

Dr. Leslie Allen, Lamentations, Session 10, Lamentations 3:52-66

© 2024 Leslie Allen and Ted Hildebrandt

This is Dr. Leslie Allen in his teaching on the book of Lamentations. This is session 10, Lamentations 3:52-66.

In this video, we come to the closing part of Lamentations, chapter 3, verses 52 through 66.

I take this section as another testimony, in this case a grievance-based individual prayer lament which includes hope. This closing testimony comes, I believe, from the main speaker, the mentor in his role as a wounded healer, and he speaks of his own experience as a help for the experiences and feelings of the congregation. In earlier, at the beginning of chapter 3, we found a grief-based prayer lament, but here this one is based on grievance.

Another difference from the testimony that appeared at the beginning of the chapter is that this one does not use third-person references as a report. It takes the direct form of a prayer with second-person references. The mentor is saying, this is how I prayed, and so it's a pure prayer lament reproduced here.

It's not presented as a third-person report, and it gives a further example of the mentor's own experience, but a different experience from the one spoken of in the opening testimony. But again, it's an individual personal experience, not a communal one shared with other people. But this testimony is grievance-based, and it's summed up in the opening phrase, my enemies without cause, and there we have a statement of grievance right at the beginning.

There's a parallel in the earlier testimony where we had a reference to God's wrath, his wrath, and that too was a sort of headline for the testimony, and that pointed behind the wrath, as in chapters 1 and 2, to underlying human sin. In the first testimony, the mentor empathized with the congregations and congregation of Judeans who had stayed behind in Judah after the war, and he said, I too once sinned against God and needed to bring to God my prayer lament, and there he was implying that something that you need to do too in your communal situation. He was operating as a role model for the congregation.

It's the same here. At the end of chapter 3, he says, I once went through a situation of unjust suffering at the hands of personal enemies, and I needed to bring an appropriate prayer about it to God. Here it is, and it's the path you need to take with your grievances against your communal enemies, and so the wounded healer is

talking about another wound that had been inflicted on him in order to help the wounded congregation in their wounding at the moment.

The mentor has spoken of communal grievances earlier in this poem, directly in verses 34 to 36, as we saw in the previous video, talking about occupation, post-war occupation, and it's the same, and we noticed in verse 51, the rape of young women by foreign troops after the war, and so very much it's talking about present experience, and of the three trajectories, pathways, or trajectories that we've been looking at in lamentations, grief, guilt, and grievance. Grief probably struck more of a nerve in the congregation because of the natural resentment that it caused in their hearts. So it was a good note to end on in chapter 3, to encourage the congregation to bring to God their own prayer lament about their grievances and to tell God about them, and his own testimony is an incentive for them to do so.

It was likely to be the most effective of the three trajectories in getting the congregation to make the move and respond with their own prayer. There's a complex situation in this prayer lament. It's really two laments rolled into one, or episodes of which are expressed in a lament, the separate episode with the same enemies, and the first one is presented in verses 52 through 54, what the problem was, and then God dealt with that in verses 55 through 58, but trouble flared up again from the same enemies, and so in 59 to 66, there's this request for God to deal with the new bad situation.

And so, we have a report presented to God, in this case, about the earlier situation that's included in this prayer lament, but it's all addressed to God, telling God the story about last time and how God responded favorably, and asking him, please do it again. So that's the situation here, but commentators are undecided as to where the first episode ends and the second episode begins. But I think firmly that it's at the end of 58 that we come to the end of the first episode, and then 59 begins the new episode and the actual lament prayer that we find in this testimony.

But that isn't how the new RSV takes it because it says, you've got some past tenses; in 55, I called on your name, then 56, you heard my plea; 57, you came near when I called on you, you said, first episode. But then, at 58, you have taken up my cause, you have redeemed my life, you have seen the wrong done to me, judge my cause. And so, from the standpoint of the new RSV, with 58, we are beginning that new episode.

But this is not so where the NIV is concerned, and I think they are right in this respect because in the NIV, in 58, we have past tenses, not perfect tenses, but past tenses. You, Lord, took up my case; you redeemed my life instead of those perfect verbs. And I think that is very reasonable because 58 is speaking of the conclusion of that situation and what God did in a very fitting way.

And so, here's our break; it comes at the end of 58, and then 59, the prayer for this complication of that situation. All right, there's another awkwardness here at first sight, but I think the context makes it clear how some of the verbs are used, and we have separate meanings for them. The verb see, for instance, we have it in verse 59, you have seen all their malice and all their plots against me.

Well, that means that it's already come to your attention. That's the force of the verb see. But having said that, when we move on to verse 63, whether they sit or rise, see, I am the object of their taunt songs. There, that see, it's more used in the way it's been used earlier in the book, look and see, God, do something about it.

Don't just observe it, but do something about it. And so there are quite different uses of that one verb, see, but the context overall, I think, makes that clear. And then, too, we've got the same difference with the verb hear.

In verse 56, we have the statement, and you heard my plea; do not close your ear. It means you listened to it, you did something about it, you did something about it. But in verse 63, you have heard their taunts, O Lord, all their plots against me.

This is referring back to another type of hearing that God has. It's not that he's listened to it and positively done something about it, but it has come to his attention at least. And so here in see, they're used in different senses in the different episodes, but as I say, in the overall context, it's straightforward.

But it is something that one needs to think about, in point of fact. Now, let's think more generally. The testimony in the first case was guilt, and the testimony in the second case was a grievance.

Those were their overall topics. And, of course, there's a reference overall to the guilt and grievance of the community. That's what it's based on.

The intention of the mentor is to use his guilt and grievance as a means of identifying with the congregation so that they may bring those pair of phenomena to God with appropriate prayers. But let's think again about that matching of guilt and grievance. And here again, I want to point back to Isaiah chapter 10 in that fundamental oracle, where they are both combined.

And Assyria is the rod of God's anger. That's the way it starts. And God's anger is a response obviously to Judas sinning against him.

And so that's one aspect. But the enemy went too far. The enemy went too far.

And they went beyond God's own will and intention. And they were unnecessarily cruel. And so, this turns into a grievance.

And so, it's a complex situation. I think I gave you an example from my chaplain work of grief and guilt and grievance. And in together in one situation.

Here's another such experience that a patient told me about. I went into a patient's room. There was a patient who lived normally in a wheelchair.

And he couldn't walk anymore. And he had a variety of maladies. And here he was lying in bed with another such malady.

But he didn't want to talk about it at all. And his first words to me were, my parents have abandoned me. And there he was.

He felt very much alone. He had no support from his parents at all. And he went on to say when I phone my sister, she won't pick up the phone.

She won't answer me. And so, his parents and his sister had both cut-off communication with him. And so there was grief over that situation.

I also read some details about him in his medical report. And I happened to know that he was married. So, I said, does your wife come to see you? Oh yes, she said.

She comes most evenings. I found this surprising because I knew they lived quite a few miles away, and so it was quite an endeavor for his wife to visit him most evenings.

But he went on. He hadn't finished. He said apologetically, she's Mexican.

And then I could understand that scenario, that white Anglo family had turned against their son for marrying this Mexican woman. And he shared a little bit of their shame and their prejudice in the apologetic way that he felt necessary to add that she's Mexican. And so, I felt that something needed to be said.

One doesn't often engage in direct counseling with patients, but I felt it was very necessary. I said, when your wife comes in this evening, I want you to say two things to her. I want you to say how much you love her.

And I want you to say how grateful you are that she is family. She is family. And so there it was.

There was this grievance against his natural family. There was a sense of guilt even about marrying this Mexican woman. And there was overall grief.

And there it was combined. So, they are compatible as they were in the situation, in lamentations. It's a complex situation.

So, let's start in detail now with verse 52—those who were my enemies without cause. There we are, grievance.

Nothing I did wrong, but there they were, persecuting me. And there was no reason for it. The fault lay with them, not with me.

They have hunted me like a bird. There's a little something wrong with this verse in the new RSV. If you look at succeeding verses, you've got past tenses.

They flung me alive into a pit. They hurled stones at me. The water closed over my head.

And then I called on your name. A series of past tenses. And that's surely what we need in verse 52.

They hunted me like a bird. Not have hunted me like a bird. So that was a slip, I think, that got past the proofreader's eye.

And in fact, the NIV has a past tense there. Hunted me, not part by. It's talking about this first episode, which was now past.

Those who were my enemies without a cause have hunted me like a bird. As often in laments, metaphors are used. And here is this hunting metaphor, tracking them down in persecution.

And it goes on. They flung me alive into a pit and hurled stones at me. The water closed over my head.

I said I'm lost. And then 55, I called on your name from the depths of the pit. And here's another metaphor.

It's as if he'd been thrown into a cistern, a water cistern. And that actually happened in some cases in the Old Testament. You may remember that Joseph's brothers threw Joseph into a dry cistern in Genesis 37.

And then you may remember, too, that Jeremiah was thrown into a muddy cistern in Jeremiah chapter 38. Well, I think it's used as a metaphor here. It's as if it was that sort of situation.

There are different types of metaphors used in the Psalms. And one of them used very frequently is about confinement. And we were talking about that the other day, narrowness.

You could hardly breathe as if you were locked into a cupboard, and you wanted to be brought out into a broad place where you could be free, develop, and live a more natural life. And this is a variation. This cistern is a variation of that situation.

There's some uncertainty about the second part of verse 53. They hurled stones on me. And the NIV is very similar.

It just varies the verb. And it says they threw stones at me. The problem is that the Hebrew noun is singular.

And what our translations have done is to take that singular verb as collective, which could be so. But there's an alternative way of understanding the text, which some commentators follow. And that is very interesting and very plausible and may well be right.

It's one stone. It's a lid over the cistern to prevent animals and insects from getting in, and that would fit very well.

That would increase the sense of confinement, being locked into this cistern with its stone top that you couldn't move or dislodge. And there you were. It's a lack of freedom that's being confined.

And so that would fit very well. And then there's another complication in this metaphor. It wasn't a dry cistern.

It wasn't a muddy cistern. It had water in it, and the implication is that there was a lot of water in it.

And it was above his head. And so, it's an impossible situation. And so, we get the reaction, I'm lost.

I'm lost—that expression of despair there. And the crisis is so great.

This persecution from his enemies is so overwhelming that he just can't take it. He despairs of life. In this report, he reminds God how he brought this whole situation to him.

I called on your name, O Lord, from the depths of the pit. There in that confinement, being hard-pressed by my enemies. And you heard my plea.

What was my plea? Do not close your ear to my cry for help, but give me relief. And then you came near when I called on you. You said, do not fear.

And so there is this movement on. He does all he can do, all that's left for him to do, to ask God for help. He reminds God how he prayed like this and gives a quotation from his own earlier lament in that first episode.

And he said, you heard, and you resolved to do something about it. You listened. And, in fact, you came near when I called on you.

You said, do not fear. And I think we've mentioned in an earlier video that one could expect a literal answer to prayer when, in the temple, one brought prayers to God. And there were people on the staff, temple prophets or priests, who had the power to give an answer from God there and then.

And so, through them, God speaks. And he said, do not fear. And this is something I may have mentioned to some extent before; this is something that we find now and then in the Psalms.

I think I, at an earlier time, mentioned Psalm 12, which starts out as a lament in verses 1 through 4. And then we get an answer from God in verse 5, says the Lord, because the poor are despoiled, because the needy groan, I will now rise up. I will place them in the safety for which they long. And then there's a lament, Psalm 35 and verse 3, which asks God to speak in that sort of way.

Psalm 35 verse 3, draw the spear and javelin against my pursuers. Fight back for me. Say to my soul, I am your salvation.

And there we are. That was the response that he expected from God. An answer like that is presupposed in some of the other Psalms.

Psalm 6 speaks in terms of lament in verses 1 through 7, but then in verse 8, the tone completely changes. And in between, offstage as it were, there's been this response from God through the temple prophet or priest. Depart from me, all you workers of evil, for the Lord has heard the sound of my weeping.

The Lord has heard my supplication. The Lord accepts my prayer. And so, this is all part of that same situation of bringing a prayer in the temple.

And there's this wonderful phrase, you came near this presence of God, this positive presence of God. So often in lamentations before, we've had the intervention of God in a negative way, and the presence of God in a negative way, punishing, punishing, punishing, and rightly so. But here, you came near, and this presence of God is a positive presence that means rescue for him.

And so, verse 56, you took up my cause, you redeemed my life. And that brings us to the end of that first episode, but it's not the end of the story. But there's this thanksgiving for God intervening in that way, in that initial way.

And with the NIV, we need to have those past tenses rather than perfect tenses. There's another variation in the NIV. It says, not my cause, but my case.

This is quite valid because it's the law court language that's being used here. God is very often thought of as a judge, as a judge who takes sides according to the evidence and according to where justice lies, and a judge who comes to the help of those who are oppressed. And if we read on to just glance now to this next verse, you have seen the wrong done to me.

Moving on into the present, judge my cause, judge my cause, and its judgment in a positive way. Judge, come to my help in your judgment. Give a verdict in my favor. My cause the NIV also uses the word cause.

It's true it's another word from what was used in that previous verse, but it's still very much a law-court word. And I think the case would have been very good there. And so very often, it's very much a positive feature that you appeal to God as judge when you feel that right is on your side.

But there's something else in this verse 58, you have redeemed my life. And this is very much a special word. And it's a metaphorical word, we might say, or a theological use of a human way of speaking.

Because redeem was used as a sociological term, where the family was concerned. And we've got this set out in a passage in Leviticus, Leviticus chapter 25, that is talking about an extended family. And there in Leviticus 25, verse 25, if any of your kin falls into difficulty and sells a piece of property, then the next of kin shall come and redeem what the relative has sold.

And so, it's literally buying back. And this word redeem is used in a number of different ways in this sense that any sort of crisis that's befallen a member of the family, then the next of kin, somebody else who has the means or the power to intervene, can come in and get the situation altered. And so, redeeming is this sociological term that relates to a family member falling into difficulty and then somebody else in the family coming to their aid and saying, I can help you out.

We can deal with this situation so that the crisis is over. Of course, we have all this in narrative form in the beautiful story in the book of Ruth because we find that there's an appeal to the next of kin. The question comes from Boaz, who isn't so directly related to the family.

Will you redeem these two widows and help them out? And the next of kin isn't keen to do that for various reasons. And he says to Boaz, take my right of redemption yourself. I cannot redeem it.

And so, Boaz takes over that responsibility, and marries Ruth, and looks after Naomi to the end of her days. And so there we are, redemption, very much a human situation, very much a situation of human sociology. But the interesting fact here is that it's applied to God.

One might say that Uncle Yahweh steps in and redeems the situation, and this redeeming work is done. You redeemed my life. And while we're talking about redemption, we might mention that the metaphor is also used in another way theologically.

And that's to apply to the Exodus from Egypt. And way back in Exodus chapter 15, we find the word redeemed appearing. We have a long poem, the Song of Moses, in Exodus 15, and it says in verse 13, in your steadfast love, you let the people you redeemed, you guided them by your strength to your holy abode.

You let the people whom you redeemed. And so, redemption becomes a theological term that has the stamp of the Exodus about it, the Exodus from Egypt. But that's not the end of this particular story because it gets picked up in one of the prophets in 2nd Isaiah, talking about the exilic situation where the people of God had gone into Babylonian exile.

There again, this is picked up in a number of places, and I read now from chapter 40 of Isaiah, and it's, what's the verse? No, 41, I think, is the chapter, and it's verse 14. Do not fear; I will help you; your Redeemer is the Holy One of Israel. And what the prophet is doing, he said there's going to be a second Exodus.

Just as there was an Exodus from Egypt, there's going to be an Exodus from Babylon, and God acted in that powerful way, way back on behalf of his people, Israel; you can trust him to do it again in a second Exodus. And so, there's a whole host of theological thinking about this word redeem and redemption, and of course, it carries over into the New Testament as a word for salvation. But I think it's got those undertones of the Old Testament very much flowing through it.

It can use the word in that way because of the Old Testament background. And so there's this wonderful talk of redemption here. But 59, coming back to verse 59, it's now the new situation.

And in this story, we've reached the second episode. You've seen the wrong done to me, O Lord, judge my cause. You've seen all their malice, all their plots against me.

And it's the same enemies, but it's a new episode. And now it's rather different because earlier on it had been persecution in an outward way, in a physical way evidently. But now it's the question of words, hostile words, which you might say was something less, but the mentor didn't see it like that.

The wrong done to me it's defined in terms of malice. In 59, it's spoken in terms of, in verse 60, and then plots again in that verse, and then their taunts, their plots against me again in 61, whispers and murmurs against me, and taunt songs in verse 63. And so, it's not overt oppression now, this time.

It's not being hunted like a bird, hunted down and persecuted in that outward way, but it's more insidious. It's verbal abuse, plotting taunts, taunt songs, verbal abuse, either in front of the mentor or behind his back. And this can be so hurtful.

There's that silly saying that we sometimes say, sticks and stones may break my bones, but words can never hurt me. We know that's not true. That's no, and if we've had people speaking against us, we know how hurtful it can be.

And in this case, it was over and over again, never-ending, and you're getting this emphasis here. All their malice, all their plots against me in 60 and 61, and then all day long in 62, the whispers and murmurs of my assailants are against me, all the day long. And then whether they sit or rise, see I'm the object of their taunt songs.

And so over and over again, and he couldn't take it anymore. We had a reference earlier on to taunt songs, and I didn't actually comment there, I think. Back in verse 14 of chapter 3, I've become the laughingstock of all my people, the object of their taunt songs all day long.

So, there's an overlap between that first testimony and the second testimony. Taunt songs, it's mockery, saying as it were, poor old you, I'm so sorry for you, I don't think. And we do have examples in the Old Testament of taunt songs, and one is in the book of Micah, verse 4, that one way in which bad people are going to be punished are going to suffer.

On that day, they shall take up a taunt song against you, wail with bitter lamentation, and say we are utterly ruined. But it's all said with a snigger, and that wailing, it isn't honest. We are utterly ruined; you almost need to say it falsetto because it's a false identification with these people who are suffering, and really, those who sing this song are laughing up their sleeves at what's going on.

And so taunt songs were a very nasty way of getting at people you didn't like. And then, in verse 64, pay them back for their deeds, O Lord, according to the work of

their hands. It's so unfair; he pleads for justice to be done, and that's very much the implication here, that they need to be punished for the wrong that they're doing.

And so, we get these series of petitions in 64 through 66, pay them back for their deeds, O Lord, according to the work of their hands. Give them anguish of heart, your curse beyond them, pursue them in anger, and destroy them from under the Lord's heavens. And you might say, well, that's not very Christian, is it? But why doesn't he forgive? You know, isn't the Christian way to forgive? Well not surpassed, because I think of Paul writing the second letter to the Thessalonians, chapter 1 and verse 6, it is indeed just of God to repay with affliction those who afflict you, and to give relief to the afflicted, as well as to us, when the Lord Jesus is revealed from heaven with his mighty angels in flaming fire, inflicting vengeance on those who do not know God, and on those who do not obey the gospel of our Lord Jesus.

These will suffer the punishment of eternal destruction. Harsh words were very much spoken out of compassion for the persecuted Thessalonian Christians. And here, this is very much picking up an Old Testament truth, appealing for justice to be done and fair play to be worked out.

There's uncertainty in verse 65, give them anguish of heart. The word only occurs here in the Old Testament, and we don't really know what it means. It seems to mean a covering of some kind, but how does that fit in? The NIV has put a veil over their hearts but it seems to mean something like making them obstinate and defiant rather than regretful, and so not responding to God's overtures that he might bring them.

And so that seems to be the sort of meaning here. Verse 66, pursue them in anger and destroy them from under God's heaven. Well, anger in the book of Lamentations has two sides to it.

Here, it's on the victim's behalf. It's always anger against human sinning, but the sinners are the other people in this case, it's being claimed. But earlier, in this situation of grievance, but earlier in a guilt context, it's being directed against Zion as a sinner.

And also, in the first testimony at the beginning, God wroth, experienced by the mentor for his sinning. And so, we have this final testimony of grievance. And as I was saying just now, grievance is perhaps the easiest type of prayer that the congregation might be induced to bring to God.

The congregation would be most ready to engage in such a prayer. And so, it carried its own incentive. Here's a prayer that you can pray most easily.

And so, be prepared to pray this prayer. But grievance opens the door. A prayer of grievance opens the door for God to take one side.

And so, if a grievance is rightly judged to be present, then it's a strong, persuasive argument. Pray this prayer. Pray this prayer.

It's a strong argument for God's help. Help us, God. We need your help in this situation.

So, it's a suitable type of prayer to urge the congregation to adopt. Here, at least, they may well be ready to pray this type of prayer. This testimony, as we've seen, is very much about role modeling.

There are two testimonies about two scars that the wounded healer carried from his old wounds. And he used them to minister to the open wounds of the congregation. Of course, another feature of this testimony is the ending of that first episode, that positive ending, where God says, I'm going to help you.

I'm going to help you. And so, presumably, that outward persecution stopped. And this was how God did help.

But then, it came about in another way, this verbal abuse in the mentor's hearing and also behind his back. But we have this positive reference. You came near when I called on you.

You said, do not fear. And this is held out as a positive incentive to the congregation. My experience, oh, wouldn't it be lovely if it's your experience.

But you've got a call on God. You've got a call on God. And then it may well be that God will come near and that God will say to you, do not fear.

Do not fear. It's okay. There's no need to fear.

I'm going to handle your situation. And so, there's special importance to the ending of that first episode and a good reason why the prayer should take the form of two episodes. The second episode is open-ended, just as any prayer from the congregation would be.

But there was a sort of closure, a theological closure, at least, a spiritual closure, hearing that message from God mediated by the temple prophet or priest. You came near when I called on you. Do not fear.

And so, there is this encouragement to move on and to engage in the congregation, to engage in their own prayer. And it's going to happen. But we've got to wait until chapter five.

Next time, we are going to study the whole of chapter four and find time to study it. The more you study it, the more prepared you will be to hear what I say to assess it for yourselves and take it in.

This is Dr. Leslie Allen in his teaching on the book of Lamentations. This is session 10, Lamentations 3:52-66.