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29 October 2024

The Way Out

Lamentations 5

Introduction

Have you ever been stuck somewhere and not been able to find the way out? Claire and I had a holiday in Paris many years ago, and we visited all the big attractions, including the Louvre museum. The place was enormous and we could have spent days wandering about the different sections. However after wandering about for a bit, and taking some time in the Egyptian section, we decided to leave. Easier said than done, though! It took us ages to find the way out. In fact, I think we spent longer leaving the museum than we did looking around the museum. If there was one thing it needed, it was more "Way Out" signs. I don't know what would happen if there was a fire, but I really hope that they have illuminated signs, or arrows like the ones you get on a plane, that guide you to the exit.

Life can be like that, especially when difficulties and hardship come. It can seem like we're stuck, that no matter where we look there are no signs of a way out, and we can feel like we're stuck in the situation forever.

That's how the author of Lamentations seems to have felt as we get to chapter 5.

Structure

Remember the previous chapters: they were all about the immediate aftermath to the overthrow of Jerusalem, of the horrors that the author saw and the effect they had on the Jewish people. Well in this chapter, in this poem, we seem to have moved on in time. We have passed the shock of defeat and are now dealing with life in the defeated nation. The immediate horrors of death and destruction are replaced with long-term hardship, living in constant danger, struggling to get enough food and water. The author seems to be frustrated that things aren't getting any better. They seem to be stuck, and there doesn't seem to be a way out.

You can sense his frustration even in the structure of the poem. It contains 22 verses like the 4 previous ones, but there is no alphabet order here, no A-Z of suffering, just a stream of complaint. There's also a sense of urgency as the poem is shorter. Chapter one and two had verses that were 6 lines long. Chapter three had triplets of verses of two lines, so was effectively the same size. Chapter four was shorter, with 4-line verses, but here the verses are just 2 lines long.

We also have another change of pronoun here. Chapter 1 used the metaphor of Jerusalem as a lady without a helper, and used "she" a lot. In chapter 2 we heard about how others were suffering and we had a lot of "they" and "them". For chapter 3 the focus turned to the author himself. Remember it started with "I am the man who has seen affliction". And it seemed that in contemplating his own afflictions he was drawn to look to God, and see his faithfulness.

However last time in chapter 4 we found ourselves back at "they" and "them", with the occasional "my people". It's only near the end of chapter 4 that we had a bit of a breakthrough. Look at the change from verse 16 to verse 17 of chapter 4:

16 The Lord himself has scattered them;
he will regard them no more;
no honor was shown to the priests,
no favor to the elders.

17 Our eyes failed, ever watching
vainly for help;
in our watching we watched
for a nation which could not save.
[Lamentations 4 v 16-17]

You see what has happened? He has stopped thinking of those suffering as "them", but as "us". He identifies himself with the people who have sinned and deserve the Lord's punishment. And it seems that in doing so, he sees the possibility of an end to that punishment.

Chapter 5 is all "we", "us" and "our". I think that recognition of communal suffering and communal responsibility is important. We can be very individualistic and think that we're OK, but the rest of the world is in a state. If we can recognise that we are part of the problem then maybe we can start looking for a way out for everyone.

Still Stuck

But at the start of chapter 5 the people are still stuck. The author starts by crying out for God to see their plight:

Remember, O Lord, what has befallen us;
look, and see our disgrace!
[Lamentations 5 v 1]

In verses 2 to 6 he then points out some of the things they have lost. Their land and their homes have been taken over by strangers; their families have been broken; they no longer have free access to water and fuel; they have no security and no rest. Their self-sufficiency is gone and they find themselves looking to others for help:

Our inheritance has been turned over to strangers,
our homes to foreigners.
We have become orphans, fatherless;
our mothers are like widows.

We must pay for the water we drink;

the wood we get must be bought.

Our pursuers are at our necks;

we are weary; we are given no rest.

We have given the hand to Egypt, and to Assyria,

to get bread enough.

[Lamentations 5 v 2-6]

In verse 7 he complains about the unfairness of it all:

Our fathers sinned, and are no more;

and we bear their iniquities.

[Lamentations 5 v 7]

Do you ever feel that you're being made to suffer for someone else's mistakes? I get that all the time. Especially at work, where you're relying on other people to do their bit. When they mess it up it often means that I've got something extra to do, or need to tidy up the mess, or even just spent time working out the scale of the damage done. Our team has a saying that whenever anything goes wrong, we blame it on the last person to leave the team. That seems to be what the writer is doing here. It was their fathers who sinned and they are suffering for it. Do you think that's true? Certainly we sometimes suffer the consequences of other people's sins. But I think there's still a bit of self-realisation to happen here.

Is There a Way Out?

Certainly things are bad. As we go on we find that danger is around them at all times, and harm comes often, and no one is safe, whether they are women, princes, elders, young men, old men or boys. Verse 15 sums up the mood of the people:

The joy of our hearts has ceased;

our dancing has been turned to mourning.

[Lamentations 5 v 15]

This sounds like a people without hope, who are stuck in their situation and see no way out. But verse 16 is a bit of a breakthrough:

The crown has fallen from our head;

woe to us, for we have sinned!

[Lamentations 5 v 16]

Step 1 in finding their way out of the darkness is to acknowledge their sin. The writer does it on their behalf because he knows it is essential. In verses 17 and 18 he goes on to say that their sin is the reason they're in this predicament.

For this our heart has become sick,

for these things our eyes have grown dim,

for Mount Zion which lies desolate;

jackals prowl over it.

[Lamentations 5 v 17-18]

All the difficulties they find themselves in are their own fault. They can't blame it on their parents. It is their own sin that still holds them stuck in this situation, seemingly abandoned by God. And that's where step 2 comes:

Step 2 is to realise that God is sovereign. Look at verse 19:

But you, O Lord, reign forever;

your throne endures to all generations.

[Lamentations 5 v 19]

He is over all things and reigns forever. There's no point in arguing with him. You don't argue with a king. You have no power in this dynamic. And it's with this thought that he wonders if they're just stuck where they are forever:

Why do you forget us forever,

why do you forsake us for so many days?

[Lamentations 5 v 20]

Is there any hope at all? Are they stuck under the oppression of others, scraping out their daily rations, fearing for their safety every moment? But then we have the breakthrough. Suddenly we see the way out.

Step 3 is to realise that to be restored in ourselves, we must first be restored to God.

Restore us to yourself, O Lord, that we may be restored!

Renew our days as of old—

[Lamentations 5 v 21]

And that's the key. The way out is through God. It's through a restored relationship with him. And that can only happen if there is confession, repentance and surrender. Confession of our sins, turning away from them, and giving ourselves over to him as king in our lives.

The New Testament makes it even clearer, as Jesus Christ, the Son of God, went to the cross to pay for that restoration. And so it is through him that we have this chance to escape darkness. He said himself: "*I am the way, the truth and the life*".

When we teach this we often say he's the way to Heaven. But he's also the way out of darkness.

There's an old hymn that sums it up well:

There's a way back to God,

From the dark paths of sin.

There's a door that is open

And you may go in.

At Calvary's cross is where you begin

When you come as a sinner to Jesus.

Unresolved Endings

So is that it sorted? Have the Israelites found their way back to God and out of misery? Well, not yet. The poem, and the book, ends without a resolution. Look at the last verse:

unless you have utterly rejected us,

and you remain exceedingly angry with us.

[Lamentations 5 v 22]

So there's an uncertainty there. The poem has detailed the darkness they're in once again. It has worked out the reason: their sin. It has even shown the way out: a restored relationship with God. But we don't know if they'll take it. We're left hanging, instead of being shown the ending. It's as if the last page has been left out of the book.

Is this maybe where you are though? Are you stuck in the darkness, looking for a way out? Maybe God has shown you the problem: it's your sin. Maybe he's shown you the way out: it's a restored relationship with him, through faith in his son. But that requires you to confess, repent and surrender to him. If you haven't made that decision yet then your future is still unresolved. There are two possible paths:

- Restored and renewed, as in verse 21
- Or utterly rejected, like in verse 22

Please take that step today.

Or maybe you've found the way out. Maybe you're living in the light, knowing a restored relationship with God. What's the best you can do for your friend who is still in the darkness? How about holding up a big arrow pointing to Jesus, and shouting "Look! this is the way out". The Bible tells us that as the church we have a ministry of reconciliation, that is pointing the way for others to be restored back to God. Listen to 2 Corinthians 5 v 17-21:

Therefore, if anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation. The old has passed away; behold, the new has come. All this is from God, who through Christ reconciled us to himself and gave us the ministry of reconciliation; that is, in Christ God was reconciling the world to himself, not counting their trespasses against them, and entrusting to us the message of reconciliation. Therefore, we are ambassadors for Christ, God making his appeal through us. We implore you on behalf of Christ, be reconciled to God. For our sake he made him to be sin who knew no sin, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God.

[2 Corinthians 5 v 17-21]