

THE LAMENT OF LAMENTATIONS

(Walter Kaiser in *The Psalms: Language for all Seasons of the Soul*)

It is difficult to overestimate the severity and the widespread depth of suffering that overwhelmed the people of Jerusalem as a result of the Babylonian capture of [Jerusalem]. Surely it was the worst event that could overtake any nation, house of worship, government, or generation. It is described in Lam. 2:20-22 as one of the loneliest moments of suffering on planet earth.

Suffering does not go away merely if we pretend it does not exist; it does exist and it does continue to hurt and cause suffering. Nor is there any sort of magic pill that can suddenly remove the heavy weight that suffering lowers on mortals' spirits and shoulders. But the most comforting news is that where there is pain, grief, and hurt, there is God! The assurance of his presence is the best news surrounding all the pain. For not only is pain our portion, but there is the potential that "the Lord is my portion" (Lam. 3:24) even in the midst of all the pain as well.

THE LITERARY FORM OF LAMENTATIONS

The literary style of Lamentations is unusual in that the first four of its five chapters are composed in an alphabetic acrostic. Each of the twenty-two letters of the Hebrew alphabet are represented in their usual order, one letter for every stanza for the poem in chapter 1. However, the letters corresponding approximately to the position of the letters "o" and "p" in the order of our English alphabet are transposed in chapters 2 and 4

In chapters 1 and 2, each three line stanza begins with the next letter of the alphabet, but a crescendo (i.e., a greater intensity rather than just loudness) is signaled in chapter 3 where each of the three lines begins with the same letter of the alphabet and each is given separate verse numbers. At the peak of this third chapter the grand confession of the community is this: "Great is [the Lord's] faithfulness, the LORD is my portion" (3:23-24) —as the darkness gives way to the light of the Lord's presence.

All too often some of the most common ways to deal with one's suffering, or that of another, are to make light of it, gloss over it, or attempt to advise ourselves and others not to think or talk of its pain and hurt at all. But none of those suggestions actually ends up being at all that helpful, especially if we are the person who is doing the suffering. But some will contend, "Yes, but that is why the alphabet was used, so that every aspect of the suffering could be remembered." However, one's memory at the time of suffering is all too vivid in recalling the pain and its source, and all a person ends up doing is to recite the vividness of the suffering or pain over and over again. Therefore, instead of not talking about it, as some counsel, Lamentations as a biblical form of communal lament encourages that every detail should be systematically (if not alphabetically) reviewed. Repeat the story-five times over if necessary. After all, evil is not inexhaustible; it is finite and it does have an end ("z")—just as the alphabet has not only a beginning, but also a sure end as well.

In this way boundaries can be set to all tragedy, loss, hurt, discomfort, and disease. Mortals are not left numb and mute in the face of horrendous evil and jumbled confusion, for the final letter of the alphabet, much as the diminishing of the strong sense of the pain, will come over the long stretch of days. Misery of this sort was never meant to be endless; it too had to have an end just as the alphabet had a final letter!

LITERARY FEATURES OF LAMENTATIONS

Several rhetorical features in the book of Lamentations call for special attention. First, there is personification. Not only is the city of Jerusalem personified, but so are its gates, walls, and roads. By making these physical features alive and giving them as it were a voice, it is



possible to portray the pain and grief of the Babylonian destruction of the city of Jerusalem and the nation of Judah all that more vividly.

Another rhetorical feature is that of voice. Two such dominant voices can be identified, similar to the voices that appear in the prophet Jeremiah's book: the voice of Jeremiah and a female voice to depict Jerusalem's pain. There is emotional and psychological progress in Lamentations also to be observed, such as appears in chapter 1. There the poem moves from a more distant third-person report in verses 1-11 to the more personal first-person speech in verses 12-22.

The third rhetorical device is of course the acrostic. Rather than this being an aid to memorization, as we have already observed, but discounted, it emphasizes the completeness and that there is an end coming to the intensity of this suffering.

The final rhetorical device we will mention is the structure of this book. The alphabetic acrostic demonstrates that each poem has a wholeness and an integrity to itself. In fact, D. J. Reimer has used modern "grief theory" to delineate the structure of the book of Lamentations. Reimer correctly observes that this book moves through stages of grief: in chapter 1 there is the stage of isolation; in chapter 2, there is anger; in chapter 3 there is bargaining; in 4 there is depression and in 5 there is acceptance—all parts in the grief process. While Reimer is careful to point out that these themes are only the dominant themes, there are subthemes in these chapters as well, especially the final chapter, which Reimer sees as continuing both confident hope and embittered lament.

THEOLOGICAL SIGNIFICANCE OF LAMENT

The reason for suffering that is the focus of these laments can be attributed to three main causes: self, an enemy, or the Lord himself. Therefore, lament is needed first of all to give voice to the suffering. In the lament, pain, grief, and suffering are given the dignity of language.

Placing the lament into a prayer of petition makes a call to Yahweh for help a dominant theme of this genre.

Finally, the most important theme is the grace theme found in Lam. 3:21-33. This has a close attachment to the "name theology" found in Ex. 34:6-7. Note how rehearsal of this same theology appears in Lam. 3:33-39, linked with a theology of divine discipline usually found in wisdom theology or Deuteronomy. However, God does not afflict with delight (Lam. 3:33), nor does he approve of injustice (Lam. 3:34-36).

The purpose of the laments in the Psalms seems to match the purposes found in Lamentations. God allows the lamenter to state his or her feelings as each would wish. This would mean, then, that these laments are true not in the sense that they always reflect accurate teaching, but rather in the sense that they accurately depict the plight and feelings of the one who has turned to God for relief.

SUMMARY AND APPLICATION

Lamentations, similar to the Lament Psalms, will yield few, if any, abstract or philosophical answers to the problem of suffering. However, the book of Lamentations and the Lament Psalms will often lead us into some very serious practical, theological, and spiritual reflections on the purposes and uses God makes of suffering in our lives. Instead of explaining pain and grief, these portions of Scripture help us face grief. In brief, they are sorts of pastoral tracts that avoid the all-too-often less welcome substitutes of "cheery bromides" and help us instead to articulate our suffering and to find companionship with those who have gone before us as examples of persons who can support us in our distress.

Above all, the sufferer is given the possibility of meeting with God in a special sort of encounter. Often, it has been God himself whom we have been avoiding leaving us to the loneliness and silence of our pain, while the Shepherd of our souls waits patiently for us to turn back to him for his comfort and restoration. The fact is that God still cares for us, and while we may be in the midst of the strongest storm of suffering, the full range of his love remains constantly available to all in pain and grief.