

lament (lə'ment) *noun*

1. passionate expression of grief or sorrow
2. a song, piece of music, or poem expressing sorrow

The season commonly known as *lent* (an Anglo-Saxon word meaning “spring”) is the forty days before Resurrection Sunday. In the Greek church, it is called *tessarakoste* or “forty days.” During this time, we reflect on our state without Christ and his resurrection. Our sinfulness and the brokenness of creation is in full view.

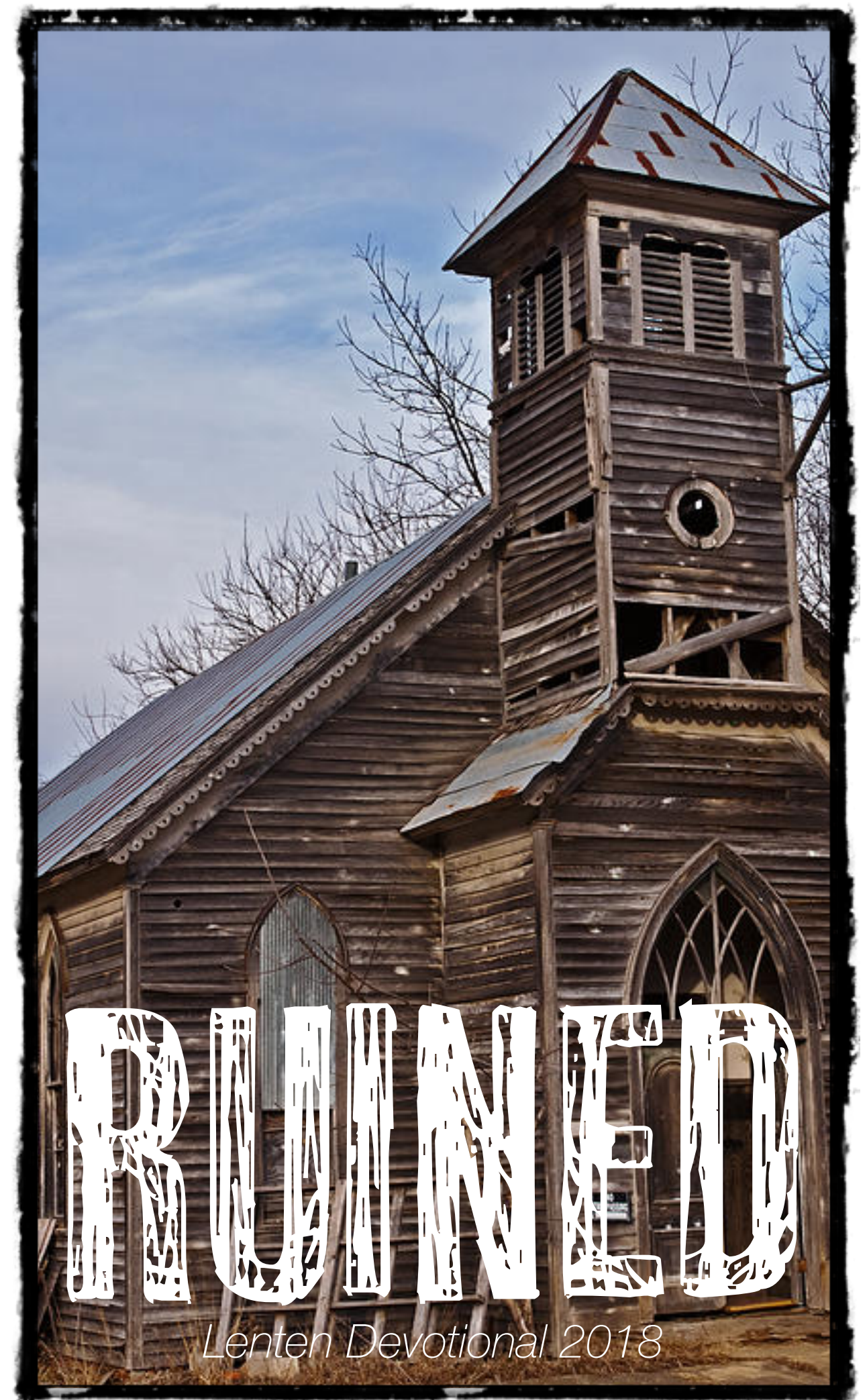
This year’s Lenten devotional considers the Book of Lamentations - a collection of five poems, written sometime after the fall of Jerusalem in 586 BCE. These poems are traditionally ascribed to the Prophet Jeremiah because they always appear with his book in Hebrew texts.

Lament is more than just weeping or crying. It is grief organized and creatively expressed with the purpose of being honest with yourself, others, and God. It is an important part of our worship, as we live in a world which is all too often worth grieving for.

You are encouraged to engage each daily study, as they build on each other. You can do this either alone or with others - there is really no right or wrong way to do this. What is important is that we are on the journey together. This booklet is divided up into three uneven sections:

- Three sessions on this historical context of Lamentations, drawn from readings in the Book of Jeremiah
- Twenty-five sessions from the Book of Lamentations itself.
- Four considerations from the traditionally read texts of Holy Week, reflecting on the days before Christ’s crucifixion.

There is no study on Friday, March 30, or “Good Friday.” On that evening, the congregation will gather for Scripture reading and worship commemorating the death and burial of Christ in preparation for the celebration of the resurrection. (It is important to note that Christ *most likely* was not crucified on a Friday; but the observance has been held on Friday for a very long time, so we honor that calendar.



Thursday, March 29

Tenebrae (Psalm 51)

A Little History

In liturgical traditions, today is the beginning of a three-day observance known as *tenebrae* - Latin for “shadows.” The liturgical observance originally took place right after midnight on the Thursday, Friday and Saturday before Resurrection Sunday. (During the Middle Ages, the observance shifted to the afternoon of the preceding day.)

One of the features of *tenebrae* during the early modern period was the singing of the Lamentations of Jeremiah. This grew out of the tradition that each evening observance (called a *nocturne*) began with a lesson from the Lamentations. Thus, our observance of devotional readings of Lamentations was in keeping with the ancient traditions of the church.

Consider the Text

The final reading of all three *nocturnes* is always from Psalm 51 - David's great cry for mercy after his sin with Bathsheba, the darkest period of his life. It is fitting that this is also the call of the Church to Christ during this, the darkest season of our calendar.

David begins “Have mercy on me, O God, according to your steadfast love [HESED].” (v 1) The psalm begins in the darkness of iniquity but ends in the celebration of restoration. It therefore foreshadows our journey into repentance and the hope of God's renewal and resurrection.

As we have noted so many times over the past four weeks, shadow and darkness are a necessary part of life. Lamentation, mourning, weeping - these are all processes we go through to remind ourselves that every shadow exists only because the light exists, every night ends and day breaks, winter eventually gives way to spring. Death, as permanent as it feels, is only temporary and will be swallowed up in eternal life.

Wednesday, February 14

Jeremiah the “Traitor” (Jeremiah 39)

Jerusalem had an air of invincibility in the Early Iron Age. For 400 years it was the citadel capital of Judah under the House of David. The Assyrians had failed to take it in the 8th century BCE; and it was widely held that no one could conquer it. It is perhaps not surprising then that when Jeremiah began prophesying the city's fall, he was considered a traitor by the ruling elite.

Jeremiah's works were censured and destroyed (Jer 36:20-27). He was attacked by the people and the royal court. Shortly before the capture of the city, he was thrown into a cistern and left there to rot. When Ebed-Melech finally pulled him out, he had to build a sling to support Jeremiah's rotting body (Jer 38:1-14). Through all of this, Jeremiah persisted in his message, even though it tore him up inside (Jer 20:9). Eventually, the king accepted Jeremiah's message, but he also silenced Jeremiah under threat of death (Jer 38:24-28). Over the next three chapters (Jer 39-41), Jeremiah speaks only once, reciting God's words of mercy to Ebed-Melech for his help (Jer 39:15-18).

Then, after a two year siege, Jerusalem fell to the Babylonian armies under Nebuchadnezzar (Jer 39:1-2). Even as the king was taken captive and his family slaughtered or exiled, Jeremiah had to stand by and watch his prophecies coming true. What must it have been like to stand by silently as Jerusalem fell? It must have been something of a relief to be vindicated; but it must have been heartbreaking as well. Being “right” is not always a satisfying position to be in. This was true for Jeremiah.

The Lamentations emerge from this experience. They are not just random grief, but creatively organized sorrow. One could argue they are Jeremiah's finest compositions, exceeding the songs that fill the book that bears his name.

Thursday, February 15

Jeremiah's Choice (Jeremiah 40:1-12)

When the Babylonians did take Jerusalem (586 BCE), one of their first priorities was to seek out and protect Jeremiah (Jer 39:11-15). They were quite literally concerned that he would be killed by the people. After a time in protective custody, he was given the freedom to choose between going into exile or remaining in Jerusalem with that was left of Judah.

Jeremiah chose to stay behind, to attempt to rebuild something of a life in the ruins of what had once been a great kingdom. All that was left was the common people. The upper classes who had rejected his message were taken into exile. Eventually, God would give them their own prophets. (Ezekiel and Daniel are both part of the people who go into exile.) Jeremiah's place was in Jerusalem, the city whose destruction he had foretold.

For good or for ill, Jeremiah was a part of Jerusalem; and Jerusalem was a part of him. Part of Jeremiah died when the city fell; but his grief was not over. Jerusalem was not done descending into sin and debasing herself.

The Babylonians appointed Gedaliah b. Ahikam to put things in Judah in order (Jer 40:1-12). But as the people began to organize life under the "new normal" of Babylonian rule, there was trouble in the ranks. One of the nobles, Ishmael b. Nethaniah, organized an assassination of Gedaliah and seized control of Jerusalem by force. One of Gedaliah's associates, Johanan b. Kareah responded quickly and seized power back (Jer 41); but Johanan was really no better - unwilling to listen to reason of the message of God.

The city of God was reduced to a battleground of opposing factions, vying for power over the rubble. That was perhaps the greatest lament over Jerusalem's destruction. Even in defeat, the ruling class was oblivious to the significance of God's judgment. They continued to fight, rather than unite and restore.

Wednesday, March 28

Betrayed (John 13:21-35;18:1-12)

Consider the Text

Jesus follows Judas Iscariot's departure with the statement, "Now is the Son of Man glorified." (Jn 13:31) This is an odd statement indeed, considering that he has just outed one of his closest friends as a traitor. Theologians have endlessly debated whether Judas's betrayal was through God's agency and whether we should condemn him. Judas knew what he was doing. He had planned it long before. He acted of his own will.

And yet, Jesus is glorified. The greatest darkness has no power over the eternal light, because it only exists when light is withdrawn. Light is the present power of God to expel chaos (Gen 1:3-5).

What Can We Do?

When you consider that even the mortal betrayal of a friend brings glory to God, is there anything in your life or the lives of others that cannot be brought into his glory? God's sovereignty is not confined to only the things that make us comfortable or ease our path. Those things that push us to the point of breaking, that crush our very souls also glorify Him.

This is why we cannot be content to have lament-less worship, why we cannot *not* confront the hard realities of life. To see God in all his glory, we must be willing to worship in all the stages of our journey with Him.

Let's Pray Together

It is hard to be thankful about the darkness, about those things I wish I did not have to think about. God, I need clarity so I can see your glory, because sometimes all I see is the heartbreak or the shadows.

Tuesday, March 27

The Death of the Seed (John 12:20-36)

Consider the Text

For Jesus, life is born out of death. Death is a beginning, not an ending. Therefore, the road to the cross is the road to something greater than what comes before. Lose your life to find it. Die to live. Be alone to find true community. The paradoxes abound in the crucifixion.

This did not, however, mean that Jesus's soul was not troubled by the prospect (v 27). What was Jesus concerned about? Not the completion of the path, only the steps to the cross. His prayer is not a request to escape death but rather an iteration of the reality of his purpose in this journey. This is what it was all about, from the beginning. Jesus makes it clear that it is for everyone else to see this divine agenda being played out. When the voice of heaven itself confirms Jesus's words, he says, "This voice was for you, not me." (v 30)

What Can We Do?

Of course we struggle with confidence in God's purpose in our lives, especially when something difficult looms ahead of us. But if we are fulfilling our God-given purpose, then what is there to fear? As a parent, why fear the divinely appointed role you have been placed in. Embrace the difficulty as glorifying the Father. As a Christian in a world without Christ, this is what you are here for. This is your role - salt and light.

Let's Pray Together

Lord, I am always struggling to make sense of the path, especially when things look bleak. Open my eyes to see all of what you are doing - to know what your purposes are for me and to keep moving.

Friday, February 16

Still Unwilling to Listen (Jeremiah 42-43)

Afraid of reprisals by Ishmael b. Nethaniah, Johanan b. Kareah decided to organize a mass exodus to Egypt. Despite Jeremiah's prophecies to the contrary, Johanan and Azariah b. Hoshaiah packed up and left. They forced Jeremiah and the remaining members of the royal family to go to Egypt with them. "They did not obey the voice of the LORD." (Jer 43:7)

This community of Jews settled in Tahpenhes, a city in northeastern Egypt, but they eventually migrated further south to Elephantine, where they built a temple that rivaled the Second Temple in Jerusalem. (This temple was also destroyed by the Romans in the late first century CE.) They evolved a very different form of Judaism, very tolerant of the polytheistic practices of their neighbors. Five hundred years later, Herod the Great brought Boethus, a priest from this area, to return to Jerusalem and establish a new line of high priests - what we today call the Sadducees.

From Jeremiah's prophecies to the actual destruction of Jerusalem to the civil wars between Gedaliah, Ishmael and Johanan to the establishment of a "new" Jewish community in Egypt - the story of the end of the kingdom of Judah is one of unwillingness to listen to God. Jeremiah is the most ignored and opposed of all the prophets. No one wanted to listen to him; and only the pagans afforded him any kind of respect.

This is the true sin of Jerusalem and Judah. Idolatry was a symptom. Corruption was a result. The real issue was a refusal to even entertain the notion that God might disagree with their opinions. This is the greatest cause for lament in the Lamentations. It is present in every line, every consequence, and ultimately in ever repentance.

Next week, we will work through the Lamentations; but hopefully these three days of meditations on the end of Jeremiah will set the stage and context so you can appreciate the words more fully.

Monday, February 19

The Works of Giants (1:1-2)

Consider the Text

Loneliness and isolation are Jeremiah's first reflections. Consider how accurately he depicts the sentiment of abandonment and loss. The first word in the Hebrew text is *'echah*, translated as the interjection "How?" It is a word of observable shock – "How could this happen?"

A city without people is just empty space. A city's purpose is to have people in it. After the Romans withdrew from Britain, the Anglo-Saxons wandered through the empty cities and wrote about the *enta geweorc* – "the works of giants." It was obvious something beautiful and great was now empty.

What Can We Do?

How do lives fall apart? As we look over the ruins of what once was, it is common to try to figure out when did this happen? But can we know? And even if we do know, can we somehow reverse the process?

As believers, our first calling is to Christ. The ruins of our lives are restored through His continual presence. *A ruin cannot restore itself* (Rom 3:10, Titus 3:5). Only God can do the work of restoration (Phil 3:12-13). So, you cannot dwell on your failings and ruins. They are not yours to correct. We place them in the hands of our Savior, and he restores and heals. If we dwell on the beauty of what once was, we will fail to see the new creation that rises from the ruins.

Let's Pray Together

God, I place the ruins of my life in your hands. Like the city of Jerusalem, I have made a mess of it. Only you can heal what is broken. Only you can change what needs to be changed. So, here it is. Do what only you can do.

Monday, March 26

The Anointed Feet (John 12:1-11)

Consider the Text

Jesus was anointed for his death, an act of mourning carried out by Mary the sister of Lazarus, according to John's gospel. Mary, who had anointed her own brother's body for burial now anoints Jesus's feet. Not his body, his feet. She had learned at his feet (Lk 10:39). Now, she weeps there.

Jesus would tread upon death. In this moment, Judas Iscariot obsessed about the cost and the "good" the money spent could have done. Jesus however points out that poverty is a symptom - something that exists because of the death and sin which he would overcome in his death.

Mary's lamentation and mourning is "in the moment." She is aware of the coming event. She knows it is *necessary* for the resurrection, which Jesus had explained to her already and her sister Martha (Jn 11). That does not lessen the reality of the process.

Jesus would still suffer in death. He would still be buried. Mary would still have to grieve, still have to weep. She would still have to walk through the valley of the shadow of death. She could not skip the lamentation for the world of sin and go right to the celebration of the resurrection.

Something to Think About

This is a truth of God's economy. The world must pass through night and winter before day breaks or spring brings new life. We must pass through shadow. When we try to shortcut things and not deal with lament fully and completely, we deprive ourselves of aspects of the glory to come.

Friday, March 23

You are Forever (5:19-22)

Consider the Text

It is because of God's *eternal* nature that he can forgive us in the finite, temporal world. The questions the singers ask are rhetorical. Although it might feel like God has forgotten, he can never forget. It might feel like we are utterly rejected, but it cannot be. He is eternal, so his covenants are eternal; and that means his grace toward the repentant is as boundless as his judgment of the wicked.

What Can We Do?

No matter how bad things get, when we turn to him with a repentant heart and a willing spirit, God is eternally prepared to act in his HESED - his lovingkindness. What he does may not be what we THINK he should do; but it will be the right thing to do. After all, his ways are above our own.

What does this mean for us, in our time of lament? The confidence we have in God's lovingkindness helps mitigate the journey of lament; but it also frees us in our self-examination. Imagine trying to deal with the horrors of life without a God who you can confidently say is good? A capricious god who might inflict injury upon you simply for his own amusement? Or a forgetful god who allows things to happen because he was distracted?

We can be thankful that even in darkness - in fact, even in punishment! - God is a God of HESED, and it is eternally his character.

Let's Pray Together

Thank you, God, that you are eternally good. You are eternally steadfast in your love, regardless how bad things might get. Help me to be aware of my need for repentance; but not to live in fear and guilt. To rest on you, because everything else passes away; but you do not.

Tuesday, February 20

Can the Roads Weep? (1:3-4)

Consider the Text

Jerusalem was abandoned not just by God but by her people. With the people gone, the infrastructure collapsed. The city itself was starving and waning to nothingness. The only people left were the commoners, those who had no power or influence. They had no leaders, no direction. The city descended into chaos (Jer 40-41).

In the glory days, the roads up to Jerusalem were filled with Hebrews gathering for the *shalosh regalim* - the festivals of *Pesach* (Passover), *Shavuot* (Pentecost) and *Sukkot* (Tabernacles). The walls resonated with the the *shir hama'aloth* (songs of ascent, Psalms 120-134). Now all of that is silenced, and the roads are unused.

The poet sees the roads as weeping because their purpose was to bring pilgrims to Jerusalem to worship. The feasts were memorials of God's faithful to the people, and the people's reaffirmation of their covenant with him. When the Hebrews broke their covenant, they fractured the very essence of Jerusalem's existence.

What Can We Do?

While mourning is not in itself a blessing, it is in our mourning that we are comforted; and to know the comfort of God is to know His presence. Therefore, without mourning and loss, we cannot experience His presence in its fullness. What is more, sometimes our lament shows us our purpose - neglected though it may be. And that knowledge helps us be restored.

Let's Pray Together

I need your comfort every day, Lord. Sometimes, I feel abandoned and empty. Sometimes, I doubt this whole thing. Help me to not only *know* that you are our comfort; but also to *experience* it.

Wednesday, February 21

Lost Children (1:5-10)

Consider the Text

The poet dwells not just on the suffering of the present generation but also on the future that would never be, because of Jerusalem's fall. He refers to the captive children as "her majesty," "princes," and "precious things." The future of the people was compromised by the impiety of the present. The irony should not be lost that one of these children - Daniel - would eventually be the instrument of their restoration.

Extraordinarily, the poet is self-aware enough not to blame the enemy for this. He understands the grief it must have brought to God to allow the forbidden nations to enter the sanctuary (v 10), and he resonates with this in his own heart.

What Can We Do?

How much thought do you give to the future implications of your actions? Will others be brought into captivity because of what you do? We like to fool ourselves into believing the only person our sin affects is us; but that is not true.

Also, have you ever paused to think of the grief you bring to God when you defy his covenant with you? Our resistance to his Spirit grieves him (Eph 4:30). Perhaps if we thought more like the Lamentations poet, seeing God's *grief* rather than God's *wrath*, we would be less likely to act in defiance or violate our covenants.

Let's Pray Together

God, I want to acknowledge that when I choose to defy you, I grieve your Spirit - I break your heart. I am thankful for your forgiveness; but I also long not to do this. Help me to resonate with your grief, and please allow that identification with you to keep me from acting in defiance.

Thursday, March 22

It Is Not Even Often About You (5:16-18)

Consider the Text

The destruction of Jerusalem was not a sign of God's weakness. We have looked at this theme before. The punishment of sin does not prove that God is less than loving, less than righteous. This kind of argument is often made by atheist apologists, who seek to prove that because God acts justly and righteously, he is not loving or is not perfect. They want to see a god who exists in their own depravity.

The truth is that God's reign is not defined by the thrones and palaces of this world. He is not contained in earthly vessels; and his glory is not defined by the success or failure of any earthly institution. God's kingdom is eternal, and our earthly existences must conform to his - not the other way around.

What Can We Do?

It is common in our lives - even among Christians - to believe in *totem*. These are objects or places which we believe are somehow imbued with divine presence of blessing. Whether this is a relic or an icon or a building, we tend to want to believe that certain places or things are more holy than others.

Such actions are a form of idolatry. No object possesses God's power. No nation uniquely wields God's authority. No church is so divinely manifest as to ever be far from seeking man's kingdom rather than God's. In your life, you must not only choose to magnify God but also to minimize your desire to somehow totemize him.

Let's Pray Together

Lord, you are greater than our symbols and holy places. Help us never to reduce you to these things.

Wednesday, March 21

Not Every Day Is Worth Dancing About (5:10-15)

Consider the Text

Jerusalem's sin had *real and terrible* consequences; and accepting their situation did not mean those consequences went away. The music had to be stopped and the dancing ceased. In reality, they were singing and dancing because they had a false hope that God would protect them, no matter how sinful they became. They expected that their status as "chosen" meant there was nothing required of them.

They were wrong. Jerusalem was chosen for a purpose; and to invert God's election as a cause for lazy idolatry and abandonment of God's mission was sin.

What Can We Do?

As followers of Christ, we are the "elect" of God; but that does not mean we are passive recipients of God's blessings. Our election is not only to salvation but also to action. We are *chosen to live in righteousness*. So much theological ink is wasted on trying to decide who is elect and who is not. The election of God is self-evident, because the elect live in righteousness and serve God's will. They do not sit back in smug confidence, believing that God has made them special. They demonstrate their election in service, devotion and love. God loves the world *through us*. That is why we are chosen. Anything else is arrogance and false faith. (2 Pt 1:10-11)

Let's Pray Together

Never let me forget that your forgiveness upon me is not permission for selfishness. Give me eyes to see how undeserving I am, and to live a life of active gratitude to you, rather than celebrating my salvation as if it is because I am somehow special and better than others.

Thursday, February 22

Starving in the Midst of Plenty (1:11-12)

Consider the Text

While not all losses are due to our actions or inaction, Jerusalem's loss was due to their moral and national failure. They could not blame anyone else for their starving. God's anger brought punishment, only because they refused to accept his grace which would have brought blessing.

No one took compassion on them because their suffering was the end result of their behavior. When they stopped looking to God as their master, they enslaved themselves to the nations around them. Of course, once they were destroyed, those nations would not provide for them. Why would they? After all, a conquered nation did not deserve the largess of the conqueror.

What Can We Do?

Whether you are the one starving or the one passing by, this passage should resonate. When we have nothing, we should be looking to God for our provision. Certainly he provides through others, but people are not our hope. God is.

And if you are the one passing by, are you not blessed to be a blessing? The gifts God gives to us are to be given through us (Eph 4:7-16). What other purpose is there for us to be provided the gifts if it is not to demonstrate God's grace, even to those who are under his wrath? We are *not* like the nations around Jerusalem, because we serve the God of HESED.

Let's Pray Together

Lord, teach me both accept the consequences of my actions and the responsibilities of my gifts. When I am struggling, help me to look away from ME and to YOU. When I am blessed, help me to look away from ME to those around me.

Friday, February 23

Rejected (1:13-22)

Consider the Text

The fall of Jerusalem was a grief that weighed heavy like a yoke; and it burned deep like fire in the bones. It was a yoke of the people's own making (v 14). It was the rejection, however, that hurt the most.

Despite all of this, the poet realized that the Lord's help is far away but not completely gone. It is precisely because of his righteousness that Jerusalem had to be destroyed (v 18); but it is also a righteous God who hears the calls for mercy (v 22). He is still listening for the repentance of those who remain. While all others have abandoned Jerusalem in her desolation, the Lord remains true - even as he punishes.

What Can We Do?

If we live in the consequences of our actions, we live yoked and led by those who master us. But this is *not* where God wants us to be; and so his grace manifests even when we are enslaved. It is perhaps no coincidence that Jesus refers to following him as an easy yoke (Mt 11:29-30)? The yoke of our failures is too heavy to bear; but the yoke of his grace is easy.

Even when being chastened by the Lord, it is for our correction and instruction (1 For 11:32). God's punishments are not meant to be destructive, no matter how heavy they are; and for those of us who have accepted his grace, restoration is close.

Let's Pray Together

Father, when you correct and even break me, help me to acknowledge your righteousness in doing so. I believe you would never bring punishment unjustly, so teach me what it is I need to learn in this time and bring me through for your glory.

Tuesday, March 20

The Sword in the Wilderness (5:7-9)

Consider the Text

To acknowledge God's sovereignty is to accept your current situation. We fight against circumstances, overwhelming ourselves with guilt, fear, anxiety. We relish our circumstances, inflating our egos with pride, self-delusion and overconfidence. In either reaction, we are either bearing the burden or taking the credit upon ourselves.

Participation in God's economy requires that we stop thinking of ourselves as the singular cause or focus of all the events around us. It was the elders - the fathers (v 7) - who sinned and brought Jerusalem's destruction; but the consequences continued.

What Can We Do?

Sometimes, this is not about you. Sometimes, this is about that and you are not the center of events. Do not fall into the trap of always thinking that events that occur are about you. You are not the only person on earth; and your situation is connected in a million different ways to the journeys of many others. Sometimes, what happens to you is a reverberation of things happening with others. They are "swords in the wilderness" - unexplainable events that we have to accept.

Our idealism of living a perfect life will, of necessity, preclude active involvement in the lives of others. In turn, that precludes our connection to problems and therefore our ability to minister to people whose circumstances might affect our own.

Let's Pray Together

Lord, help me to live among people - to participate in the messiness that the sword in the wilderness brings. Help me to be faithful to you, and to endure and accept my place in the world around me. Help me to keep the focus on you and not on me.

Monday, March 19

The State of Zion (5:1-6)

Consider the Text

The last poem in Lamentations is not an acrostic like the other four. While 1-2 and 4 are laments and 3 is a sermon, 5 is a prayer. It seems to be a response to chapters 3-4.

The singers begin with a cry out to God, with a sense that they have lost everything - even water has to be purchased (v 4). The problem is that now that they have nothing, they are on the edge of being forced into the very behavior that they were punished for (v 6). So, they cry out to God to restore. They have repented and are prepared to return. They ask only that God “remember...see our disgrace” (v 1).

What Can We Do?

At the end of a long journey of self-examination and repentance, it is easy to say “That’s that...ok, God, now make everything better” but our repentance *does not* automatically trigger God’s restoration. He never, **ever** acts subservient to our will.

We do well to express beseeching prayers and songs - requesting that God act in conformity to what he has revealed to us about his character. This is not reminding God because he forgot. Rather, it is the act of claiming the reality of His revealed will and plan for His people. It affirms, in our hearts and minds, that God is truly sovereign; and thus, when he does act, we can declare his worth in acting rather than taking the credit for ourselves.

Let’s Pray Together

Draw us, Lord, into the *entire* process of your restoration. Make me aware of the path, and not just the destination. Strengthen my resolve to be devoted to you, especially when I have plans for what you “should do” that are my own, rather than yours.

Monday, February 26

Deceiving Lovers (1:18-22)

Consider the Text

Jeremiah resonates with Hosea in the metaphor of the deceitful lover. The truth is that Jerusalem had whored herself out to every nation, trusting in the power of false gods and kings over the covenant of the Lord. But when the punishment for violating her covenant with the Lord came, Jerusalem was abandoned by all her deceitful lovers.

She was drawn away from the LORD by the temptations of the “other” love; and yet in her distress, all that she longed for was denied her. The very thing she hoped to gain from these other lovers was the very thing she was denied. In fact, these false lovers laughed at her collapse (v 21). They never had any intention of honoring their promises.

What Can We Do?

Sure, sometimes the promises of God seem to be obscured by the moment. It is tempting to look for other avenues of salvation because we don’t see how God could possibly get us out of whatever situation we are in.

And how ridiculous is it to believe that the God capable of your eternal salvation is not capable of relieving your temporary situation? As the psalmist once wrote, “I lift my eyes up to the hills. From where does my help come?” (Ps 121:1) We may not see God’s preserving hand; but he is never far away. It is a shame that sometimes we have to go through the heartbreak of deceiving loves to see that as true.

Let’s Pray Together

Lord, I need to trust you even when I don’t see the answers in front of me - especially when I don’t see the answers in front of me. It is so tempting to go after other solutions. I struggle with relying on powers other than you. Help me. Help me to know your Spirit’s comforting touch.

Tuesday, February 27

He Has Become an Enemy without Mercy (2:1-5)

Consider the Text

The second poem picks up again in the depths of lament. The poet experienced God's anger in vivid terms. The Lord of Hosts is turned against Israel, taking up arms against his chosen people (v 4). Although the poet was one of those who had called the people to honor the Lord, the pain was no less palpable for him.

Perhaps the worst part of this is not the suffering itself but the mourning it brings about. This is an often unmentioned aspect of repentance. To repent is to see our sin as God sees it; and to see it through His eyes *should* be an act of mourning for us.

What Can We Do?

Have you ever stopped to consider something you consider "not that bad"? Maybe it is one of those habitual things you do without thinking about it. What do those things look like through God's eyes - rather than yours? What is his perspective, given that he is uncompromising and unchangeable in his righteousness?

It is surprising to look at things we make such a big deal about through God's eyes, and realize they are not such a big deal; and then to look at things we minimize and realize that God might have a much more serious perspective on it.

Let's Pray Together

While I can never see everything as you do - this side of glory - God, I want to see my sinfulness and my faithfulness through your eyes. Help me to discipline myself to study your Word and to consider Christ, and therein to find your perspective.

Friday, March 16

Life Isn't Fair (4:21-22)

Consider the Text

Iniquity requires punishment. What would God be if he was not just? If Jerusalem - God's covenant people - were punished for their sins, why would Edom, their pagan neighbors to the south, be exempt from his justice? Edom is often depicted as mocking Jerusalem as they are punished. They rest secure in their mountains and seem to believe they are exempt from God's justice.

Jeremiah here echoes the prophecy he delivered against Edom (Jer 49), but Ezekiel (25, 32), Joel (3:19), Amos (1:6-11) and Obadiah (1) all make the same statements. Over and over, Edom is named as one of the kingdoms that will be judged.

What Can We Do?

It is easy to look at our surroundings and think it isn't fair. Others who do far worse things or just seem not to care are not living in pain. We ask why the righteous suffer while the unrighteous are free. But the message of the Prophets is clear. God brings justice; and he is never early or late.

Is it really our place to look at others and think, "Why don't you punish them?" God does not need our whining reminders. He is in control. In fact, obsessing about others is a form of envy. We want them to trade places with us because we think it would be better if we had what they have.

Let's Pray Together

Lord, clear my heart of envy and self-justifying criticism of others. Help me to focus on my relationship with you and bringing my life into harmony with the precepts of your Word, to focus less on others and more on Christ.

Thursday, March 15

The Shadows (4:17-20)

Consider the Text

Looking for help that seems to never come. Running from enemies that never tire. It sounds like the tagline to a horror movie; but it was the experience of the people of Jerusalem. Because of the sins of their rulers, the people were in a calamitous situation with no foreseeable escape.

And yet, there was this lingering hope of a promise that is stated here and repeated in Ezekiel 3:16-17. Jerusalem dwells among the nations “under his shadow.” What does that mean? It means that the people of Israel need to *stay* under his shadow to dwell among the nations. Their sin was that they wandered from him, exposing themselves to the judgment and punishment. It is not like they *did not know* this would happen. They just chose to ignore it.

What Can We Do?

We find ourselves in a difficult, inescapable place and wonder where God is. He is where he has always been - leading us in the paths of righteousness. God has not moved. We have moved. What is punishment to us is often just the natural course of the world when one is not under the shadow of the Almighty. We often do not like where God puts us, so we run; and then we discover that it is far more difficult to live beyond our place than it was in our place.

Let's Pray Together

Draw me nearer to you, into the light of your presence, O Lord. Stop my running feet. Turn my eyes to you.

Wednesday, February 28

The Sacred House in Ruins (2:6-10)

Consider the Text

As the poet walks through what was once the sacred district of Jerusalem, he sees emptied booths (Hebrew *sok*, the booths constructed during the Feast of Booths) and ruined gathering places. Festivals and Sabbaths were forgotten; and the altar had been rejected. That which God commanded had been laid waste. It is only when this has happened that the people finally mourned (v 10).

God had to destroy his gifts to the people for them to understand his graciousness. Isn't that a paradox? And yet, how true is it? Our hindsight is always 20/20. It is easier to miss something beautiful once it is gone than it is to appreciate it while we have it.

What Can We Do?

Placing a priority on living in the moment of God's grace, worshipping to our fullest, not being lulled away - these are foundational disciplines for a full Christian life. Seeing what we “always” do as if it is the first time takes work, because we convince ourselves that we know it all. Always seeking novelty, we forsake stability. Then we lose what matters most, and we live in the regret of having not treasured it more.

If the Lamentations teach us one thing, it is to embrace what God gives us *now* and never take it for granted; because once it is gone, it is gone forever. The present reality of our experience with God is worth our notice. We cannot afford to exchange this present glory, even if it is to our disadvantage (Jer 2:11).

Let's Pray Together

God, I do not always know why or when or how; but I know that you are going to be glorified - even in destruction and loss. I don't always see that though. Help me to find a confidence in you, regardless.

Thursday, March 1

Weeping Heart (2:11-19)

Consider the Text

Many of us have experienced the kind of gut-wrenching weeping that the poet describes here. There are days when we are so overwhelmed that the spiritual weight manifests in physical illness. But to feel this way about a city? How did that work?

The truth is that Lamentations is not just about “a city.” Jerusalem was the Promise and the Kingdom – the hope of Abraham. It was the present symbol of Israel's place as God's covenant people. For Jerusalem to be destroyed was know the failures of the people to honor the covenant. God's wrath came only because they had abandoned God; and that truth placed *all the blame* on the people's shoulders.

What Can We Do?

God is all too happy *not* to punish his people. His defining characteristic is love (1 Jo 4:16). He loves with reckless abandon and punishes only reluctantly.

If that last paragraph makes you uncomfortable, perhaps your characteristic of God needs to be reset. If you think of God as a judge first and a loving Father only later, you have not yet fully embraced grace and HESED (Rom 8:15, Gal 4:6). Consider re-thinking the way you perceive God, especially when reading things like Lamentations.

Let's Pray Together

God, I see you as my judge far more than as my Father. I sometimes think first of your wrath and only then think of your love. Help me to reset my thinking and to learn from your great sacrifice of your Son just how far you are willing to go to extend grace to us.

Wednesday, March 14

Leaders and Consequences (4:14-16)

Consider the Text

The state of the rebellious priests and prophets was truly reprehensible. They are dishonored and scattered, as they should have been after bringing about the fall of the city. Here is the poet really focusing on the problem. The great calamity that befell Jerusalem really was caused by the leaders, who sacrificed piety for their own desires and now are stripped of all glory or power. The very thing they sought to gain is what was taken from them. Even the common people cry out “Unclean!” when they see them.

What Can We Do?

Consider that the elders of Jerusalem tried to preserve a good thing (the kingdom) for the wrong reasons (greed, fear) using the worst possible means (abandoning the worship of God). While their goal was good enough, everything else about what they did was wrong.

All the time, we don't realize we justify unrighteousness in the name of something righteous. We justify poor marriage relationships to “keep the family together.” We argue that an immoral business practice is okay because it “provides for us.” As humans, we always try to make things work in our own way rather than God's. True righteousness and holiness are more important to God than our perceived “correctness.”

Let's Pray Together

As I journey through this world, Lord, I am reminded of just how many little things we alter in little ways to justify our behavior. When you show me these things in my life, help me to self-correct. When I see them in others, help me to encourage and strengthen rather than tear down.

Tuesday, March 13

Is God Weakened? (4:11-13)

Consider the Text

When the poet says that the rest of the world could not believe Jerusalem actually fell (v 12), he was not exaggerating. Jerusalem was not taken by an invading army for almost 400 years - from the time David captured it around 1000 BCE until Nebuchadnezzar sacked it in 586 BCE. Such longevity for an ancient city was unheard of in the Middle East.

Only the full force of the Lord's wrath could cause Jerusalem's fall. In other words, the destruction of the city required God's unadulterated contempt; and what could bring that? Prophets and priests - the officers of his word among the people - committing the most heinous of sins against the righteous (v 13).

What Can We Do?

Sometimes, we get obsessed with the idea the "God is out to get us." You look at the situation you are in and think that God is intentionally messing with you or giving you a hard time. And it doesn't help when some well-intentioned friend remarks that "All things work together for them that love God."

But the truth is that God's anger brings down cities. Thankfully, we never feel the full brunt of his consuming fire (Heb 12:29). So, no matter how bad things might get, you are being spared the full wrath of God because of his lovingkindness and grace.

Let's Pray Together

I cannot thank you enough, Lord, that you restrain your hand. Your grace keeps me from the full wrath I deserve. You are truly good, even in my worst circumstances.

Friday, March 2

The Paradox of Divine Wrath and Mercy (2:20-22)

Consider the Text

Was this suffering what Jerusalem truly deserved? Should women and children starve? Priests and prophets slaughtered in the sanctuary? These are questions the poet frames after considering the validity of Jerusalem's suffering. God is just in his punishment; and yet the poet wonders whether this was what God wants for his people. As we have seen, it is *not* what God wants; but it is what our actions force him to do.

It is as much in God's character to punish our covenant-breaking as it is for him to summon us to a festive celebration (v 22); and his purposes are just as complete in judgment as they are in rejoicing. He cannot be otherwise.

What Can We Do?

Reconciling God's perspective on justice and blessing is difficult because we are so changeable. God simply *is* (Num 23:19). We can either expend our energy in the futility of convincing ourselves God is something other than what he is or we can embrace the glory of his eternal mystery. Which is better? A god who suffers from our own lackluster caprice or a God who is eternally as He is - the same both in judgment and in blessing?

Let's Pray Together

God, you are ONE. You are unchangeable and unrelenting. Were you any less, you would be unworthy of our worship and service. I give up my "expectations" of how you should be to placate my own mind and embrace your mystery. You are my hope and glory.

Monday, March 5

The Crushed Hope of the Prophet (3:1-18)

Consider the Text

The third poem is three times the length of the previous two. It is also written from the perspective of the prophet, preaching to those who have suffered the fall of Jerusalem. After recounting the pain of watching God's judgment, he cries out, "My endurance has perished; so has my hope from the LORD." (v 18)

This is the darkest shadow of the soul, the bottom of the pit of despair. Like the previous two poems, this one also begins in the darkness; but it will return from that abyss in a declaration of God's fidelity.

What Can We Do?

Hope must sometimes die and be reborn. John recounts Jesus saying, "Unless a grain of wheat falls into the earth and dies, it remains alone; but if it dies, it bears much fruit." (Jn 12:24) Of course, Jesus was speaking of his own death and resurrection; but he was the first fruit of the greater resurrection, the firstborn of all creation (Col 1:15-18).

The story of the gospel is not the story of judgment. It is the story of new life. This is the pattern of creation since the giving of the seasons. Dawn drives away night. Spring ends the winter. Death always gives way to life. Destruction gives way to restoration.

Let's Pray Together

Lord, you are our hope - the new, the living, the transforming, the hope of all hopes.

Monday, March 12

Dark Honesty (4:1-10)

Consider the Text

The fourth poem echoes the first and second, something of a response to the sermon of chapter 3. It is, however, more up front about the failures of Jerusalem and the cause of her fall. The first few verses are couplets, showing the change that has taken place - gold dimmed, stones scattered, precious things considered broken pottery, etc. Then verses 9 and 10 explicitly show just how dark the world has become.

What Can We Do?

It is *necessary* to be honest about the darkness of our souls when we are lamenting. This is not popular in our modern world. We try to phrase things in the best possible way, so sin is no longer sin. It is "what you have done in the past." Addiction is now "impulse control problems." The truth is though that some dark situations require dark descriptions. We should not be afraid of honesty that makes us uncomfortable.

Putting true, honest words to situations helps us cope with them. Saying things they way they really are *forces us* to either dwell on it or find a solution. It takes four chapters for Lamentations to get past complaining about the circumstance and begin to deal with the reasons. Lament is not easy. It is uncomfortable, and long. We need patience with ourselves and others when we go through this process.

Let's Pray Together

Help me, Lord, to put words to the pain I experience. Help me also to listen to the words of others who are struggling. Let me be honest with myself and others - both in what I say and in how I listen.

Friday, March 9

The Unrighteous Used Rightly (3:55-66)

Consider the Text

Even though they were the instruments of God's punishment of Jerusalem, the Babylonians were still unrighteous. Their actions, even though used by God, were still unjust. The recompense of their actions would still come.

This is a peculiar and somewhat frustrating reality. Babylon would still be judged for their unrighteousness and idolatry. Being used of God did not mitigate their sinfulness.

What Can We Do?

Remember that God *using you* for his purposes is not the same thing as you being *faithful* to Him. He uses the unfaithful just as readily as he uses the righteous. You cannot look at "success" and think that somehow it forgives moral or ethical failure.

This is a common mistake in Christianity. We acknowledge some failings but then say "But, look at the results!" Are the results theirs to claim? No. Results are God's to give or take away. They in no way indicate anything about the person involved. Character, faithfulness, commitment to Christ - those matter far more than whether someone is on top of the world or in the trenches.

Let's Pray Together

Father, help me to judge myself and others by our intimacy and faithfulness to you and your Word. Help me not to look at what we call "success" and let it taint my perspective on your holy purposes in our lives and our world.

Tuesday, March 6

The Morning Always Comes (3:19-36)

Consider the Text

The word *HESED* appears only twice in Lamentations, both here (vv 22, 32). This is the defining characteristic of God - his steadfast love. It is the boundless attribute of God that we both cannot comprehend and cannot live without.

Bound up in the character of God is the truth that he does not abandon us. True, we find ourselves in the dark and seemingly hopeless abyss, but morning is coming. So, there is a blessing even in the pain. If we seek silence and embrace the struggle, in time his compassion will be manifest. While mankind is characterized by unreasonable cruelty, this does not define God (vv 34-36).

What Can We Do?

Return to this simple theme: God is not like us. We cannot judge God's action by "This is what I would have done." The truth is that the value system we sometimes use to judge God is skewed by our own finite, sinful experiences.

In his short story, "On Exactitude in Science," Jorge Luis Borges used the absurd notion of people living within a perfect map to illustrate that a map, by definition, cannot represent reality. In the same way, human systems of theology do not accurately and completely reflect God's truth. What we comprehend is *enough* for basic understanding but we can never grasp the glorious expanse of God's true reality this side of heaven.

Let's Pray Together

Dear God, thank you that you are too big for me to comprehend, that your *HESED* exceeds any limitations I might impose upon it. You are truly more than I can observe.

Wednesday, March 7

Forgiveness and Repentance (3:34-42)

Consider the Text

“You have not forgiven” (v 42) does not express the absolute reality. It represents our shortcomings. For the poet, God’s forgiveness lay just a single repentance’s distance at hand. If God punishes, then God can forgive. What could be know about God was enough to know this is true.

True repentance, of course, is not about escaping punishment. This is selfish. True repentance is both a returning to the Lord and a recognition of His authority to punish our sin (vv 40-42). It is an acknowledge that the Lord was just in his action and the renewal of our commitment to honor the restored covenant. God will not grant us license to continue in sin (Rom 6:1).

What Can We Do?

Perhaps you are still in the state of “God has not forgiven.” Remember that this is not the same thing as “God *will not* forgive.” There is a tremendous gulf between these two statements, and all that is required to bridge it is the act of repentance.

Of course, forgiveness does not mean there will not be consequences. But forgiveness, even in the midst of our suffering, is infinitely preferable to not seeking forgiveness and dwelling alone in the valley of the shadow of death.

Let’s Pray Together

Father, I acknowledge your forgiveness is here for me to accept. I have fallen. I am broken. I am a sinner. So, I come to you not for my own benefit but to restore what is broken. I acknowledge that I have broken my side of the covenant, and I ask that in your steadfast love, you would open

Thursday, March 8

The Lord of Heaven Will See (3:43-54)

Consider the Text

The poet uses figurative language to represent God’s unflinching justice. What he saw as the enemy armies invading and cursing the people of the city (v 46) is the same thing as God wrapping himself with anger (v 43). While he brings these images together, he does not forget that God is still watching. He is watching not so he can bring further judgment but watching for repentance.

The poet has confidence that the Lord will see his lament. His words are not bouncing off the sky. They are reaching God’s ears; and in time, the Lord will indeed restore. This is the true message of the long darkness - dawn will rise. God will save the repentant. Even with his perspective skewed (the poet does say he is being persecuted “without cause”), he repents and calls for salvation.

What Can We Do?

Circumstances do not determine God’s watchfulness. He never looks away from you. Can you consider how painful that must be for him? To watch us suffer the consequences of our actions? To wait for us to finally return so he can remove the yoke of pain? If there is anything that is a testament to God’s character of HESED, it is the readiness of his saving hand.

Let’s Pray Together

Thank you, Lord, that you are always watchful. You see my failures and my successes equally well. You do not look away from me, even in my darkest days; and I will thank you for that - even when I do not want to.