

FALLEN ASTONISHINGLY

A Survey of Lamentations

Study #2

The Lessons of Lamentations (Selected Verses)

לֹא יִהְיֶה-לְךָ אֱלֹהִים אֲחֵרִים עַל-פְּנֵי

“Never ever will there be lesser gods against the faces.”
(Exodus 20:3)

I. THE FIRST COMMAND AND THE BIBLICAL DEFINITION OF SIN

- A. *Exodus 20:3* = (cf. *Deuteronomy 5:7*) This first command, almost obvious in its basic truth, forms the biblical bedrock for understanding the nature and definition of sin. The literal picture of the Hebrew phrase is very intimate. Picture yourself standing somewhere. Then picture God so close to you that his face is literally against yours (almost like dancing “cheek-to-cheek”). The phrase used in both referenced passages (*Exodus* and *Deuteronomy*) is identical in Hebrew. It is simultaneously a promise and a command, and it means exactly what it says. God’s promise to you is that there will never be anything lesser than His full glory and intimacy offered to you. He will never put anything between His face and yours. The command is that you show the same fealty by allowing nothing to come between your face and His.
- B. *Proverbs 3:32* = The Hebrew word translated “devious” here is *nālōz’* (נָלוֹז) and literally means *to escape from sight or to depart*. Conversely, the word translated “intimate” is the Hebrew *sōd’* (סֹד), which means literally *a secret or a confidential discussion*. The truth of this proverb is that those who are “abominations,” those who are abhorrent to God, are such because they have escaped or departed from His sight. Something has come between their faces and His. But those who have not departed are not only called “righteous” here, but are said to be partakers of the LORD’s *secrets or confidential discussions*.
- C. *Isaiah 59:1-2* = It is **iniquity** that causes our separation from God. It is **sin** that has “hidden faces.” So what, then, is sin...and what, consequently, is the nature of repentance?
- D. *Isaiah 53:6a* = Here is the essence of sin, defined most succinctly: we have gone astray, turned aside to our own way. We have, essentially, allowed everything else to come *against the faces*.

1. The Analogy of a Heart Attack

- a. *Symptoms*. The symptoms of a heart attack may include pain in the left arm, cold sweats, anxiety, heartburn and nausea, among other things. Some symptoms may be more severe, and some less. Some may be more common, and some less. And yet if I asked you to describe a heart attack, listing these symptoms doesn’t really get at the root, does it? These symptoms, no matter their severity or commonality, are not what *defines* a heart attack...they are what *accompanies* one.
- b. *Underlying Problem*. The underlying problem is that there is a blockage of blood flow to the heart.
- c. *The Difference Between Symptoms and the Underlying Problem*. The main difference can be illustrated with two realities: diagnosis and treatment.
- i. *Diagnosis*. A competent doctor could look at these outward symptoms, and give a fairly good guess at what is the underlying problem. With further tests, the diagnosis could be confirmed. But it is not the symptoms themselves that are diagnosed. It is the underlying cause.
- ii. *Treatment*. Having made the diagnosis, the doctor doesn’t proceed to treat each symptom (Tylenol for the ache in the arm; Tums for the heartburn; etc.). He treats the underlying problem...the blockage. Why? Because if the doctor alleviated the symptoms without resolving the blockage, the patient would still die. He might be in less pain when he died, might even have the illusion that he’d been cured...but he would still die.

2. The Symptoms of Sin and Its Proper Diagnosis

- a. *The Symptoms*. The symptoms of sin are listed several times by Paul in his letters:
 - i. *Romans 1:18-32* = Note that Paul begins by addressing the root problem, which is the rejection of God, the turning of the heart and face away from Him. As a result of this turning, God gives people over (vv. 24, 26, 28) to all manner of wicked behavior, as listed in verses 29-31.
 - ii. *1 Corinthians 6:9-10* = Another list of symptoms.
 - iii. *Galatians 5:19-21* = Another list.
 - iv. *Colossians 3:5* = Another list...but NOTE! Paul says that all these symptoms amount to one problem: *idolatry*. This is the same thing he said in *Romans*, as noted above.
- b. *A Blockage*. Like a heart attack, the root and underlying problem that defines sin is a blockage: rather than a blockage of blood flow to the heart, sin is the placement of a blockage *against the faces*, that is, between my face and God's. This is why it is the first commandment given in the covenant made at Sinai, and the first of the Ten. When we allow a blockage *against the faces*, we have begun to pursue our *own* agenda (not God's), and work to achieve it by our *own* devices (not God's). We make *ourselves* God, and turn to whatever pleases us, as though this was our prerogative. And also like a heart attack, if the symptoms of sin (i.e., individual *sins*) are all that is addressed, the sinner will still face judgment.

E. The Nature of Repentance

1. *It Is a Turning*. If *sin*, at its root, is a *turning away*, it is obvious that repentance then is a *turning back*. The New Testament word for *repent* is μετανοέω (*metanoēō*), and it literally means a turning of the mind. It indicates that I turn my face back toward God and away from self and everything else. It involves the removal of the blockage *against the faces*.
2. *It Involves the Root of the Problem Rather than the Symptoms*. Often we think of repentance in terms of a *specific* sin symptom. If I have stolen something, for example, a repentance of this specific sin involves regret, reconciliation and restitution. But although there *is* a place for this kind of narrowly-focused repentance (especially in the life of a believer), it is not by itself the solution to the problem because, having failed to address the root disease, I still exhibit a great many other *symptoms* that will all have to be addressed individually. And now I am treating symptoms rather than the problem. I may look and feel better on the outside, but inside I am still sick. I may appear righteous on the outside, but inwardly I am self-righteous. I may look holy outwardly, but my soul is still facing judgment. The *repentance* necessary for salvation is one that looks at the life in total, as a whole, and the modus operandi of my entire existence, and recognizes the error of idolatry that I am perpetrating against the one and only God. Then, having recognized the error, it involves a turning of the mind and will. It is this kind of inward *turning* to which Jeremiah calls Judah (cf. *Jeremiah 4:1-4*; see also *18:11-12*; *Ezekiel 33:11*; *Joel 2:12-13*). And it was Judah's failure to heed that call that resulted in her judgment. The consequences of this failure are the impetus that moved Jeremiah to write the *Lamentations*.

II. THE LESSONS OF LAMENTATIONS

- A. *Sin Disrupts Fellowship with God*. One basic principle expressed most plainly through Jeremiah's laments is that sin creates a blockage in fellowship between God and people. Even Israel, uniquely chosen by God as His special people, experienced a loss of fellowship with their covenant God. This is almost self-evident. A *turning to* self and the world involves a *turning away from* God, allowing lesser "gods" to come *against the faces*. By definition, this breaks the intimate fellowship with God.
 1. *Lamentations 2:1* = Jeremiah here describes the change in relationship very clearly. The glory of Israel was heavenly in God's eyes, but He has now cast it to earth. Israel was His footstool, denoting intimacy and position...but now He has forgotten it.
 2. *Lamentations 5:3* = In one of the saddest statements of the text, Jeremiah says that the inhabitants of Judah have "become orphans without a father." The intimacy was gone, the relationship severed.

3. *James 4:4-10* = The same principle is described in the New Testament. But James says that, because of God's grace, we can restore the fellowship by humbling ourselves, drawing near, cleansing our hands and purifying our hearts.
- B. *Sin Invites God's Judgment.* Perhaps the most severe lesson of *Lamentations* is that sin brings judgment. The book repeatedly, and in various ways, describes the destruction and desolation brought on by Judah's sin. It is also completely unambiguous about the source of that destruction: it was God.
1. *Lamentations 2:8-9* = These verses, along with many, many others in the *Lamentations*, describe God's initiative in bringing judgment.
 2. *Galatians 6:7* = Paul says that people will harvest what they plant.
 3. *2 Peter 3:7* = Peter says that the world in which we now live is also being held in reserve for judgment. And yet, the Lord tarries. Why? Because He does not want *any* to perish (cf. 3:9).
- C. *Sin Destroys Human Relationships.* Another of Lamentation's lessons is that sin has a destructive effect on the relationships between people and nations.
1. *Lamentations 1:1* = The city was full of people. Now she is lonely. She was great among the nations. Now she is like a widow. She was a princess. Now she is a slave. This verse, and others like them, are very instructive. They all detail a change in status as a consequence of sin. But note that every illustration deals with a *relational* change. *Verse two* of the same chapter says that her lovers now will not comfort her. Her friends have become her enemies. Sin destroys relationships. It alters the way we relate to one another.
 2. *1 John 1:6-7* = Note that the apostle John gives us the solution to restoring these relationships. The essence of the solution involves a restoration of intimacy with God.
- D. *The Right Response to Sin is Grief and Repentance.* When the Word spoken by God shows us our sin in such a way that there is no denying and no defense, we become keenly aware of the prerogative of the offended God to judge us without mercy. The right response to this truth is fear, grief and humility. But when that same Word offers us His unmerited grace and reconciliation, the *only* right response is meekness, acceptance and repentance.
1. *Lamentations 2:18-19* = The intensity of the cry to be offered is emphasized. We are to give ourselves no rest, and no relief. We are to weep and pour out our hearts. This is no maudlin melody offered at the end of a cheap piece of badly-acted cinema. This is the desperate and genuine heart cry of one who knows that his sin has put him in a helpless place.
 2. *Lamentations 3:39-41* = Jeremiah encourages his readers to return to God. We have turned away, and faced a fitting judgment for it. Now we heed the call and turn back.
 3. *2 Corinthians 7:8-10* = The sorrow prompted by God in view of our sin produces REPENTANCE.
 4. *Luke 18:9-14* = The heart-cry of the tax collector was for *mercy*, because he recognized that his *sin* made him *unworthy* of it. And this man was justified.

III. THE GOSPEL OF JESUS CHRIST

- A. *You Are a Sinner.* Like the Jews living in Jerusalem, you have *turned away* from God and sought your own way, effectively placing yourself on God's throne in your own heart. Your daily walk consists of making decisions based on *your* agenda and *your* inclinations. It does not consist of any consideration of God's will for your plans and methods (cf. *Romans 3:23*). You have thus allowed something to come *against the faces*.
- B. *Your Turning Away Has Invited God's Judgment.* Because you have willfully broken fellowship with God and turned to your own devices, you, like Judah, have invited God's judgment and destruction (cf. *Romans 6:23*). And like Judah, this threat of judgment is real, its fulfillment inevitable (cf. *Luke 13:1-9*).
- C. *God Has Satisfied His Justice Through Christ.* Christ who was without sin bore *our* sin and paid for it with His life. God's wrath was thus diverted, poured out on Christ so that we would not have to bear it (cf. *1 Peter 2:22-25*; *2 Corinthians 5:14-15, 20-21*).

D. *Acceptance of This Payment Requires Two Things.*

1. *Repentance.* Turn back. Return to God. Remove the blockage *against the faces*. Or put another way, you have been placing things between your face and God's. Now, place God's face back between you and the other things. It's a matter of reorganizing priorities in view of your guilt and God's mercy. It's a matter of sorrow over the offense you've perpetrated against God.
2. *Faith.* This word involves the ideas of believing and trusting. And this *faith* manifests itself as both a *crisis* and a *process*, a moment of decision and a lifetime of commitment.
 - a. *The Crisis.* This crisis comes at the moment of repentance. I have made a *turning* back to God. I have put Him back in His rightful place on the throne. And in that moment, I *trust* for the first time that Christ's substitution as a sacrifice for me was sufficient to guarantee my pardon. At the moment of confrontation with my sin, I trust in God's mercy and the means it has provided for my reconciliation, and I simultaneously *stop* trusting in my *own* way to accomplish that (cf. *Romans 1:16-17, 3:28; Ephesians 2:8-9*)
 - b. *The Process.* Then, having committed myself to trusting in His grace as sufficient, I now begin to live a life characterized by that trust. This is part and parcel of my repentance. I have turned from trusting my own way, and now I am trusting God's way for my life. Now, when I have decisions to make, I trust God's will and wisdom. Now, when I have a behavior to change, I trust God's standard to be right (cf. *Galatians 2:20*).

IV. THE MESSAGE OF LAMENTATIONS FOR BELIEVERS

- A. *Remember.* By reading *Lamentations*, we remember where we have come from and from what God has saved us. We recognize the destruction for which we were headed. It is simultaneously a book of sad and awful recollection, and joyful and awestruck recognition of restoration.
- B. *Reflect.* When we read *Lamentations*, we reflect on the horror of sin and its horrific consequences, both in our lives and in the lives of those involved with us.
- C. *Return.* *Lamentations* also is a great encouragement for us to willingly root out and forsake any sin that remains in our lives. When we see the reaction of God against sin, it inspires in us a desire for holiness borne of gratitude for salvation, reconciliation and restoration. It is a constant call to renewed repentance. It ignites a passion inside of us to allow nothing *against the faces*.

V. PRAYER

Nothing Between
Charles A. Tindley (1905)

*Nothing between my soul and my Savior,
Naught of this world's delusive dream.
I have renounced all sinful pleasure;
Jesus is mine, there's nothing between.*

Refrain

*Nothing between my soul and my Savior,
So that His blessed face may be seen.
Nothing preventing the least of His favor.
Keep the way clear! Let nothing between.*

*Nothing between, like worldly pleasure;
Habits of life, though harmless they seem.
My heart must not from Him ever sever.
He is my all, there's nothing between.*

Repeat Refrain

*Nothing between, like pride or like station.
My self or my friends will not intervene.
Though it will cost me much tribulation,
I am resolved! There's nothing between.*

Repeat Refrain

*Nothing between, even many hard trials.
Though the whole world against me convene,
Watching with prayer and much self-denial
I'll triumph at last! There's nothing between.*

Repeat Refrain