

July 19, 2015 The Churchill: It's Always a Matter of Perspective: Lamentations 3:19-39 J. M. Terrett

Read the Passage: Lamentations 3:19-29

We are in the summer season and in Judaism this always brings back the memory of the disasters which our people have suffered. You see, summer was the time the kings went to war while the crops were growing and frequently the winner got to harvest them and the loser starved. I have three introductory remarks to make before I get into the meat of my sermon this morning. First of all, the Jewish calendar is set up so that all the biblical feasts occur in the spring, summer and fall – following the harvest cycle.

There were three main harvest times: Barley (Passover), Wheat (Pentecost) and fruit, with a second grain harvest (Tabernacles). But there is quite a time gap between Pentecost which occurs in the spring and Tabernacles, which occurs in the fall. It was during this gap that the walls of Jerusalem were breached by the Babylonians and three weeks later the temple was burned (both temples were burned on the same day).

To handle the memory of this distress, there are ten special Sabbaths which are observed: three of Affliction, between the breaching of the walls and the burning of the temple and seven Sabbaths of Consolation. Yesterday was the second Sabbath of Affliction and after next Sabbath, we begin to climb out of the pit of despair and we read passages of consolation from Isaiah to get us ready for Jewish New Year and the fall feasts. This is because we want our lives to turn around the goodness of G-d and not around the disasters of life.

Second of all, Jeremiah was a special prophet because he was also part of the High Priestly family and he was a contemporary of Josiah, the last righteous king of Judah who was killed when he led an army against Pharaoh Neco. The remaining kings went from bad to worse and Jeremiah's warnings about the need for repentance went unheeded.

When the last king of Judah rebelled against Babylon, during the long final siege, Jeremiah recommended surrender to the people because the rebellion did not have the blessing of G-d. So he was put in prison, which was actually a dry cistern, and was told that the Babylonians would have to set him free, which they eventually did.

He saw the city burn and witnessed the destruction of the temple and a great slaughter of the defenders. To deal with this pain and the incredible horror of watching pagans defile the temple and carry off its remaining treasures, he composed the lamentations in a very special format called an acrostic, which is my third introductory point.

The book has five chapters, the first two and the last two each have 22 letters and the first word in each verse begins with a letter of the Hebrew alphabet. The third chapter has 66 verses and goes through the Hebrew alphabet three times, for a total of seven acrostics. Psalm 119, composed by Ezra, is the longest acrostic in the Bible and is broken in stanzas, each with eight verses where the first words of each stanza follow the Hebrew alphabet for a total of $22 \times 8 = 176$ verses.

Proverbs 31:10-31 is also an acrostic where the virtues of a good wife are extolled. This was a Babylonian habit our people picked up and only the portions of the Bible composed during and after the captivity are afflicted with this way of writing.

When I look at the sad state of our world and at the atrocities which are committed and the pollution and the political corruption which our world seems to be so full of, it would be easy for me to despair and become cynical. So today, now that you understand about the context of the passage we read, I want to examine some features of the passage to see how they would apply to our own context in the sunset years of our lives.

You see, it's always a matter of perspective, and one major failing which believers are prone to in times of personal distress and loss is to think the whole world is collapsing, when it is only our lives which are passing through trials and troubles. The first three verses speak about the shift which Jeremiah is able to make when he considers his horrible situation:

When I think about my distress and my misery, about absinth (wormwood) and poison; when my soul remembers, she is cast down within me. Behold that which I wish to reflect on in my heart, and is that which gives me hope: the steadfast love of the L-RD never ceases, His mercies never come to an end; they are renewed every morning; great is Your faithfulness. The L-RD is my portion, says my soul, therefore I will hope in Him. The L-RD is good for those who wait for Him, for the soul which seeks Him.

Our lives may crumble, wars may shatter our world and disease may strike us down - friends may forsake us and we may see those we love die and leave us feeling very alone, but there is a higher reality in which we can seek refuge. The purposes of G-d cannot be overturned and His goodness is always there for us to call upon. In other words, we are never left totally alone and His love never forsakes us.

There have been a lot of commentaries on WWI and WWII on the television lately and it is hard for me to imagine the horror of the bombing and the great loss of life which nearly turned Europe into a pile of rubble. C.S. Lewis said that after the first few battles of WWI, all of his good friends were dead. As believers we need to be able to work through our bitterness and anger and realize that above all that is going on and through everything we can possibly experience, the goodness and the mercy of G-d are still intact and will welcome us, both in this life and in the life which is to come.

I do not want to cast a shadow on your summers, but I want to help you to remind yourselves that in all the ups and downs of life, the goodness and the mercy of G-d need to be the reality we see most clearly and stubbornly in our lives. Two more verses from our passage to deal with today.

Lamentations 3: 36 says that ***when people do wrong to others without reason, does the L-RD not see it?*** He will not cast off His people forever and He is active in our lives even when we are being fed into ovens and chased from one country to another. He is even there when we lose everything and have nothing left which we treasure.

He will act in His time, He just wants to make sure that we act the way we should at all times. We may lose control of our situations, and be beaten and imprisoned and carried away into captivity, but He does not want us to lose control of ourselves in these situations. He is aware. He is active and feels our pain and our loss – the most important thing for us is to see beyond the pain and the turmoil and rest in His love and compassion and not lose sight of the One who will always love us and have our best interests at heart.

These interests are spiritual and will not be fully understood in this life, but as long as we

understand His compassion and mercy in this life, everything will turn out in the bigger picture – because truly this is what really matters. As long as we do not lose sight of this bigger picture we are not really in any dangerous or permanent distress.

The passage ends with a statement which I find comforting, even though it kind of smacks me every time I read it: ***Why should a living man complain? Let each one lament about his own sins.*** Jeremiah has just finished saying that nothing happens without at least the permission of G-d, so we really have got nothing to complain about in the long run.

He kept his life, as did all the captives who were taken to Babylon, and though he ended his life as an unwilling hostage in Egypt, his faith remained intact and he never let the ups and downs of his situation dictate how he should live or how he should respond to the trials he faced.

We need to constantly take refuge in His mercy and compassion. Also, we need to remember that the L-RD is aware of our troubles and has not lost control of the situation (even if we have). Lastly we need to see that as long as we are alive, we should not complain – and even if we lose our life, if our faith is intact, we have really suffered no permanent, eternal loss. And we leave behind us a heritage of faith which can speak to our children and grandchildren, just as the faith of all those who have preceded us can speak to us.

It is always a matter of perspective and it is my prayer this morning that the perspective we maintain over the summer is one of faith and confidence in the goodness and mercy of G-d. This is because when all is said and done, all the sad troubles and the horror of this old world will pass away and the only permanent double feature of life which shall always be there is His mercy and compassion.

I want to base my life and my responses to my life on that which is permanent and not upon that which is temporary, be it ever so painful or ever so good. As believers we have the privilege of seeing the end of the story and the final, bigger picture. May the L-rd grant us the spiritual tenacity and wisdom to make the end of the story and the final, bigger picture the perspective we maintain through all the seasons and ups and downs of our lives.

Shalom.

Let's pray.