

A LAMENT

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The world's attention has been absorbed with the terrorist attacks against the twin towers of the World Trade Center, the Pentagon and all that has followed on the heels of those events of September 11. Among our nation's citizens and friends there has been shock, sorrow, indignation, fear, sympathy. In our own house we had notes of support from Sweden, Africa and Australia.

We each feel dismay, anger, and grief on account of those attacks. But we have to have a concern that our response is not just the instinctive response of Americans, but that of Christians. It is our duty to see the things which happen around us as God would have us see them. As God brings things to pass in his sovereignty, a Christian has a responsibility to look at these in the light of his Word.

What happened in New York and Washington resembles what happened to Jerusalem and Judah in the destructions which the Babylonians brought about 600 years before Christ. The book of Lamentations is a God-inspired commentary on the Babylonian conquest of Jerusalem. There are obviously dissimilarities between what happened in Judah and what happened in America. The destruction of Jerusalem was complete; that of the two cities attacked by the terrorists was not. Jerusalem lost her king; our nation did not. The princes of Judah were overcome, destroyed, or deported, but the leaders of America, thankfully, were not. Jerusalem suffered starvation in the Babylonian siege, so that mothers were driven to eat their own offspring; this was not the case with us. But there are sufficient likenesses between the two different times and places for us to assess these events in the light of the book of Lamentations, a book which bewails the destruction of Jerusalem and Judah in 586 BC.

Similarities with Our Situation

Devastation.—Lamentations is a poetic picture of devastation; so are the pictures which have come to us from the towers on Manhattan Island and the Pentagon. Listen to Lamentation's portrayal of Jerusalem in the light of what your eyes have seen and your ears have heard.

The ways of Zion mourn. All her gates are desolate (1: 4). The Lord . . . hath thrown down in his wrath the strong holds of the daughter of Judah; he has brought them down to the ground (2:2). The Lord was an enemy; he hath swallowed up Israel; he hath swallowed up all her palaces; he hath destroyed his strong holds (2:5). He hath not withdrawn his hand from destroying; therefore he made the rampart to lament [to grieve over their destruction]. Her gates are sunk into the ground; he hath destroyed and broken

her bars (2:9). The young and old lie on the ground in the streets; my virgins and my young men are fallen by the sword (2:21). The stones of the sanctuary are poured out in the top of the street. The Lord hath accomplished his fury; he hath poured out his fierce anger, and hath kindled a fire in Zion, and hath discovered the foundations thereof (4:11). Because of the mountain of Zion, which is desolate, the foxes walk upon it (4:19).

The trade towers were strongholds of business; the Pentagon is a military stronghold. They have been cast down, their gates (or doors) left desolate and devastated, the flames have devoured, they have been swallowed up, the wound is deep and terrible. The young and old lie, not in the streets, but in the ruins. Concrete and steel beams have been poured out; buildings have been devoured down to their foundations. And instead of the sight of foxes walking on the ruins, we have seen search dogs walking among the ruins for signs of either the living or the dead.

Sorrow.—Along with the devastation has come deep, bitter, and widespread sorrow. Listen to the lament of long-ago Jerusalem:

How doth the city sit solitary, that was full of people! She weepeth sore in the night, and her tears are on her cheeks: among all her lovers she hath none to comfort her (1:1-2). Is it nothing to you, all ye that pass by? Behold, and see if there be any sorrow like unto my sorrow, which is done unto me (1:12). For these things I weep; mine eye runneth down with water (1:16). The elders have ceased from the gate, the young men from their music. The joy of our heart is ceased; our dance is turned into mourning (5:14-15).

Tears in abundance flow from these pages; Jerusalem and Judah were a city, a nation sunk in bitterest sorrow. They had lost everything—king and princes and men of war, her temple, her walls, her wealth, her independence and liberty. Comparatively speaking, our reason for sorrow is less than hers of long years ago. But the acts of our enemies have given us reason for sorrow as well. That we should feel it is not wrong. God made us with the ability to enjoy the blessings of good on one hand and to suffer the sorrows of evil on the other. When we saw President Bush fighting back tears, heard Senator Gephardt acknowledge his weeping, and when we saw it on untold faces of people unknown to us, we have seen what people have done through all of time when they have suffered loss. When we weep and sorrow, we have done nothing wrong or shameful. We have done what God made us to do when we experience the evils of this world.

Evil planning.—For our enemies, it has been the day of planning and inflicting destruction and a day of rejoicing. Jeremiah talks to the Lord about the plot of the enemy against his country:

O Lord, thou hast seen my wrong [the wrong they have done unto me]; judge thou my cause. Thou hast seen all their vengeance and all their imaginations against me. Thou hast heard their reproach, O Lord, and all their imaginations against me (3:59-61).

There is a recognition of all the planning and scheming which had gone on among the Babylonians. Their plan was to hurt Judah wherever they could, and they carried out their plan, be it one place or another, mountain or wilderness. So there was the plan, the execution of the plan, and there was a display of elation.

All mine enemies have heard of my trouble; they are glad that thou hast done it (1:21). All that pass by clap their hands at thee; they hiss and wag the head at the daughter of Jerusalem, saying, Is this the city that men call the perfection of beauty, the joy of the whole earth? All thine enemies have opened their mouth against thee; they hiss and gnash the teeth; they say, we have swallowed her up; certainly this is the day that we looked for; we have found, we have seen it. The Lord . . . hath caused thine enemy to rejoice over thee (1:15-17).

Men have not changed. We heard about men in sight of the twin towers in New York who gave evidence of joy, and we saw people on the streets of foreign cities raising their hands and shouting and laughing for what was done against us in September.

Anger.—Another point of likeness is the anger that has been felt in this nation.

Let all their wickedness come before thee; and do unto them as thou hast done unto me for all my transgressions (1:21). Render unto them a recompense, O Lord, according to the work of their hands. Give them sorrow of heart, thy curse unto them. Persecute and destroy them in anger from under the heavens of the Lord (3:64-66).

In both these passages the anger is expressed in prayer to God. Judah and Jerusalem had no power for a righteous response to their neighbor, no ability to mount a war against them. But they could take their case to God, and they did.

There is a legitimate, righteous and dutiful anger. Placid acceptance or submission to evil is no virtue. Anger against sin is not a vice. God is angry with sin and he would have his people indignant against sin also. “Be ye angry and sin not. Ye that love the Lord hate evil.” There is indeed such a thing as righteous indignation, but the corruption of our nature is such that more often than not a good deal of unrighteousness gets mixed into our righteous indignation. We must guard against masking sinful hatred and vengeance with declarations of anger against sin. But to desire a just punishment on our enemies for the evil they have done is not an evil passion, but a righteous sentiment.

God has armed the civil magistrate, the government, with the authority to seek out and punish those who do evil.

Rulers are not a terror to good works, but to the evil. He is the minister of God to thee for good. But if thou do that which is evil, be afraid; for he beareth not the sword in vain; for he is a minister of God, a revenger to execute wrath upon him that doeth evil (Rom. 13:3-4).

Whoever planned the attacks upon the World Trade Center and the Pentagon were evil doers and the sense of justice which God has written into our beings calls for retaliation, not for personal gratification either of citizens or rulers, but as the outworking of justice according to the law of God.

The Difference in Our Situation

We have seen similarities between what was experienced in Jerusalem in the sixth century BC and what happened in America in the twenty-first century AD. While there are evident similarities, there is also one obvious difference. That dissimilarity has to do with SIN. The writer of the Book of Lamentations ACKNOWLEDGED THE NATION'S SIN AND GOD'S JUDGEMENT AS THE CAUSE FOR THE DESTRUCTION AND SORROWS which had come on them. We have not heard a public voice giving expression to such a conviction today. Listen once again to Lamentations:

The Lord hath afflicted her for the multitude of her transgressions (1:5). Jerusalem hath grievously sinned; therefore she is removed (1:8). We have transgressed and have rebelled; thou hast not pardoned. Thou hast covered with anger, and persecuted us; thou hast slain; thou hast not pitied. Thou hast covered thyself with a cloud, that our prayer should not pass through (3:42-44). For the sins of her prophets, and the iniquities of her priests, that have shed the blood of the just in the midst of her (4:13).

And who, according to the author of this book, bore a large share of responsibility for the destruction and sorrow which came upon the nation? Let me give you an answer from another translation:

Your prophets have seen for you false and deceptive visions; they have not uncovered your iniquity, to bring back your captives, but have envisioned for you false prophecies and delusions (2:14).

Is our nation guilty of rebellion against the Lord, or transgressions against his law? We wish not, but how can we hold to the Bible as our rule of faith and practice and think our nation is a God-fearing people? Both tables of God's law, duties both to man and to God, are openly, flagrantly, constantly and widely violated. Among all the voices we have been hearing, who is saying, "We have rebelled, we have transgressed"?

Because our nation is not being confronted with its sin, we are making ourselves more guilty and more deserving of God's wrath and punishment. And who bears the great responsibility for our insensitivity to and silence concerning our sin? The present day prophets—the clergy. In the memorial services of these recent days, have we heard voices lead the nation to acknowledge these sufferings to be inflicted not merely by human enemies, but by a righteous God who has used these enemies as instruments of his wrath? We have not heard it, and I think that many in this nation would be indignant to think that anybody sees this as judgement for sin.

What do you think will be the mind of God when we go on self-righteously in our rebellion? We deserve more and greater displays of God's displeasure. When God entered into a covenant with Israel, promising blessing if they obeyed his law and punishment if they disobeyed, he told them that the more they sinned, the more severe would be his judgments. In Leviticus 26:14 he told them the terrible things he would do if they did not obey. Then in verse 18 he said, "If ye will not yet for all this hearken unto me, then I will punish you seven times more for your sins." Again in verses 23 and 24 he declared, "If ye will not be reformed by me by these things, but will walk contrary unto me; then will I also walk contrary unto you, and will punish you yet seven times for your sins." What took place in New York City and Washington,

D.C., should make us thoughtful of our national sins, but repentant for our own sins. If there is no repentance, our present sorrows could be only the beginning of sorrows.

Supplication and Submission to God

We have looked at the similarities and the dissimilarities between Lamentations and what we are hearing and seeing today. Let me close with an “ought to be” similarity, which is supplication and submission to God. Let me end with the verses which end the book:

Thou O Lord, remainest forever; thy throne from generation to generation. Wherefore dost thou forget us for ever, and forsake us for so long time? Turn thou us unto Thee, O Lord, and we shall be turned; renew our days as of old. But thou hast utterly rejected us; thou are very wroth against us (5:19-22).

With desolation and suffering around us and anger within us and unrighteous ways behind us as a nation, and with enemies’ jubilation around us, what shall we do? Look to God in repentance. Look to Christ Jesus in faith and hope and humility. Let us acknowledge that God is the everlasting God and that his throne, his rule is forever. If at this time in history it seems He might forget us and give us up to more of what we saw, then let our prayer be that he should mercifully turn to us who have turned from him, and so turn us to him and renew the days of old when he was acknowledged in this land. If we in future days should have reason to say “thou hast utterly rejected us; thou art very wroth with us,” our duty would be to submit to the hand of God with the acknowledgment, “even so, Father, for so it seems good in thy sight.”

It might seem that this is a bleak note upon which to end a sermon, but on such a bleak note ends one of the books of God, one of his sermons to us. That should not weaken our faith, but make us more importuning to God, “whose mercies are new every morning, whose faithfulness is great.” God deals with this nation and with each of us as he sees fit in his infinite wisdom and truth, in his goodness, righteousness and holiness.