

Dr. Leslie Allen, Lamentations, Session 13, Lamentations 5:8-16

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This is Dr. Leslie Allen in his teaching on the book of Lamentations. This is session 13, Lamentations 5:8-16.

In our previous video, we made a start on Lamentations chapter 5, and we saw how it was the climax of the book, the climax of that liturgy of grief, and how, at last, the community responded in response to the urging of both the mentor and that role model, Zion.

The mentor first urged Zion to pray, and then Zion prayed not only for her own sake but also on behalf of the congregation. The mentor also engaged in praying twice in chapter 3. He told her previous prayers and gave an explicit directive to the community that it was to be their turn to pray. We've had to wait a long time, but at last, the response comes, and the congregation brings their own prayer.

They have learned much and they incorporate a lot of what their mentor and Zion has been saying. And we arrive at a turning point, not, sadly we might think, at a closure, but sometimes closure takes much longer. But here is a turning point, and though they are in as much pain as ever, objectively and subjectively they feel so much grief, and yet they can look forward.

And this looking forward is expressed by their feeling that they can indulge in a prayer to God himself, a prayer that things may change for the better. We were looking at verses 1 through 7 and saying it was the first section of this prayer, and we saw those cries for help in that first verse, and we saw a long section of expression of grief, and indeed grievance, over the loss of freedoms that they'd been used to in the past and took as normal, but now they were living in an occupied country. And it's this post-war situation that very much engrosses their mind through much of this prayer, rather than looking back in pain on what had happened before, in the invasion from the Babylonians, and the siege of Jerusalem for 18 long months, and then the capture of Jerusalem.

We decided that verses 1 to 7 were the first section because of that concluding verse with the mention of sin, and we said we were going to find a parallel in verse 16. But it's not the same, because in verse 7, it's looking back to the sin of the ancestors; in verse 16, it's going to be our own sins that are the focus of attention. We said that there is a sad tendency among some commentators to see a contrast and indeed a contradiction, that now one thing is said and now quite another thing is said, and we were trying to say that this is not so.

But the argument for contradiction we saw was based on Ezekiel 18:2, the resentment of those Babylonian exiles. Our forefathers sinned, and yet we're bearing their punishment instead. And superficially, it sounds a bit like it.

But no, that's not so. The line that's taken here, which looks both at preceding sin in former generations and present sin in the present generation, is very much in line with that epic history from Joshua through Kings, which traced a long history of sinning, which sadly led up to the end of the Northern Kingdom and then the end of the Southern Kingdom. But along with that, there is no suggestion that the final generation were saints and were quite different from their predecessors.

No, they were sinners just as much. We looked at a verse in the Psalms that combined these two ideas of the sins of the present generation and the sins of previous generations. And this is what we saw verses 6 and 7 say.

And what I want to do now is just to amplify what I was saying there with another verse from the Psalms. And it's in Psalm 106, and it's in verse 6. So, we'll just glance at that. And what does that say? Psalm 106 and verse 6. Both we and our ancestors have sinned.

We have committed iniquity. We have done wickedly. And so, there's past sin, and there's present sin combined into one verse.

Whereas here in Lamentations 7 and 16, it's spread over two verses. And so, I needed to make that clear before we go on. We move now to our second section within this prayer, verses 8 through 16.

It splits into general harassment that the people as a whole had suffered, particular harassment that different groups among the people had suffered, and an expression of general grief.

Finally, a confession where the present generation is concerned, which matches and parallels and is necessary after that intergenerational confession that we saw in verses 6 and 7. And very much, we have our three pathways, our three trajectories here of grievance, yes, and then grief, yes, and then finally, in verse 16, guilt. And all this, of course, continues to expound that disgrace in verse 1, that subjective feeling, this humiliation, this secondary suffering that comes and goes along with objective suffering. And the general intention is still to elicit God's compassion.

And it's all looking back to that appeal. Remember, verse 1, don't ignore. Look and see our disgrace.

These verses continue to have a persuasive role in defining that disgrace and appealing to God's compassion. And largely, we have harassment. Most of this

section is taken up with the harassment of grievance, the grievance that is linked with harassment.

And we saw overall last time that the genre is that of a funeral lament, but a strange funeral lament which is addressed to God after that direct prayer of verse 1. And so, in verse 8, we find this grievance. Slaves rule over us. There is no one to deliver us from their hand.

And this is an occupied country. And there were people, foreigners, foreign soldiers, and administrators, who were low on the chain of command but had the power to give orders that must be obeyed. And these minor officials, these are contemptuously called slaves.

And there's no opportunity to lodge official complaints because they are the officials. And a complaint would get them nowhere. Culturally, this is a reversal of the proper social order, which we find laid out in the Old Testament in a number of passages.

For instance, in Proverbs chapter 30 and verses 21 to 23, Under three things, the earth trembles, and under four, it cannot bear up. A slave when he becomes king, a fool when glutted with food, an unloved woman when she gets a husband, and a maid when she succeeds her mistress.

In two of those cases, we have a sort of parallel to the situation here: a slave when he becomes king and a maid when she succeeds her mistress. And there's trouble on the horizon whenever that happens, complains Proverbs chapter 30.

And then we have it too in a prophetic text in Isaiah chapter 3 and verse 4. There's a threat of punishment and part of that threat in Isaiah 3-4, I will make boys their princes and babes shall rule over them. Oh my, what a bad sort of rule that's going to turn out to be. But there it is this overthrow of the normal social order and social distinctions no longer in force.

We find it in Ecclesiastes chapter 10 and verse 16, too. Ecclesiastes 10-16. Alas for you, O land, when your king is a servant.

When your king is a servant, or it may be a child, the same Hebrew word, it can go either way. Alas for you, O land, when your king is a servant or a child. And in Israelite culture, there was very much a class distinction.

And very much a feeling as to what was proper and what was improper. And so here it was an improper situation from which the people were suffering. Slaves rule over us; there's no one to deliver us from their hands.

And then verse 9, another problem that the community as a whole is facing. This section has us and our, and we run through it. And so, we get our bread at the peril of our lives because of the sword in the wilderness.

What's the sword? The sword in the wilderness. I think a good clue is to see how that noun is used in the book of Jeremiah. Over and over again, that book refers to the sword.

And it's looking ahead to the punishment that God is going to bring out about through the Babylonians. And so, it seems to be a Babylonian sword in view. But this sword is in the wilderness, and we get our bread at the peril of our lives as a result.

The situation seemed to be that families who lived in the towns would have their fields open outside the towns, and their crops would be in their fields. But the problem was that they were liable to be attacked by a detachment of foreign troops marching to new assignments.

And they could fall on them and harm them as well as take the crops. And so there was this particular problem there that it was risky to go out and try and harvest your fields outside the towns because of the sword in the wilderness.

And then verses 9 and 10 seem to go together because verse 10 seems to be a consequence of what's happened, that risk. They don't want to risk it, so they don't do it. Who's going to go out in the fields and get those crops in if you're liable not to come back but to be killed or perhaps wounded? And so, it follows in verse 10.

And here is a bit of an uncertain translation we've got to look at. Our skin is black as an oven from the scorching heat of famine. And it's this question of being black and this question of scorching heat.

Because if we look at the New International Version, our skin is hot as an oven, feverish from hunger. And that does hang together very nicely. A basic problem with that verb translated to be black is that Hebrew has homonyms, as most languages do.

Most developed languages, which pick up elements from other languages and earlier ways of speaking, have homonyms. So we can speak of the bark of a dog, and we know that's quite different from the bark of a tree.

But there we are, they're homonyms but they're quite separate words and they mean different things. And this particular verb, yes, it could mean be black. And yes, that would fit an oven from burning and black deposits.

Yes, that would fit all right. But over against that, there's another verb that means to be hot. And that is generally preferred.

And so, the more recent NIV, more recent than the R9-RSV, takes advantage of a recent study, in fact, in going for heat. And so, our skin is hot as an oven. And what is this heat? Well, it's physically based.

It's from fever, feverish from hunger. And this scorching heat seems to be a reference to fever here. So, how do these verses hang together? Well, farmers and their helping families were not going out into the fields because of the danger, military danger.

And so, they were staying in the towns instead. But there was a scarcity of food and there was famine and there was malnutrition. And so, sickness and disease came in, and they ended up with a fever from this malnutrition.

And so there we are. That seems to be the way that we need to go in this particular verse. And we see it as a consequence of verse 9. Well, now, thus far, in sections 8 to 10, it's very much talk of general harassment because this little section is marked by us and our and us in verse 8, verse 9, and verse 10.

But now there's a difference. We have moved to a different subsection now, particularly regarding harassment, where certain groups were concerned. And we leave behind the generality that we had before of we, us, and our, and we turn again to think of specific groups who were suffering in this post-exilic situation of occupation, particular abuses that were caused by the occupying forces and imposed on the Judeans who'd been left behind and not exiled over to Babylon.

And in verse 11, it's sexual offenses that were committed not only in Jerusalem but in the other towns of Judah as well. Women are raped in Zion and virgins in the towns of Judah. Sadly, this is often the fate of women as an aftermath of an area being captured and occupied by foreign troops.

The NIV, a little bit more general but with the same implication, women have been violated in Zion, in virgins in the towns of Judah. Well, let me remind you that this is harking back to what the mentor was talking about and what particularly upset him, you remember, at the end of that little soliloquy in chapter 3. What I see brings grief to my soul because of all the women in my city. But now, in this corporate prayer, what he means is made plain.

The NRSV is very explicit with its verb raped. And the Hebrew verb means it, but it doesn't explicitly say so. And so, we're on slightly better ground when the NIV says violated.

But it's sexual abuse, sexual assault, that's meant here. And the NRSV is not wrong, but perhaps a little too direct. And so there we are.

There's this terrible experience. And once again, men who might protect their women, expected to protect their women, they could do so no longer. And they were just helpless.

And so, in a male-dominated society, this was even more troublesome than in an egalitarian society, one might say. And then, in verse 12, princes are hung up by their hands. No respect is shown to the elders.

And here we are. Former Judean leaders are strung up to humiliate them. This isn't a reference to hanging or to execution, but they're strung up, and their hands are tied to some structure, to a pole or a tree or something.

And there they are. There's an example. Your high and mighty rulers, look at them, look at them.

But it's very much a humiliation that they're strung up in this way. And it's done so in a gesture of mockery. More generally, no respect is shown to the elders.

The city and towns generally were governed by a council of elders. And everybody would look up to them, not only because of respect for the old, which was very much part of the social structure in Israel, but because they were the leaders, and one looked up to them for their wisdom, their experience, and their wise government of what went on in the towns of affairs. And so, here again, there's this denial, this cutting across of the social conventions, and everything is turned upside down in this situation.

And then, in verse 13, another of these social complaints. Young men were forced to do women's work or even slaves' work, where food was concerned in the first case. Young men are compelled to grind.

And young men did not grind. Young men did a number of good things, but they did not grind. Grinding refers to the daily task generally of housewives who would take their barley or wheat grains and grind them between stones, wheel-like stones, every morning to turn those grains into flour in order to make bread for that day.

Our daily bread, as the Lord's Prayer mentions, everyday bread was made because it soon got too hard to eat, and bacteria could attack it. So daily bread was made and it was the housewives who had that role. And we can look at a New Testament text, in fact, and find that brought out.

Luke 17 and verse 35, it talks about a division that's to be made. There will be two women grinding meal together. One will be taken and the other left.

Two women grinding meal together. We also find it in a number of texts in the Old Testament. In 47, we find an oracle of judgment against Babylon.

And Babylon is personified as a queen, a queen over the empire. But the command is given by God: take the millstones and grind meal. Take the millstones and grind the meal.

And this is very much a comedown, very much a degradation for somebody of a queenly rank. And then, too, we can, yes, I think those are sufficient verses for us to look at. But it could also be done by slaves.

If the household were large enough, then there would be slaves in the household, and they would have that job if the wife and husband were of high rank in a large house. And so, we find, for instance, in Exodus 11 and verse 5, when Moses passes on that verdict against Pharaoh and against Egypt. Every firstborn in the land of Egypt shall die, from the firstborn of Pharaoh who sits on his throne to the firstborn of the female slave who is behind the hand mill.

And there we are, sometimes there would be slaves. But it was not a thing that men would do. And young men would very much turn up their noses at the thought that they should be grinding these grains into flour to make bread.

And so, it's regarded as very humiliating. And so social conventions are very important in every culture. And then boys stagger under loads of wood.

We had mentioned wood back in verse 4. The wood we get must be bought. And you needed wood to light fires so that food could be cooked. And so there were these loads of wood and boys who weren't really strong enough to bear these great loads.

They were forced to carry this heavy weight beyond their physical capacity. And so, this, again, is a matter of complaint. And so, in all sorts of ways, there was this grievance against this foreign power that was causing them so much grief and grievance.

Then 14. The old men have left the city gate, the young men, their music.

Variation in the NIV. The elders are gone from the city gate. The young men have stopped their music.

First, we have to realize that inside the city gate, as I think I've mentioned before, there would be a plaza. It would be a public square where people could gather. On market days, the farmers would bring in their produce.

And just inside the city gate, there would be the marketplace. And so that's the overall situation. But we've got to look a little bit more closely at that gate because it was actually a gatehouse with walls on either side.

A gatehouse with actually a room with gates at either end and seats provided in this gatehouse. So that's the situation. But who was sitting in this gatehouse? In the NRSV, it's old men.

The advantage of that is that it's the direct opposite of young men. And so, it seems to fit quite well. But over against that, I think there's a preference to be given to the new international version.

The elders are gone from the city gate because the city gate was especially where the council of elders would meet and they would sit day by day discussing affairs of the town or city. And people could come and talk to them and talk about complaints that they might have that needed to be put right. And so, it was the council chamber.

This gatehouse was the council chamber. And we have an illustration of that in Ruth, the book of Ruth, where Boaz, we find, goes to try and get sorted out this question of redemption for Ruth and her mother-in-law. And he goes to the city gate.

And he sat there near to the next of kin, this kinsman. And that seems to be a place where the elders would meet. And he finds him there.

All right. And so, elders, this seems to be the right translation here. Because they weren't officiating anymore.

They weren't the officials. They'd lost their jobs. They were the sort of ones who were being strung up, these town and city leaders.

And they'd lost their civil power. And great disrespect, again, is shown to these people. But against that, the young men have left their music.

In this public square, the opportunity for young men to come together and make music for entertainment, entertaining themselves and entertaining members of the public who were there in that square adjacent to the city gate. And they weren't making music anymore. Well, what were these young men doing? Well, we've just been told.

They were grinding. They were given work to do. And life was all work and no play.

And they were hard at work, as in verse 13. And they got no time off, no time off. So, after hours, after your working day, the young men would come and gather and play music.

You can imagine it very easily. But now that has stopped because there was no time for this. There was work to be done, said the occupying authorities.

And so, this normal practice had ceased. And then in verse 15, we come to a generalization again. And you get the mention of general grief.

And 15 and the first line of verse 16 go together. The joy of our hearts has ceased. Our dancing has been turned to mourning.

The crown has fallen from our head. And that expression of entertainment and the joyful young men meeting and making music is now generalized, saying, well, nobody's happy anymore in our present situation. And there's this generalization of grief at this point.

There's been grievance up to now in this section, but now there is positive grief. The joy of our hearts has ceased. Our dancing has been turned to mourning.

The crown has fallen from our head. And so, this grief expression is a reversal taking place. In a sense, all those grievances were reversals, but very much with the thought of grievance.

But now, more particularly, it's grief that's in mind. And we might compare a psalm, a psalm of thanksgiving, Psalm 30, where the psalmist has been talking. He had a crisis, but he brought the crisis to God.

And the crisis has been dealt with, and he comes back with a song of thanksgiving. And he's ready to bring his thank offering and worship God and praise him for what God has done. And this is summarized in verse 11 of chapter 30 in this way.

You've turned my mourning into dancing. You've taken off my sackcloth and clothed me with joy. This is a further case where the Psalms, not just funeral laments, but the psalms can speak of mourning behavior and mourning customs in connection with their particular crisis.

You've turned my mourning into dancing, taken off my sackcloth, and clothed me with joy. And he's thankful to God, and he says, it's you, God, who delivered me from this crisis, and I'm so thankful. But we've got the reverse here.

The joy of our hearts has ceased. Our dancing has been turned to mourning. And then the crown has fallen from our head.

Well, a few commentators say, oh, the crown? Well, that sounds royal, and we've had royal references before. Part of the loss has been that tradition of a Davidic monarchy, and now it's gone. And so that would fit.

But, of course, we've got to look at the immediate context. And the crown is used in a different way here. The word is wider than a royal crown.

And sometimes it can refer to a garland of flowers and leaves as a mark of festivity. And there's an example of this in the book of Isaiah, Isaiah 28, where the prophet is speaking against the leaders in the northern kingdom. And he's saying there's been misrule.

And part of this misrule is that they spend their time at riotous parties and get drunk. And they wear these garlands. And the point that Isaiah makes is that those garlands are going to fall off as a sign that their partying is going to be over.

Ah, the proud garland of the drunkards of Ephraim and the fading flower of its glorious beauty, which is on the head of those bloated with rich food, of those overcome with wine. See, the Lord has one who is mighty and strong. And so, verses 3 and 4, trampled underfoot, will be the proud garland of the drunkards of Ephraim and the fading flower of its glorious beauty.

And so, there it is. This seems to be the reference here. And so, that garland which went along with festivity, went along with partying and rejoicing in an innocent sense, and in a good sense, it's fallen from our head.

The garland has fallen off. This is a striking way of illustrating how the joy of our hearts has ceased, and our dancing has turned to mourning. But then, in that last line, in that last half line in verse 16, there's a turn from grievance and from grief to guilt.

We come back to this punchline from verse 7, but now expressed in a different way: Woe to us who have sinned. And this guilt that comes out is very reminiscent of what the mentor had been saying: They must acknowledge their guilt before God.

They do so at these climactic points, verse 7 and verse 16. And what's being said here is, this is the root cause of all this suffering. Our problem is not simply foreign occupation.

It's not merely a human problem, but we must look behind it and see this as Yahweh's punishment for Judas' sinning. There's divine providence here, and we know the cause for it. And the cause is in us, in our own lives.

And so, this is so striking, this concluding reference to guilt here—woe to us. Yeah, we're suffering, but the root cause of that suffering is our own fault.

We have sinned, and so the responsibility lies with us. So, there's that frank admission at the end of all these notes of grievance and grief. We've come to the foundation of it all, and it's a divine foundation, and it's the question of their relationship to God.

And so, the message here is that the congregation has realized what the mentor has been telling them. An adequate response to the post-war situation as an adequate response to the siege situation is not just grievance and grief but also guilt. And there's this penitential element of confession here that the congregation are taking responsibility at this point.

And this must have been wonderful for the mentor to hear because we're coming back to the matter of interpretation of this catastrophe, this whole disaster. It runs all through the book, and the mentor had so interpreted back in 1:5 and 1:8, and then Zion had taken up this cry, this accusation which is known to be true in 1:18 and 1:20. Zion had come back to it again in 2:14, and then we have the mentor's call to repentance in chapter 3 and verses 40 through 42. And so, as we look there through the book, we see that this is indeed a climax.

In chapter 4 as well, we have these notes of sinister interpretation throughout the chapter. Verse 6 states that the chastisement of my people, says the mentor, has been greater than the punishment of Sodom. Underlying this is that Yahweh is responsible in both cases.

And we have verse 13 of chapter 4: it was for the sins of her prophets and the iniquities of the priests that all this fell upon the community. And lastly, there's a reference to punishment in verse 22 in an expression of hope for the future, punishment over, punishment over. But in order for that to happen, the congregation who've been listening knows full well they've got to do their part, and they have to acknowledge the sin that underlies that punishment.

And they do so in that intergenerational way in verses 6 and 7, and now directly where we are concerned, this outright confession, woe to us, for we have sinned. Next time, we will look at the closing verses, verses 17 through 22 of Lamentations 5.

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