David Meiklejohn
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A Light in the Black

Or How to Find Hope in the Darkness

Lamentations 3

Introduction

Would you rather have 400 nits or 500 nits? I guess the answer depends on who you are. If you are a parent or a teacher you will probably have strong opinions on this and proclaim the fewer nits the better (nits are a name for hair lice). However if you've been researching to buy a new television, you might know that nits are the unit of brightness, and a brighter TV is often a better one.

Brightness isn't the only criteria though. TV makers often tell you how much contrast they can display, between the darkest blacks and the brightest whites. And that's really the figure that the enthusiast is looking for. To show the televisions off they often have a slow moving video of a flame in the darkness, or something similar, so you can see what a contrast the screen can give.

Because contrast is important in our lives! Our eyes are drawn to contrast - a zebra is more visually stimulating than a donkey. Our ears are drawn to contract too, in music. A rousing chorus is more impactful if the music quietens before it. And it's also true for our other senses. One of the best meals I've had was in a beachfront cafe, after a much longer than anticipated walk. Being really hungry made the meal tastier.

The writer of the poems in Lamentations knows this rule. The first two chapters have been pretty dark, haven't they? In fact the book consists of 5 poems that are all very dark apart from the middle one, chapter 3. And even in chapter 3 we find that there is darkness either side of the middle verses. So when there is light, it blazes out of the pages at us. Maybe when we sing the song based on these verses, Great is Thy Faithfulness, we miss out on the context. Perhaps we think that the author is having a great life, and can easily say that God is faithful. But the opposite is true. The hymn writer was actually suffering from poor health and money problems. The writer of Lamentations is in the midst of disaster. I think we should introduce a first verse to the song, full of doom and gloom, so that the chorus is a surprise, a contrast.

So how does the writer have this great turnaround? Where does the light come from? And does it just fade away to nothing afterwards? Let's delve into the chapter to find the answers.

Structure

A quick word about the structure of this chapter. We've heard before that these are poems, written as 22 verses in each, with the first four being alphabet poems - each verse starts with the relevant letter of the Hebrew alphabet. The middle chapter is similar, except that the

verses are split into 3 lines, each starting with the same letter. So we have 66 verses, though each verse is small, so the poem is roughly the same size as the others.

The first 7 letters, 21 verses, begin in darkness. The next 7 letters, and 21 verses, are like a match being struck in the darkness. There is brilliant light at first, though it dies down a little. The remainder of the poem returns to darkness, but it's not quite the same as before.

101 Metaphors

In the first poem in Lamentations we read about the suffering of Jerusalem as a picture of a women who has suffered great loss. She is like a widow in mourning. The city as a whole is dealt a bitter blow, and can find no one to comfort her. Jerusalem is referred to as "she" and "her" throughout the poem.

In the second poem the focus is on the people in the city. We hear about how "they" have suffered because of the wrath of God. We read about the kings and princes, the prophets, the elders, the young women, mothers and daughters, the young and the old. Individual people are suffering because of the wrath of the Lord.

In our third poem, the focus is on the writer. It starts with the word "I" and we read about the deeply personal suffering of the author. It reminds me of some of the poems that many of us will be familiar with if we took English in high school, and studied the war poets. Men like Siegfried Sassoon and Wilfred Owen wrote about the horrendous things they saw in the First World War. Those poems were graphic, they were bitter and they were very personal. Owen referenced the Latin phrase "Dulce et decorum est, pro patria mori" in his most famous poem, translating to "it is sweet and fitting to die for your country". But he called it the "old lie". There is no light in their words. And so starts our passage:

I am the man who has seen affliction
under the rod of his wrath;
he has driven and brought me
into darkness without any light;
surely against me he turns his hand
again and again the whole day long.
[Lamentations 3 v 1-3]

We then have a long list of metaphors and similes as he tries to explain and express his grief. Rather than use one picture and expand upon it like the first poem, here he hits us with picture after painful picture:

He has made my flesh and my skin waste away;
he has broken my bones;
[Lamentations 3 v 4]

He feels like the corpse of a defeated warrior

He has walled me about so that I cannot escape;

he has made my chains heavy;

[Lamentations 3 v 7]

Now he is like a prisoner.

he has blocked my ways with blocks of stones;

he has made my paths crooked.

[Lamentations 3 v 9]

He is like a traveller being obstructed at every turn.

He is a bear lying in wait for me,

a lion in hiding;

[Lamentations 3 v 10]

He feels like the prey of fearsome beasts.

he bent his bow and set me

as a target for his arrow.

[Lamentations 3 v 12]

He is a marked man.

He has made my teeth grind on gravel,

and made me cower in ashes;

[Lamentations 3 v 16]

He is destitute, with nothing to eat and nowhere to live.

so I say, "My endurance has perished;

so has my hope from the Lord."

[Lamentations 3 v 18]

He is like an athlete who has given up the race.

Despite all these different illustrations, the feelings are very real. He is in the depths of despair, and sees no hope for his situation. There is no mention of other people, nothing about Jerusalem, this is all personal. And he's very clear that it is God who has done this to him.

I wonder if you've ever felt like this? in a place where everything is terrible and you see no hope. There is no way to prevent disaster from happening, in fact maybe it has already happened. Or maybe you've met someone who is in such a dark place, and you want to help, you want make it better, but there is nothing you can do. What does the writer do about it?

The next three verses are remarkable, for the pivot they create from darkness into light. Look at verses 19 to 21:

Remember my affliction and my wanderings,

the wormwood and the gall!

My soul continually remembers it

and is bowed down within me.

But this I call to mind,

and therefore I have hope:

[Lamentations 3 v 19-21]

Firstly, he doesn't hide the pain and the suffering. He doesn't try and put them behind them. In fact he says "remember" them. He calls on the reader to join him in his contemplation of the darkness he is in.

Secondly he shows us how this remembering has affected him. His soul within him is bowed down. He knows he's looking at himself and his circumstances and he knows he is limiting his view.

And now with an effort of will he turns his gaze from himself and his surroundings to the creator God. Here is where the torch is lit in the black of night and the light blazes out. Here is where the song's mournful verse has died to a whisper and the chorus comes crashing in. Here is where the gnawing hunger is replaced by the taste of the most delicious food.

So what did he call to mind? What gave him hope in the darkness? Let's read on to find out.

Great is Your Faithfulness

For the next 21 verses we are treated to the most beautiful picture of the nature of God, starting with three of the most powerful verses in the Bible about him:

The steadfast love of the Lord never ceases;

his mercies never come to an end;

they are new every morning;

great is your faithfulness.

"The Lord is my portion," says my soul,

"therefore I will hope in him."

[Lamentations 3 v 22-24]

How did we get from there to here, from darkness to light? Perhaps one of the reasons is that the writer has been looking at the wrath of God being meted out, and has realised that it is just what he promised. He said that if Israel departed from him he would bring justice down on them. And if that part of the promise is true then the rest is true as well. God does reward those who follow him.

These three verses speak of a God who loves his people unconditionally and unremittingly. And that love is even demonstrated in the darkness that has overcome Jerusalem. When Job lost all that he had, and said that the Lord gives and the Lord takes away, it's not that he gives

in love and takes away in anger. Even the taking away is love. Its aim is to turn his people back to him, and away from their harmful sinning.

What are the mercies that are new every morning then? Aren't they just life itself? To awaken and to know the start of another day is by God's mercy. It is a gift from him. Again with Job, Satan was given every power over Job's life: his wealth, his family, his household, and his health. But not his life. That was for God to give or take, according to his will. And he gives us his mercy faithfully, day after day. He doesn't get tired or bored, or forget one day. He loves us without ceasing.

And who else could be our portion? Who else will feed us day after day? Who else could we have our hope in? The author here has nothing else to lean on. It has all been stripped away. And so he hopes in the Lord. Are we sometimes too comfortable to realise that our only hope is God? Maybe we hope in money, or status, or family, or our own unique set of skills. But Lamentations is a reminder that all those things can be taken from us. Only God is faithful and only in him is our hope secure. When we sing these words in times of comfort they might not shine so much, but in the darkness, those words burn brightly.

The Flame Burns On

For the next 18 verses the writer contemplates the nature of God. We hear that:

- He is a rewarding God, verses 25-27, to those who wait for him, who bear the yolk of suffering.
- He is a faithful God, verses 28-30, even as we are laid low, "*there may be hope*" because God doesn't forget his promises.
- He is a compassionate God, verses 31-33, it is not in his nature to cause grief or afflict, and he will have compassion.
- He is a just God, verses 34-36, who hates injustice and oppression. We find time and again in the prophetic books that God hates it when the powerful oppress the weak.
- He is the creator God, verses 35-37. He spoke and it came to pass. Again looking back to Job, good and bad come from him, he gives and he takes away.

And now there is a call to action. Look at verses 40-42:

Let us test and examine our ways,
and return to the Lord!
Let us lift up our hearts and hands
to God in heaven:
"We have transgressed and rebelled,
and you have not forgiven.
[Lamentations 3 v 40-42]

The author here calls the people to see their sin and their guilt. They need to turn away from it and turn to the Lord. The reason that he has not forgiven is because they have no yet repented.

Afterimage or Ember?

From here it looks like the poem is returning to darkness. But there's still a hint of light. Is it an afterimage of the light like when you see a bright image and close your eyes, to find you can still see the outline of the image, that slowly fades away? Or is it an ember, a remnant of the fire, ready to be fanned back into flame?

From verse 42 it looks like the writer is telling the people what to say. Instead of I and me, he uses we and us. "*We have transgressed and rebelled*", "*You have made us scum and garbage*". The situation around them is still terrible, but there is that glimmer of hope. In verse 50 he says "*until the Lord from heaven looks down and sees*".

The language turns personal once again, and perhaps the author is Jeremiah after all because he talks about the experience of being thrown in a pit, which did happen to Jeremiah.

"I have been hunted like a bird
by those who were my enemies without cause;
they flung me alive into the pit
and cast stones on me;
water closed over my head;
I said, 'I am lost.'
[Lamentations 3 v 52-54]

And here is where the ember is fanned into flame again. It was when Jeremiah was in the pit that God came to the rescue:

"I called on your name, O Lord,
from the depths of the pit;
you heard my plea, 'Do not close
your ear to my cry for help!'
You came near when I called on you;
you said, 'Do not fear!'
"You have taken up my cause, O Lord;
you have redeemed my life.
You have seen the wrong done to me, O Lord;
judge my cause.
[Lamentations 3 v 55-59]

And the poem finishes with an amazing confidence in God, as the writer is sure that Israel will be avenged, and their enemies defeated:

"You will repay them, O Lord,
according to the work of their hands.
You will give them dullness of heart;
your curse will be on them.
You will pursue them in anger and destroy them
from under your heavens, O Lord."
[Lamentations 3 v 64-66]

Hope in the Darkness

How can you stand in the midst of disaster and have confidence that things will turn around? How can you have hope in the darkness? I'm sure it's a question many people are asking. Even this week we have seen many people lose everything they possess at the hands of a hurricane. How can they have hope?

Thankfully God has an answer to the darkness. John calls it the True Light.

The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness has not overcome it. [John 1 v 5]

He goes on to say:

The true light, which gives light to everyone, was coming into the world. He was in the world, and the world was made through him, yet the world did not know him. He came to his own, and his own people did not receive him. But to all who did receive him, who believed in his name, he gave the right to become children of God, who were born, not of blood nor of the will of the flesh nor of the will of man, but of God. [John 1 v 9-13]

That Light was Jesus. He came into the world to bring light to the darkness. If you believe on him you become a child of God, and the True Light will always be with you.

But what about those of you who know Jesus and you find yourself in darkness again. Terrible things are happening around you. Jeremiah doesn't ask you to ignore them, they're real. He says to remember them. But then look to the Lord. Let him shine out to you anew.