

## **Lamentations (Part Six; 1989)**

**Lamentations 3:24-54**

**John W. Ritenbaugh**

**Given 20-Jun-89; Sermon #BS-LA06**

Let us go back into the book of Lamentations. Unfortunately, before Christ comes we have to go through lamentation—and I do not mean as a book, I mean as a nation. We got up to verse 24 last time but I am going to go back a little bit and pick up a couple of things that I think that are helpful to keep us in the flow.

I do not know whether I mentioned this to you the last time, but chapter 3 is the chapter that most of the commentaries feel there is pretty solid evidence that Jeremiah is really the author of this particular chapter. There are a lot of things here that seem to indicate that there were things that occurred in his life. We may find later on that he indeed was the author of the entire book. But you know how they are, if you do any reading in the commentaries, these guys come up with more ideas and most of them are kind of negative and I do not know personally whether they are right or wrong. But at least chapter 3 is one of those chapters that they feel there are very strong indications that indeed Jeremiah is the author of it. And a couple of interesting things in here indicate the way that he felt about the way Israel was in affliction. Verses 1, 2, and 3 give the indication that they were driven into their calamity.

**Lamentations 3:1** I am the man who has seen affliction by the rod.

..

Remember I mentioned to you what that word rod refers to. A shepherd carried two instruments. He carried a rod and a staff, and the staff was for gentle direction of the sheep and the rod was for stern discipline. It was nothing more than something akin to a policeman's nightstick (whack!) across the bridge of the nose or across the head or whatever of the sheep, whenever one of them really stepped out of line. And what the author here is

talking about is Israel had really stepped out of line, the sheep were gone out of the fold, and God really whacked them one good on the head to get them back in line.

Verse 4 is interesting because "He has aged my flesh and my skin" does not indicate old age, but rather the *appearance* of old age. That is somebody who had really gone through the mill. I mean, they had been in the threshing machine and when they came out the other end they looked like they had had it. Their skin was all burned and scratched and bruised up, and though he was only 23, he looked like he was 93. You know, that kind of thing.

There is a very interesting metaphor in verse 6. It is as though he is speaking from out of the grave. "He has set me in dark places. . ." like he is talking from his grave, "like the dead of long ago." He really was not dead. He just *felt* like he was dead, like he was gone and forgotten. He said in verse 7 that he felt like he was hedged in, that no matter where he turned, he felt like he was in a maze.

Verses 8 and 9, "He has blocked my ways with hewn stone." I mentioned the illustration of being in a hall of mirrors inside of an amusement park and how no matter which way you walk, you see yourself coming at you and that is the way he is describing here. It is as though he was in a labyrinth, no matter where he turned, he was in a blind alley, he could not get out, and the one that was standing in his way all the time was God. It was a calamity, every direction he turned in, and the it was very painful.

Not only that, verses 10-11, the way was set with danger. You know, like there was "a bear lying in wait. . . a lion in ambush. He has turned aside my ways and torn me in pieces; He has made me desolate." So you are really given a vivid picture of somebody who is really in a great deal of bitterness, feeling harassed in every way he turns.

Verse 16, "He has broken my teeth with gravel" seems to indicate bread made with the leavings from a granary floor, like that was all that was left. I mean, they were scraping around on the floor to get whatever they could and along with the wheat berries came little pebbles and stones as well and so they would make this into bread and then they bite into the bread and break their teeth. So another vivid picture.

I think I mentioned to you that the word "strength" in the Hebrew there does not clearly indicate physical strength. It might be included within it. It really has more of a sense of good looks. It is actually a reflection back to where he said that He has aged my flesh. You can imagine what a person who had not eaten well for a long period of time would look like. So when he says that his strength was gone, he meant that the glory of his countenance had been changed and his vitality, his face, no longer glowed with radiant good health, but rather his skin was all blackening because of the lack of food and was becoming stretched over his bones.

Verse 18 is also significant because it has the first mention of the Lord in this chapter. Every other time it was just He or Him. Now, if this poem was a reflection, a meditation, it seems as though this was a turning point because once he could get God's name out, it seems as though his attitude began to change and notes of hope begin to creep into the things that he is writing about and he no longer feels as though he is completely, totally burdened and abandoned. But there are glimmers of ideas that good is off in the future, they are not too far away, begin to come into what he is saying.

Verse 24 says, "The Lord is my portion," says my soul, "therefore I hope in Him!" That is pretty obvious. Once God's name began to come into it, why, he began to reflect on the things that God had done in the past. He knew that God was a faithful God and that there therefore was going to be hope. We will get a little bit more of that later. But in verse 24, the word "soul" might be a little bit misleading to you. We have grown up in this Protestant society where soul means something that is dwelling within the person, and you do not want to think that here. It literally means "the whole being," it means "myself." So it would read something like this: "The Lord is my portion, I say."

Now, what does he mean by the Lord is my portion? Well, it is very similar to back in the Pentateuch there where God was setting aside the tribe of Levi to be the priestly tribe, the teaching tribe, and to the other tribes He gave land and that was their portion. And it was from their portion that they derive their prosperity because of what the ground produced, either in food or minerals or whatever. Levi's portion was God. They got no ground. But rather He was saying that their prosperity was going to be directly

attributable to Him. They were not going to have the means of being able to produce a prosperity like the other tribes did by making their prosperity out of the ground. Now, this does not mean they had no ground at all. They did have *some* ground, but they did not have ground like the other tribes did.

Where it says here that the Lord is my portion, what the author means is that he did not have anything else. He did not have any house, he did not have any lands, he did not have any bank account that he could fall back on. But God, to him, was everything. And that is where his prosperity was going to come from. That gives people the indication that we are dealing with a Levite. Jeremiah was a Levite. It is just one of those indications that this chapter was written by him, just one of many.

And so in effect he is saying that he has everything to gain and nothing to lose. He has already hit bottom. It cannot get any worse. God is his portion, you see, and therefore things are going to be good. So it is actually an expression of hope.

**Lamentations 3:25** "The Lord is good to those who wait for Him [notice how his attitude is picking up, getting more and more positive], to the soul [to the person] who seeks Him."

Now, he is calling upon these people to wait on God in positive anticipation that God is going to work some good out of this terrible ordeal that they are going through.

The word "good" needs to be explained. It needs to be explained because of what these people were going through. Is it possible that what they were going through was good for them? Yes, it was. Is the Tribulation going to be good for the Laodicean? Yes, it is! Painful, terrifying, anxiety-filled, but it is going to make them or break them spiritually, and therefore it is good.

The word "good" as it is translated into the English, the Hebrew does not indicate good from a human sense, but rather, that is, what my concepts of good would be. My concept of good might be that I have a nice suit of clothing on, be able to take a shower every day, be clean, have a nice car to drive, and have a nice house, and all that. I might think, "Well, that's how God can be good to me." And I think that that pretty much hits the way most

of us would think of as being of being good. We think of good in terms of physical material, well being, good health, that kind of thing, having all your family around you. You see, that is good, and I do not mean to say that those things are not good.

But the Hebrew indicates good from God's point of view, not from what man thinks is good. Now, what man thinks is good and God's point of view is on the situation may or may not be exactly the same thing. From God's point of view, putting a heavy yoke on a person might be good. From the person's point of view, he might rather wish he did not have that yoke on. Now, you can see that in the prophets. In fact, they even usually start many of their prophecies, "The burden of the Lord." I mean, man, this is the load that I have got to carry. A little bit of humanness creeps out there, you see, yet, was it good that they carry that burden? Yes, it was good for them. It was good for Israel. It was good for God's purpose. So we have to understand good from the Bible perspective, not good from a human perspective.

Another example: Paul had a thorn in his flesh. Boy, he would have liked to have been healed of that thing! From Paul's point of view, boy, it would be awfully good if I did not have to go carrying around this affliction with me all of the time, you see. But from God's point of view, it was good that Paul be afflicted. Paul appealed to Him, he said, three times. We take that to mean that he was probably anointed three different times for the same affliction. And each time God said, "No." That was good. From Paul's point of view, he would have rather not; from God's point of view, it was the best thing He could do for Paul. Because, as Paul said, it kept him humble. Every day he had to go back to God for strength. And so it kept Paul close to God. Paul did not get the big head about all that he was able to perform because he knew that humanly he should not have been able to do these things as consistently as he did.

So when you see good, you might just try to put that in there because you understand that it is always good from God's purpose and not always good the way a man would think it ought to be done.

**Lamentations 3:26** The Lord is good to those who wait for Him, to the soul who seeks Him. It is good that one should hope and wait quietly for the salvation of the Lord.

Oh so hard to do though, is it not? Yes. But, look how the attitude has changed here. Now, this person who is writing this is actually beginning to see good in these horrible things that are occurring. He is beginning to see it from God's point of view and he is beginning to realize that God had tried other methods to get the people to change. And in a sense, it was almost like this was a last ditch effort and therefore it was good that God do this because He had tried everything else before and He could not get Israel to change.

So it is good that one should *hope and wait quietly*. Boy, I will tell you, that is hard for me. I like to gripe. I usually gripe to my wife and I like to complain that things would be different. And I usually complain to her. But it is better to wait quietly. But sometimes, if I did not complain to her, I would never talk to her. No, it is not quite that bad!

**Lamentations 3:27** It is good for a man to bear the yoke in his youth.

Now, that is an interesting statement. Why in the youth? Well, I will give you a couple of reasons. The older that a person gets, the more ingrained the habits become and the more difficult it is to make a change. An old dog *can* learn new tricks and it is harder. And it is harder simply because the habit is ingrained that much more deeply. The rut is deeper and since it is deeper, the sides are higher and it is harder to crawl out of it.

Believe me, oldsters, God did not make a mistake. He called you at just the right time because probably if He would have called you younger, you would not have listened. And so He waited until you were in enough pain that you would listen. But there are some that He calls when they are young. I think my wife and I were blessed with that. I was 26 when we were called; 27 when I was baptized. And it is good to bear that yoke in your youth because it is easier to change when a person is young. And if you do change, look how many more years you get to serve God than if you had waited until you were older.

Those of us who are married, would it not be good to make the changes and have a perfect marriage when you are 25 rather than wait until you are 50 and have gone through 25 years of battling before you make the changes?

Would it not be better at 25? Just look how much more fun you would have with those 25 years of enjoying life together rather than battling it out like the Bickersons and holding onto our turf, competing with one another.

Well, that is what he means. It is a simple principle, but it is better to do it when you are young. Make the changes, bear the yoke. You know what the yoke is? That is what they put on oxen or on a horse and it indicates being under submission and accepting guidance in order to pull a load. See, to bury your burden. The yoke is that device to which the cart is attached, that the animal is pulling, and it is through that that progress, metaphorically, is made.

**Lamentations 3:28** Let him sit alone and keep silent, because God has laid it on him.

In other words, if someone has to experience what would normally be considered to be a misfortune, and indeed it would be a misfortune, from God's perspective it would be good for the person to be undergoing that kind of thing. And so the advice here is, when something like that occurs and God has permitted it to occur to your life, then the best thing to do is just submit to it because it does no good to kick against the pricks. You get yourself all stressed out. And over what? Could this one man change what happened to Jerusalem? Well, of course he could not.

And so what he is saying is, accept the discipline of God and do not be like the Israelites and complain, but sit down and meditate on your situation in a positive way, with hope, looking for answers that might be in the spiritual realm. Maybe there is good reason why God is allowing this affliction that has come upon us, come upon me. And let us make, as Mr. Armstrong used to say, lemonade out of the lemons.

**Lamentations 3:29** Let him put his mouth in the dust—

Boy, what a graphic metaphor. You see the picture of a man laying on the ground with his mouth right down in the dirt. What a picture of submission; just willing to accept, you might say, whatever comes along. Now, if your mouth is in the dust, are you going to be able to complain? That is the point. Metaphorically, when you reach that point that your mouth is in the dust now, things are going to be set right.

I want I want to go back to verse 28 because my eye picked up something in my notes. The implication of verse 28 (actually a lead in to verse 29), but what he is saying in verse 28 that if you reach that point where you are willing to sit alone and keep silent, it is an indication that you have finally reached the point where you are willing to accept God's will.

Now, there is a further ramification of this. Sitting alone. If you are willing to do that—submit to God's will completely—it is going to separate you from society and you are going to sit alone. You will be sanctified and it is very likely that it is going to make you an outcast. You know, you can probably begin to think of scriptures in the New Testament that says that right out. Here, it is given in poetic form. If you accept God's will it is going to start separating and you are going to be alone; probably separate you from your family. You become sanctified. And then when you put your mouth in the dust, now things are going to start working. So you have accepted it. You are not going to talk back to God and there is going to be hope. "There may yet be hope" from absolute submission.

**Lamentations 3:30** Let him give his cheek to the one who strikes him, and be full of reproach.

Now, the one who is striking is God. He is still in the picture here. Still another picture of submission, one right after the other.

**Lamentations 3:31** For the Lord [that goes right back to the previous verse, to the one who strikes him] will not cast off forever.

This verse is actually beginning a new thought and he is beginning to show reason for the resignation to God's will. That is, he is going to give reasons that will help make the bearing of this problem easier.

The first one he gives, he is meditating on God's acts in the past. God did similar things two generations before. Not exactly the same as this, not anywhere near as intense as this one was. But nonetheless, God has shown a pattern that He chastens every son that He loves and when He does chasten, when He disciplines severely, it is not forever. There is good within it and He is doing it to accomplish good for the person that He is chastening. And



so there is reason then to accept it, to submit to it, and to actually have hope and a positive attitude within it.

You know, God will not give to us anymore than we can bear (I Corinthians 10:13) and He will show us a way of escape. He will provide it *through* the problem; not around it but right through the middle of it. So therefore there is reason to hope because there is going to be good come out of it. First of all, the problem will not last forever. Second, there is going to be the right kind of mind come out of this that will help this person to be in the Kingdom of God.

**Lamentations 3:33** For He does not afflict willingly, nor grieve the children of men.

He has given three reasons in those three verses to have a positive hope. 1) it will come to an end, 2) he will show mercy, and 3) He is doing what He is doing because our conduct allows him no other choice.

Verse 34 begins another reflection and it is this time a contrast between the way God treats His prisoners and the way man treats his prisoners. Here is the way a man does it:

**Lamentations 3:34** To crush under his feet all the prisoners of the earth.

Now, God does not do that. Point number one here is that God does not capriciously crush people as men do, as shown by the ill treatment of prisoners, you see, simply because they are prisoners.

**Lamentations 3:35** To turn aside the justice due a man [In other words, God gives a man his rights.] before the face of the Most High.

Now, it is interesting that he used that name for God, the Most High, because he is talking about God judging and God is pictured here as being at the highest point where He can see everything that is going on. So what he is indicating here is that when God judges, He has all of the facts, but a man

does not judge that way. He judges unrighteously because men do not have all the facts whenever they judge. So second point is that God does not deny men justice.

**Lamentations 3:36** Or subvert a man in his cause—the Lord does not approve.

So, God does not go out of His way to deliberately twist a man's right, not the way men judge, not the way attorneys manipulate the courts. God does not do that. He always deals fairly with everybody in every situation.

**Lamentations 3:37** Who is he who speaks and it comes to pass, when the Lord has not commanded it?

Here, this section is taking another turn. You see, he is positively reflecting on what is going on. So now he is reflecting on God's omnipotence, that nothing can happen against God's will. "Who is he who speaks and it comes to pass, when the Lord has not commanded it? [verse 38] Is it not from the mouth of the Most High that woe and well-being proceed?" You can check this with Isaiah 45 and I believe it is about verse 7 or 8, where God says, "I create good and I create evil." Evil there does not mean sin. It means calamity, it means trouble, it means trials. Whenever Job was being plagued there, he said in one place, "I have received all this good from the Lord. Now, should I turn my back on Him when He brings calamity upon me?" Well, he at least understood that intellectually.

**Lamentations 3:37-39** Who is this who speaks when the Lord has not commanded it? Is it not from the mouth of the most high that woe and well-being proceed? Why should a living man complain, a man for the punishment of his sins?

I mean, this guy has come full circle. Now he is saying we ought to be thankful we are alive! Why should a living man complain?

**Lamentations 3:40** [now he has turned in his reflection and it is as though he is speaking to a congregation] Let us search out and examine our ways.

Yeah people, in the light of everything that has happened, do you not think we better start looking at ourselves instead of grumbling and mumbling and shaking our fist at God and turn back to the Lord.

**Lamentations 3:41** Let us lift our hearts and hands to God in heaven.

Interesting picture. Apparently the normal position for them to pray in was something like this, where they lifted their hands before God. And that is actually a position of submission because if you lift your hands up here, it shows you do not have any weapons, there is nothing you can fight with. You see, it is sort of like when prisoners were captured in the war, what did they make them do? They made them either put their hands up or behind their head because you cannot fight with them up there. And so lifting your hands to God is a symbol of submission before Him.

These people were told do not just lift your hands to God, but also your heart. Heart-mind. Put your whole mind, submit your mind to Him. Do not just show Him a picture, you see, but submit your mind to Him as well.

**Lamentations 3:42** We have transgressed and rebelled; and You have not pardoned.

As though it is going to God. Now here, he begins to suggest a prayer to those people. And the first thing, of course, is that he suggests that they repent of their sins. Now that is interesting because it shows very clearly that he understood that they had not been forgiven yet.

**Lamentations 3:43-45** [this directed at God] You have covered Yourself with anger and pursued us; You have slain and not pitied. You have covered Yourself with a cloud, that prayer should not pass through. You have made us an offscouring and refuse in the midst of the peoples. All of our enemies have opened their mouths against us.

It is interesting that that comes back in there again. It seems as though those Hebrews were just very sensitive to the scorn of their neighbors. I want to go

back to verse 44 where it says, "You have covered yourself with a cloud, that prayer should not pass through." That is an interesting metaphor again. You might go all the way back in time in the Bible to the book of Exodus. You see, God was in the cloud and the pillar of fire and whenever God came to the Tabernacle, the glory of God, the Shekinah, would settle down over the Tabernacle. But always it was surrounded by the clouds so that the glory of God was shielded from the people by the cloud.

That is what the author here is picking up on. However, they always understood that, though the cloud was there, they could speak to God. However, now we have got a cloud that is so thick that the prayers will not go through. He is trying to draw a picture of the separation that they felt from God. Now, what we would say today, we would not talk about the cloud at all. We would say, well, my prayers were going up to the ceiling and bouncing off. But that is the way they said it—He was surrounded by a cloud that the prayers could not penetrate.

And then verse 45 that they had been made the "offscouring and refuse in the midst of the peoples," meaning the nations of the world, and that they were the objects of scorn from those that were around about them.

**Lamentations 3:47-48** Fear and a snare have come upon us,  
desolation and destruction. My eyes overflow with rivers of water  
for the destruction of the daughter of my people.

Again, a reflection on the seemingly unremitting pressure from every side and the tears, at this point, in verse 48, was for the destruction. There does not seem to be any tears of repentance yet, but they are heading in that direction.

**Lamentations 3:49-50** My eyes flow and do not cease, without  
interruption [he is indicating here that he was going to keep on  
crying until God heard], till the Lord from heaven looks down and  
sees. My eyes bring suffering to my soul because of all the  
daughters of the city.

It made him sick "because of all the daughters of my city." That is, because of the suffering that they were going through.

**Lamentations 3:52** My enemies without cause hunted me down like a bird.

I do not quite understand the hunting of a bird. I do not know how they did it. But apparently they must have strung up nets in some way so that the bird could kind of fly around but it could not get out of the net. Everywhere it turned, everywhere it flew, it went into another portion of the net.

I saw a movie a number of years ago of a group of men hunting for monkeys in Africa and it was very interesting the way that they caught them. There was a whole tree full of monkeys. I mean, the place was writhing with monkeys, they were jumping around in a great big tree and it seemed to me like there must have been 20 or 30 monkeys in that tree—jumping around, swinging, jabbering every which way, doing their thing. Anyway, what these men did is they set up nets, actually it was just one large net that they set up, it was like it was attached to rockets. (I watched this in the movie.) And they set off this charge and the rockets went up and pulled the net over top of the tree and then it fell down on the other side and all the monkeys were inside. Well, they were trapped there.

Now I get the impression he is giving a picture here once again of the people trying to flip from place to place inside the city, inside the nation. Trying to do everything that they could to escape the encircling foe. That would be one thing. The hunger and famine that was also there there as well, the lack of water, you know, the drought, all the disease that was taking place within the city, and everywhere they turned they were trapped and they could not get out of the tree, as it were.

**Lamentations 3:53** They silenced my life in the pit [there is another indication it might be Jeremiah and he was put into a pit, a cistern, a refuse collection place of one kind or another] and they threw stones at me.

Let me see something here. My margin says for verse 53, "a stone on." I think I recall reading something about this somewhere. It means not that they

actually threw a stone at him or a multitude of stones, but actually they put one stone on top of it, which indicates that he was put into a dungeon or a cistern and then they put one stone on the lid on top and shut him in.

**Lamentations 3:54** The waters flowed over my head.

It does not necessarily mean literally that he was up to his nose in water. It is a common Hebraic idiom that indicates intense distress. You know like somebody who could not swim and was in water over his head. I mean you would be in this intense distress and I said I am cut off.

Well that is a good place to stop. We will pick up verse 55 next time.