

# Followers of the Way

## Living by faith in calamity

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Lamentations 3:19-57

Images of war are yet again being played across our TV screens, and the world has rightly reacted in horror. Dreadful though these events are, though, in this instance (so far), we haven't seen the full awfulness of what war can bring. Writing in the wake of the Babylonian invasion of the southern Israelite kingdom of Judah and the sack of its capital, Jerusalem in 587 BC, Lamentations speaks of terrible brutality and almost unimaginable suffering.

- The city has been laid waste and is depopulated (Lamentations 1:1), its walls and ramparts broken down (Lamentations 2:8), the temple pillaged and desecrated (Lamentations 1:10).
- Judah has been betrayed by those it considered friends, let down by its allies (Lamentations 1:2, 1:19, 4:17).
- Women and girls have been raped (Lamentations 5:11), combatants and non-combatants, young and old, slaughtered without mercy (Lamentations 2:21) and large segments of the population taken into exile (Lamentations 1:3, 1:18).
- Those who remain are under pitiless foreign rule (Lamentations 1:5, 5:8) and are starving (Lamentations 1:11, 1:19). The situation is so bad that children are fainting from hunger and mothers eating their own offspring (Lamentations 4:3-5, 4:8-10).

It's an appalling vision of what human beings are capable of doing to one another. Too often, similar events have been repeated over the centuries, and the Bible warns of yet more devastating wars to come before Jesus, the Prince of Peace (Isaiah 9:6) at last makes everything new (Revelation 21:5). When that happens, "There will be no more death or mourning or crying or pain, for the old order of things [will have] passed away." (Revelation 21:4). The Creation will be renewed and reconciled in such a way that "The wolf will live with the lamb, the leopard will lie down with the goat, the calf and the lion and the yearling together, and a little child will lead them." (Isaiah 11:6).

Between now and that wonderful time, however, we have to live in a world which will descend into greater and greater chaos. Writing to his friend Timothy, Paul says, "There will be terrible times in the last days." (2 Timothy 3:1). In the verses that follow (2 Timothy 3:2-7) and in Romans 1:18-32, the apostle describes a downward spiral of moral depravity that we're currently witnessing in our own nation and across the world. The Old Testament prophets tell of coming catastrophes, as does the book of Revelation, and Jesus also spoke of end time events so awful that, "If those days had not been cut short, no-one would survive, but for the sake of the elect those days will be shortened." (Matthew 24:22, Mark 13:20).

This isn't to terrify us or cause an atmosphere of doom and gloom. Quite the opposite, because as great as the darkness will be, the light will be even greater. Alongside crisis, God will reveal His glory in the Church and bring a great harvest of souls into His kingdom. But we need to be realistic about where we are and what's coming down the track if we're to be able respond as God wants. Not in fear, since "perfect love drives out fear" (1 John 4:18) and we haven't been given a "spirit of timidity, but of power, love and self-control." (2 Timothy 1:7). Not in trepidation but in hope and expectation, for as Jesus advised his followers, "when these things begin to take place, stand up and lift up your heads, because your redemption is drawing near." (Luke 21:28).

Against that backdrop, Lamentations deserves our serious attention. The Bible says, "The righteous will live by faith." (Romans 1:17, quoting Habakkuk 2:4). Lamentations shows us how we can position ourselves to live by faith in times of calamity by (1) addressing bad theology (ideology or world view, as non-believers might call it), (2) examining and testing our ways and (3) returning to the LORD.

### **Addressing bad theology**

Though Lamentations doesn't say who wrote it, there are good reasons to think it was Jeremiah, the prophet who correctly foretold the Babylonian invasion and the resulting exile. He needed enormous courage to declare this message from God, as it wasn't what government, religious establishment or people wanted to hear, and he suffered greatly for his faithfulness – threatened, abused and falsely imprisoned. We read about this in the Bible book that bears his name, and Lamentations talks about similar things: "Those who were my enemies without cause hunted me like a bird. They tried to end my life in a pit and threw stones at me; the waters closed over my head, and I thought I was about to be cut off." (Lamentations 3:52-55). It was only divine intervention that saved Jeremiah, since many in the Establishment wanted to silence him: "I called on your name, O LORD, from the depths of the pit. You heard my plea: 'Do not close your ears to my cry for relief.' You came near when I called you. And you said, 'Do not fear.'" (Lamentations 3:55-57).

Jeremiah was a lone voice at that time, because many other self-declared prophets were saying the precise opposite. They predicted continuing peace and prosperity, but the theology on which they based those pronouncements was faulty. Events proved the false prophets wrong, and Lamentations reminds us how, and why:

They'd thought Jerusalem was impregnable: "The kings of the earth did not believe, nor did any of the world's people, that enemies and foes could enter the gates of Jerusalem." (Lamentations 4:12).

They'd thought God would protect them for the sake of the blood line of King David: "The LORD's anointed, our very breath, was caught in his traps. We thought that under his shadow we would live among the nations." (Lamentations 4:20).

They'd thought God would always fight for them, though "The LORD himself has scattered them; he no longer watches over them." (Lamentations 4:16).

These ideas were based on misreading Scripture and misunderstanding God's character and ways. They thought God wouldn't allow his temple to fall into the hands of pagans as this was His earthly dwelling-place, and He had "chosen Jerusalem for my Name to be there" (2 Chronicles 6:6). They thought that because God promised King David, "Your house and your kingdom will endure forever before me, your throne will be established forever" (2 Samuel 7:16), the line of Davidic kings would be secure on the throne. And they thought God's promise to Abraham that He was giving the land of Canaan to the patriarch and his descendants as "an everlasting possession" (Genesis 17:8) applied to

them unconditionally. They forgot (or preferred to overlook) the LORD's warnings of how, if Israel persistently disobeyed His commands, "I will scatter you among the nations and will draw out my sword and pursue you. Your land will be laid waste, and your cities will lie in ruins." (Leviticus 26:33; see also Deuteronomy 4:27 and 28:64). We tend to do the same today, picking up on Scriptures we find encouraging or affirming, and preferring not to look too closely at ones that might tell a different story.

This is a reminder to us, especially in times of great deception, that the Bible must be our plumb-line and our failsafe check. Everything – wherever it comes from – must be tested against God's Word. That means the full, undiluted Word, not selected passages or translations that have been massaged to make them more in tune with modern sensibilities. It means taking the ordinary, natural meaning of the Scriptures, not twisting them to fit our pet theories. And it means allowing the Holy Spirit to guide our reading and bring the Scriptures alive for us. Remember: a text out of context is a pretext.

There's much in Scripture to make us uncomfortable and much that challenges us in ways we might prefer to avoid. But we can't have it both ways. Either the Bible is true, or it isn't. And if it's not true in every detail from first to last, how can we have any assurance that any of it is? There are parts of the Word that we can't check scientifically. We weren't present at the foundation of the world or when the Flood came, when the Red Sea parted or Jesus fed five thousand. But if we apply ourselves properly to investigating what the Bible says, we'll find that it's never been proven wrong, giving us confidence to rely on what we can't replicate empirically. And if we live its message, we'll prove its truth through the fruit it brings forth in our lives and the lives of those around us.

## **Lesson one for living by faith in times of calamity: stand firm on the totality of God's Word.**

### **Examining and testing our ways**

Using the Bible as our benchmark, we need an honest appraisal of who and what we are, what we've done and failed to do, and where we presently stand before God. Or, as Lamentations puts it, "Let us examine our ways and test them ... Let us lift up our hearts and our hands to God in heaven and say, 'We have sinned and rebelled and you have not forgiven.'" (Lamentations 3:40-42). This process of examination and testing applies individually, and also collectively as Church and nation. By the way, it's important to note that God's lack of forgiveness towards Judah that this verse records was since there'd been no repentance, which is the necessary pre-condition for forgiveness. They're linked, so: "repentance and forgiveness of sins will be preached in [Christ's] name to all nations" (Luke 24:47).

Examining our ways means measuring them against God's standards as set out in the Bible, and as the writer of Lamentations does so, he concludes, "We have sinned and rebelled" (Lamentations 3:42) – sin and rebellion that ultimately is against God and His laws.

Testing our ways means looking at the results that flow from our behaviour, and so the writer of Lamentations contemplates the spiritual landscape of his nation:

- Many "prisoners [are crushed underfoot] in the land" (Lamentations 3:34).
- Others have justice and their rights deprived (Lamentations 3:35-36).
- The people have become "scum and refuse among the nations" (Lamentations 3:45).
- Judah's "enemies have opened their mouths wide against [them]." (Lamentations 3:46).
- The nation has "suffered terror and pitfalls, ruin and destruction." (Lamentations 3:47)
- The "people are destroyed." (Lamentations 3:48).

These aren't random misfortunes or bad luck. They're a result of spiritual laws playing out, for "God cannot be mocked. A man reaps what he sows." (Galatians 6:7). It's understanding this underlying spiritual dynamic that enables the writer of Lamentations to say, "Who can speak and have it happen if the LORD has not decreed it? Is it not from the mouth of the Most High that both calamities and good things come? Why should any living man complain when punished for his sins?" (Lamentations 3:37-39).

This is the mature response: not to duck responsibility or deny reality, nor to bleat about our bad luck or blame others for what's our fault. We have to look things square in the face. Tough times are coming. There's no use bemoaning the fact. God's put us on earth at this time to do something about it, not to hide under the table. We need to grow up fast.

Like Judah, we've no ground for complaint before God about where we stand at the moment. We, too, have sinned and rebelled against Him, and are suffering the consequences. What Lamentations describes we can readily see in our own time and place. If that sounds a bit strong, consider the huge numbers in our nation who are imprisoned by addictions. Or the people whose mental and physical health is being destroyed by deliberate government policy. Think of the ruin and destruction caused to lives and livelihoods in recent years, and the ever-present threat of domestic terrorism. You can argue the toss about whether we're treated as scum and refuse among the nations, but undeniably, our international standing is a shadow of what it once was. If we carry on down this track, "enemies will open their mouths wide against us" (Lamentations 3:46) and God – who for almost a thousand years has miraculously preserved this nation against all comers – will remove His hand of protection. This is our reality, and it's time for us to step up to the plate. The days of milk are over: it's time for strong meat. The days of passivity are over: it's time for spiritual warfare. The days of compromise are over: it's time for the true ekklesia to arise.

## **Lesson two for living by faith in times of calamity: grow into spiritual adults, don't be content to remain babies.**

### **Returning to the LORD**

At no point does the writer of Lamentations deny reality or seek refuge in fantasy. He "[remembers] my affliction and my wandering, the bitterness and the gall. I well remember them, and my soul is downcast within me." (Lamentations 3:19-20). But he doesn't dissolve into self-pity, either. Though these are the physical circumstances that confront him, he makes a conscious effort not to stay in an attitude of pain and oppression. Instead, he affirms, "Yet this I call to mind and therefore I have hope" (Lamentations 3:21). This deliberate effort to focus on God is part of what a return to the LORD involves. If we put Him front and centre, our perceptions are inevitably transformed and we'll no longer be constrained by outward circumstances.

The writer reflects on God's character and qualities: love, compassion (Lamentations 3:22, repeated in 3:32), faithfulness (Lamentations 3:23), reliability (Lamentations 3:24), goodness (Lamentations 3:25).

Recognising that "the LORD is my portion" (Lamentations 3:24), he acknowledges that God is our all-sufficient source of provision, wherever we are and whatever our circumstances may be.

He knows believers are always called to respond to God's activity, not just sit on their hands. There are times to be still and times to act, times to pray and times to do, for "There is a time for everything,

and a season for every activity under heaven” (Ecclesiastes 3:1). In this case, the right response is an attitude of prayerful and expectant waiting (Lamentations 3:26), acceptance of what God has ordained (Lamentations 3:27), quiet contemplation (Lamentations 3:28), personal repentance (Lamentations 3:29) and godly conduct in the face of provocation (Lamentations 3:30). None of this is fatalism. When he refers to having “hope” (Lamentations 3:21), this is the Hebrew *hatikvah* – not a woolly “I hope I won the lottery” hope, but a sure and certain expectation based on trust in God and in His promises. We may not perceive the Glory, but it’s always there. And even if we’re not conscious of the presence of our Redeemer, Jesus “always lives to intercede for [us].” (Hebrews 7:25). (The Old Testament makes the same point: “Even now my witness is in heaven; my advocate is on high. My intercessor is my friend as my eyes pour out tears to God.; on behalf of a man he pleads with God as a man pleads for his friend.” (Job 16:19-21).

Trust in God allows the writer to proclaim a great truth: “For men are not cast off by the LORD forever. Though he brings grief, he will show compassion, so great is his unfailing love. For he does not willingly bring affliction or grief to the children of men.” (Lamentations 3:31-33).

This passage of hope and expectation from 3:22-33 is very deliberately positioned in the middle of Lamentations, sandwiched between heart-rending descriptions of a shattered nation, shattered capital and shattered people. It’s a reminder that, though we shouldn’t let the physical world define us and our ultimate focus should be God, neither can we stay on the mountain-top forever. At some point, we have to come down to confront the messiness of everyday life, as Moses did when dealing with the Golden Calf (Exodus 32:15-35) and Jesus did after the Transfiguration (Matthew 17:9-23, Mark 9:9-32, Luke 9:37-45). We’re not part of the world, but we are in it, and while here, the LORD intends us to make a difference.

### **Lesson three for living by faith in times of calamity: make God the focus, and lift up our heads, but don’t forget to be salt and light.**

To summarise, three steps we can all take for living by faith in times of calamity: Scripture, maturity and focus.

May it be so in our day.

Amen