. But certainly, in the condition of alcoholism, which lies behind AA, guilt is very much there, not called as such, but in terms of taking responsibility.

The 12-step program has a couple of steps that are very close to verses 40 and 41. Step 4 says to make a searching and fearless moral inventory of yourselves.

And that's a necessary fourth step in that program. Then you can move on to step 5, admit to God, to yourself, and to another human being the exact nature of your wrongs. And there's confession.

And I remember, I think back about 10 years ago now, there was a phone call from my daughter, a recovering alcoholic, and she was working through the 12-step program, and she'd arrived at step 5, and she phoned me up, and said, can I come and see you tomorrow, Dad, tomorrow afternoon, Sunday afternoon? Yes, I said certainly. And she came and said she wanted to confess about wrongs that she'd committed against me as she now realized. And she was working out this step 5, and confession and repentance were very much there.

She was taking step 5 very seriously. So, it's still relevant now, and lamentations spring to life as we look at that situation of Alcoholics Anonymous and many other cases, I'm sure. And then verses 42 to 47, I take as a model prayer.

And so we will move into that. It's very much patterned on the psalm lament prayer, but a communal lament with penitential elements in it. There are elements that are missing that we would normally find in a communal lament.



There's no petition for help, though it's alluded to in verse 44 in a mention to mention a prayer, a prayer that hasn't been answered. There's no affirmation of trust. But apart from that, it follows a pattern, especially in terms of a penitential prayer where there are negative references to God and also to enemies' experiences at the hands of human enemies.

And first of all, there's very much a penitential element, which is the highlight of this prayer. We have transgressed and rebelled, and you have not forgiven. And these are two words for rebelling here.

That first word we had in the form of transgressions, and that second verb, rebel, we also had earlier on, but now they're added together for emphasis. We have transgressed and rebelled, these two words for rebellion. And you have not forgiven.

You've wrapped yourself with anger and pursued us, killing without pity. God didn't forgive because there was not yet any confession. It's only now that there's the coming to confession.

But in the days when we did rebel against you, you didn't forgive and that was natural because forgiveness must come after confession and we are bringing the confession now. So that's quite a reasonable statement there. But instead of forgiveness, you wrapped yourself with anger and pursued us, killing without pity.

So, there's this mention of anger, which is featured in chapter 1 and chapter 2 in connection with the Day of the Lord. And this was the temporary but necessary way that God treated Judah at that time. Killing without pity, we've had this before, echoing the pre-exilic prophets who use this word as they look forward with foreboding to the disaster that was going to befall either Israel or Judah.

And then you wrapped yourself with a cloud so that no prayer can pass through. And there was this blocking because, in fact, there was no confession. There was only sin, and we were bringing our prayers, Lord help us, but we were not repenting of our sins.

And you made us filth and rubbish among the peoples. And so, God's part in punishing, of which the mentor has been speaking. This is brought into the open, and the congregation is saying amen to what's happening here.

And so there is that prayer. At last, of course, the congregation are not saying it, the mentor is saying it for them, but the implication is this is the sort of prayer you need to be praying. And we have to wait until chapter five when we get a similar sort of prayer to what's happening here, what's being proposed here.

And so now, hopefully, there is going to be a confession. But this distress that God has brought, this disaster that God has brought upon them is explored further in 46 and 47. All our enemies have opened their mouths against us.

Panic and pitfall have come upon us, devastation and destruction. And so, along with that punishment from God, it involved too, as we've seen implied, God using human enemies, and they were opening their mouths. And this is mockery, and this is humiliation.

And so, it carries on from 45, and you've made us filth and rubbish among the peoples. We're disregarded. We're regarded as people of no worth. And this, we said before, is the secondary side of suffering.

The disaster can bring a stigma that others can latch onto and make you suffer further by humiliating you, this secondary suffering. And so, their distress at that made it worse. And then, in this powerful statement, the English try to capture the alliteration.

Alliteration in Hebrew is often an effective tool for emphasis. And so panic and pitfall, the two Ps, and then devastation and destruction, the two Ds. This is a powerful way of pointing to the extremity of the disaster that had been experienced.

And so there we are. There's a recounting of the disaster and distress that the congregation had been through. But here, it's put under the heading of confession of sin.

We have transgressed and rebelled. The hope is that with this confession, there will be future forgiveness, such as they had not prepared for before. Now, there's a change of heart and mind, and they bring that spirit of repentance to God.

And then lastly, today, 48 through 51, here the mentor takes over. Of course, he's been speaking all the way through with this suggestion of a prayer of repentance. But he comes to speak for himself now.

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 the city. In an earlier video, we were describing Chapter 3 in terms of the concept of the wounded healer.

We were mentioning how Carl Jung took up that idea and applied it in two ways. The therapist can be wounded in dealing with a patient and overwhelmed by the sad situation in which the patient finds themselves. I might have gone on to say that Henry Nouwen applied it in a pastoral way.

He, too, wrote a book called *The Wounded Healer*. He mentioned there the danger for a pastor to be overwhelmed by one in his congregation who brings so sad a story to him. But both Jung and Nouwen applied this, too, to the work of a pastor who has suffered before becoming a pastor or before engaging in this present pastoral work.

And the healer who has been wounded very often is the one who can be successful in that healing. And we have very much, I think, in the testimonies at the beginning and end of Chapter 3, we have the wounded healer who speaks of former experiences that he'd been through, which were on a par, in a way, parallel to what the congregation and he himself had recently experienced. And he trusted that this would be a help to them and that they would trust him as having been through parallel experiences.

But also, there's this other type of being a wounded healer that you can't take it. You can't take it. You listen to this story and you find it so overwhelming.

The mentor is overwhelmed now. He uses it as a tool on the congregation's side as he hopes that they will return to God. My eyes will flow without ceasing, without respite, until the Lord from heaven looks down and sees.

And he picks up that cry of Zion earlier in the book, look and see, look and see a trust to God. And he so fervently hopes, that he's going to be indulging in tears, which hopefully will move God and will express his own distress at the situation of the congregation. He then brings out one last point and one particular point about what worries him.

My eyes cause me grief at the young, at the fate of all the young women in the city. And I, that's a literal translation. The NIV is a little bit clearer.

What I see brings grief to my soul because of all the women in my city. And he brings out one example. And I said earlier that the chapter had moved on in the book from the question of siege, occupation, from siege to occupation.

It moved to a post-war situation, the prisoners of the land being crushed underfoot and human rights being perverted, one's case being perverted in verses 34 through 36. And he comes back to the present situation because those invading soldiers, what did they do? They raped the women. They raped the Judean women.

And the mentor had to be Stanback Helpless and all the other Judean men. They could do nothing about it. And so there was grief caused at the fate of all the young women in the city.

It may have been an exaggeration, it wasn't all, but there were so many that those foreign soldiers leaped on and raped, and it caused him so much grief. Behind this is

a male model of the man who expects to be a knight in armor, defending the helpless damsel. But he couldn't pursue that protective role.

His power was taken from him, armour and he was helpless. And this saddens him so much that he couldn't exercise that traditional male role, the fate of all the young women in my city. And it's not directly stated, but that raping is going to be mentioned directly in Chapter 5 as a phenomenon of the present experience of the congregation.

Next time, we will be moving on to verses 52 to 66 and drawing Chapter 3 to a close.

This is Dr. Leslie Allen in his teaching on the book of Lamentations. This is session 9, Lamentations 3:34-51.