James Philip Bible Readings

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THE BOOK of LAMENTATIONS

The Book of Lamentations is anonymous, but has been attributed by tradition to Jeremiah. E.J. Young holds to the Jeremaic authorship, although he adds 'Of this we cannot be certain, and it seems best to admit that we do not really know who the author was.' The position of the book immediately following Jeremiah's prophecy is due to the Septuagint but in the Hebrew Bible it stands among what is known as the 'Writings', or 'Hagiographa', and the third of the five Megilloth (or Rolls). In the Septuagint the title of the book reads as follows 'And it came to pass after Israel had been taken away into captivity and Jerusalem had been laid waste that Jeremiah sat weeping and lamented this lamentation over Jerusalem and said.' Beyond doubt, however - whether or not Jeremiah was the author - the chapters are the work of an eyewitness of Jerusalem's calamity in 586 BC, who records his impressions while they were still fresh and vivid in his consciousness. If written by Jeremiah, the book must have been composed between the time of the fall and destruction of Jerusalem in 586 and the prophet's enforced departure to Egypt (Jeremiah 43:7), i.e., in the governorship of Gedeliah, appointed by Nebuchadnezzar after the capture of king Zedekiah.

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I) *1:1*

As to the purpose of the book, the following quotations, in this and the next Note, will serve to highlight its main thrusts: 'The prophets had heralded Judah's doom, convinced that a righteous God would act in history to punish his people's sin. Lamentations continues this prophetic emphasis by seeing in the ashes of Jerusalem the vindication of God's righteousness (1:18). The city's destruction is no capricious coincidence; it is the logical and inevitable result of defyingng God's law. Even where God is chided (e.g. ch 2) for his severity, the deep-seated sense of guilt which permeates the book is evident (2:14; cf 1:5, 8-9, 18, 22; 3:40-42; 4:13, 22; 5:7). The sense of tragedy is heightened by the recognition that it was avoidable. The manifold picture of the wrath of God (e.g. 1:12ff; 2:1-9, 20-22; 3:1-18; 4:6, 11) makes Lamentations a key source for any study of this aspect of God's nature.

'Judah's plight is desperate but not hopeless. Though the aspects of her hope are not delineated, her reason for hope is cogently stated: the faithfulness of a covenant-keeping God (3:19-39). It was one thing for the prophets to forecast a better day before the disaster struck; it is another thing for our prophet to appropriate this hope in the midst of appalling circumstances. His recognition of the disciplinary role of suffering and its relationship to God's goodness (3:25-30) is cogent testimony to his prophetic insight.' (IVF Bible Dictionary)

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2) *1:1*

Two further quotations will help us further to understand the purpose of the book. The first is from H.L. Ellison: 'One fallacy that is widely held is that inspiration is a question merely of authorship. For those who held it, the 'fact' of Jeremiah's authorship of Lamentations was sufficient justification for its being in the Bible, but the reason why any particular book is included in the Canon of Scripture must be deeper than that.

The Bible sets out to give us every facet of the impact of God's revelation on man. There is no aspect of human life, once it has been brought into the sphere of the operation of God's Spirit, that is not illumined by some book of the Bible.

Grief, great and crushing, is an unavoidable part of human life. Even in the new covenant it can come, and even there it can come as the result of sin, one's own or another's. To one who is passing through such an experience, who feels that the sun can never shine again as it once did, Lamentations may speak its word of comfort in ways that cannot be grasped by those who have not gone down into the vale of grief.'

The second quotation is from Delitzsch: 'In these Lamentations (the prophet) seeks not merely to give expression to the sorrow of the people that he may weep with them, but by his outpouring of complaint to rouse his fellow-countrymen to an acknowledgement of God's justice in this visitation, to keep them from despair under the burden of unutterable woe, and by teaching them how to give due submission to the judgment that has befallen them, to lead once more to God those who would not let themselves be brought to Him through his previous testimony regarding that judgment while it was yet impending.'

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3) *1:1*

As to the contents of the book the subject of the destruction of Jerusalem is treated in each of the five chapters from a different point of view. Again following Delitzsch, we give the following analysis: 'In the first, the lamentation is chiefly made over the carrying away of the people into captivity, the desolation of Zion, the acts of oppression, the plundering and the starvation connected with the taking of Jerusalem, the scoffing and contempt shown by the enemy, and the helpless and comfortless condition of the city, now fallen so low.

'In the second, the destruction of Jerusalem and Judah is set forth as an act of God's wrath against the sins of the people, the impotency of human comfort in the midst of the terrible calamity is shown, and the people are exhorted to seek help from the Lord.

'In the third, the deep spiritual sufferings of God's people in the midst of the general distress form the subject of grievous complaint, out of which the soul endeavours to rise, and to see the compassion of the Lord, and the justice of His dealings on earth generally, as well as in this visitation of judgment; and on this is founded the confident expectation of help.

'In the fourth, the dreadful misery that has befallen Zion's citizens of every class is represented as a punishment for the grievous sins of the people and their leaders.

'And lastly, in the fifth, the Lord is entreated to remove the disgrace from His people and restore them to their former state of grace.'

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4) *1:1-11*

The prophet speaks in these verses of the utter desolation of Jerusalem. It is the abandonment of the city in its desolation that is emphasised in 1. As has been said, alienation is always a consequence of sin. Hemingway, in his novel *For Whom the Bell Tolls* makes one of his characters say 'Having done such a thing there is a loneliness which cannot be borne'. Such was Jerusalem's solitary plight. The contrast between what she once was and what she had now become is very graphic, all that constituted meaningful life and experience for her having been removed - the feasts, the solemn assemblies, the ways of Zion (4). One cannot help but see a reflection of our own land's parlous situation in these verses, with former 'friends and allies' treating us with disdain and even contempt, no longer taking us seriously in the counsels of the nations - but with some significant differences, for at least the prophet is aware of the reason for the affliction of Jerusalem. It is God's hand that has afflicted her. This is the ground of hope for Israel, just as it represents a bleak prospect for us as a nation, who do not know what is happening to us or why. Awareness, and ability to interpret - these are the essential marks of hope and the beginning of the possibility of recovery. The bedraggling and dilapidating effect of sin is underlined in 6, and this prompts the reflection that the shoddiness and untidiness of our streets and of many former 'beauty-spots', of which visitors from abroad have justifiably complained in recent days, may be a more significant symptom of national decline than we had realised. It is often not the enemy from without, but the enemy within, that brings about collapse and destruction.

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5) *1:1-11*

The statement in 7 is particularly moving, and so true to experience. So often, it is only when we lose these precious things that we learn to prize them, and then it is too late. This is further underlined in 9, where the phrase 'she remembered not her last end' is rendered in the NIV 'she did not consider her future'. One recalls the lines of the hymn,

> And I, poor sinner, cast it all away,
> Lived for the toil or pleasure of each day;
> As if no Christ had shed His precious blood,
> As if I owed no homage to my God.

This is one of the tragedies of sin, that it blinds our eye to its consequences (cf Deuteronomy 12: 29ff; Isaiah 47:7). And the end result is always so much more serious than ever we could have anticipated, as 10 makes plain. The disgrace and sacrilege of the sanctuary being violated must have been particularly distressing to the people of God. Well might we remember the Apostle James' grim words 'sin, when it is finished, bringeth forth death' (James 1:15). Zion's ejaculations of distress and misery in 9 and 11 are understandable, but they were destined to remain unheard for long enough, as the captives sat by the rivers of Babylon and wept as they remembered Zion. As P.T. Forsyth once said, 'Our suffering can only be finally dealt with by Him who is more concerned about our sin; who is strong enough to resist pity till grief has done its gracious work even in His Son'.

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6) *1:12-16*

The lament of the prophet in 1-11 is echoed in these verses by that of the city itself, in words which are now inescapably associated with our Lord's own sufferings on the Cross. The plaint 'Behold, and see...' has been immortalized in the beautiful aria in Handel's Messiah, and it was surely a true insight on the great composer's part to apply these words to our Lord's agony. Messianic interpretation is indeed legitimate here. As H.L. Ellison puts it, 'Our Lord is the Second Man (1 Corinthians 15:47). The sufferings of the righteous before Him were but foreshadows of His sufferings, and the punishment of sin was a foreshadowing of what He would have to bear when He took our place as our substitute. It is therefore entirely to be expected that in this book of the suffering for sin, there would be the frequent phrase that would remind the loving heart of a much deeper suffering.' Such interpretation is also credible because Israel and the Messiah are inextricably linked together in the economy of God, as Paul makes clear in Romans 11:12, 15. This does not, however, detract from the more immediate understanding of these verses, which contain the recognition, in graphic and eloquent images, that it is the Lord that has done this to Jerusalem. The fact of this recognition is one important step in the ongoing process of repentance and ultimate restoration, as the verses that follow begin to make clear.

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7) *1:17-22*

A brief comment by the prophet in 17, in which he corroborates the city's complaint regarding the want of comforters in her distress, is followed in the remaining verses of the chapter by a further outpouring by Jerusalem. But now we see a progression in thought: in 12ff, it was the recognition that the Lord was at work in her distress and disaster; here, in 18ff, it is the acknowledgement that He is righteous in what He has done (cf Psalm 51:4; Romans 3:4). This is accompanied not only by the recognition that she can expect no help from her former lovers, who have turned against her (19, 21), but also, and more importantly, by an acknowledgement and confession of her sin (20). The words are deeply moving, indeed they represent what the hymn calls 'the depths of self-despair'. And despair is the womb of faith: it is there, in the place of bleak and black darkness and emptiness that faith is born. This, indeed, is the point of the exercise. As Luther once said, 'God made the world out of nothing, and it is only when we are nothing (i.e. brought to an end of ourselves) that He can make anything of us.' It was out of this unspeakable disaster and calamity, and in this tremendous crucible of suffering, that a new Israel was shaped and fashioned, as we see in the story of the returned exiles in Ezra and Nehemiah. Psalm 137, with its tears and grief, must always precede the laughter and singing of Psalm 126, in the experience of individuals and nation alike.

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8) *2:1-10*

In this chapter, as was pointed out in the opening analysis (see page 5), 'The destruction of Jerusalem and Judah is set forth as an act of God's wrath against the sins of the people, the impotency of human comfort in the midst of the terrible calamity is shown, and the people are exhorted to seek help from the Lord'. In these verses the repeated emphasis on 'anger', 'fury' and 'indignation' - 'anger' twice in 1, 'wrath' in 2, 'fierce anger' in 3, 'fury' in 4, 'enemy' in 5, 'fierce indignation' in 6 - underlines the reality of the concept of the wrath of God, a concept so alien to modern thought today, but central to the biblical revelation. Indeed, it is integral to a true understanding of the gospel itself. So prominent a theologian as E. Brunner asserts in his great book 'The Mediator', 'A theology which uses the language of Christianity can be tested by its attitude towards the biblical doctrine of the wrath of God, whether it means what the words of Scripture say. Where the idea of the wrath of God is ignored there also will there be no understanding of the central conception of the gospel: the uniqueness of the revelation in the Mediator.... So long as we continue to reject the scriptural ideas of Divine holiness, of divine wrath, and of divine righteousness and punishment, the process of decay within the Christian Church will continue…. To reject the idea of the wrath of God also means to reject His love. The God who cannot be angry is a God who cannot love.'

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9) *2:1-10*

It is the totality of the Divine visitation that is stressed, and the thoroughness with which the devastation overtook them. The reference in 3, 'he hath drawn back his right hand' is an indication of the removal of the restraints of common grace that had hitherto protected God's people, so that the forces of evil are unleashed upon them. Not only so: God Himself is against them and fights as their enemy (4, 5). The people are devastated, and the land and the sanctuary are alike brought under the cloud of judgment. Palaces and strongholds (5), sanctuary and altar (7), walls and ramparts (8), gates and bars (9), king and princes, law and prophets (9), all are brought to an end with the destruction of the Temple. What a picture of desolation this is! And we must compare it with the awful warnings given by so many of the prophets in the pre-exilic period - this is the fulfilment of that. And it is now seen that the actuality is not a whit less awful than the prediction had been. There was indeed a literal fulfilment of all that had been warned and foretold. There is a confirmation of the word of the Lord in all this, an authentication and validation of the word spoken by the prophets, who are now seen to have been speaking not mere human warnings, but indeed a Divine word from on high that was to be fulfilled to the letter. One thinks of the 'it-could-never-happen-to-us' attitude in the modern world, and the sense of unreality when confronted with warnings of judgment to come. The silence after the visitation (10) stresses the completeness of it, the 'it-is-all-over' note, as an accomplished fact - like the aftermath of a bombing raid, with the dust settling on the devastation of a whole area, and the sense of being stunned into silence. And, above all, no word now from the Lord through the prophets. Action speaks louder than words!

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10) 2:11-17

These verses constitute a lament for the punishment of Jerusalem and a description within it of the callousness of neighbouring nations in their treatment of God's people. Either it is a looking back to the horrors of the siege, or a description of the misery of the survivors after the leading citizens had been deported. What a picture of distress we are given in 11-13! The RSV rendering of the last words of 13 sum it all up: 'Vast as the sea is your ruin. Who can restore you?' The misery is heart-rending. The tears in 11 remind us of the moving passage in Jeremiah 8:18-9:1, while the moving reference to the desolation of the children (11, 12) reminds us of the displaced persons and refugee camps of today in different parts of the world, with their total hopelessness and misery. Nor can Jerusalem expect either comfort or healing from her prophets, for they have prophesied falsely, and have been instrumental in bringing calamity upon them through their careless and foolish prophesying of smooth things. As Delitzsch says, 'They did not expose the sin and guilt of the people with the view of their amendment and improvement, and thereby removing the misery into which they had fallen by their sin; nor did they endeavour to restore the people to their right relation towards the Lord, upon which their welfare depended, or to avert their being driven into exile.' The reference in 15 to those 'that passed by' echoes 1:12, but here it is their delight over the injury and downfall of Israel, reminding us of the theme of Obadiah's prophecy (which see). The two phrases at the end of 15, 'the perfection of beauty', and 'the joy of the whole earth' echo Psalm 50:2 and Psalm 48:2 respectively. It is particularly touching that such words should now be used in derision against the people of God.

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11) 2:11-17

The writer recognises in 17 that it is the Lord's hand that has done all this (paradoxically, it is this realisation that can turn the people's thoughts to the reality that it is God also who can comfort them, hence, in 18, their cry to Him). One is reminded of the awesome words of Isaiah 53:10 'It pleased the Lord to bruise him', and it is certainly no accident that 15, 16 have assumed a messianic significance. As the Rev W. Still says in a Note on these verses, 'This is the very picture of those who railed at our Lord on the Cross. How wonderful that Jeremiah should endure, for Judah's sake, the same, hundreds of years before our Lord's earthly birth! He was bearing His Lord's reproach before the time. Jesus tells us that if we suffer persecution as Christians, it is for 'My name's sake, because they know not Him that sent Me' (John 15:18-21; 16:1-3). And Paul commands us that 'We then that are strong ought to bear the infirmities of the weak, and not to please ourselves. Let every one of us please his neighbour for his good to his upbuilding. For even Christ pleased not Himself; but, as it is written (Psalm 69:9) 'The reproaches of them that reproached thee are fallen on me'. 'There are two ways of standing with sinners, the one forbidden, the other commended. Psalm 1:1 condemns the man who first walks with ungodly men, then stands with them, and ultimately sits down amongst them, for he shares their guilt. Whereas the man who stands with sinners because he loves them and shares judgment with them in hope that it may be redemptive, is a follower of the Master Who bore the sins of others. Jesus ate with publican and sinners and shared the Pharisees' reproach of them, because He loved them. If our love for men drives us into queer places we may be classed with their denizens and lose our reputation. What does it matter? Only we must be sure we are pure and clean of their sins and well able to withstand their temptations. We are there, not to be like them but even in identifying ourselves with them, to emphasise the difference.'

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12) *2:18-22*

The recognition that it is the Lord's hand that has smitten them turns their hearts, as we have said, to the Lord. If we follow the AV the first phrase of 18 expresses what their realisation in 17 brings them to. Then, 18b adds, as it were, in response, 'Yes, that is what to do, O wall of the daughter of Zion, let your tears run down like a river...'. Then, in 20-22, we have Zion's response in prayer. The RSV however, with others, makes 18a an imperative: 'Cry aloud to the Lord, O daughter of Zion', i.e., an exhortation to Zion to pray. Perhaps we are meant to understand that while 17 spurs them to cry to the Lord (18a), they do not really know what or how to pray, and 18bff is the instruction given to them so to do. And 20ff is their prayer, articulated, because taught (by the Spirit). The reference to the 'wall' in 18 reminds us of the 'wailing-wall' in Jerusalem today, and the words 'Give thyself no rest' echo Isaiah 62:1, 7. The plea in 19 'for the life of thy young children' is very moving, as is the plea in 20: it is as if the prophet were saying 'Is this something that is to be allowed to continue?' - i.e., cannibalism seems already to have occurred, and the prophets and priests had already been murdered in the awful holocaust (cf Leviticus 26:29; Deuteronomy 28:56, 57; Jeremiah 19:9). The picture of massacre and bloodshed in the streets in 21 is very terrible, and 22 speaks of the grim powers that had come upon Judah - sword, famine, plagues - as having been summoned to Jerusalem as to a solemn feast day, to do despite foul and horrible to the people - with none escaping, not even the children. The darkness and desolation of judgment comes down once more as the chapter ends.

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13) *3:1-20*

In this chapter (following Delitzsch's summary) 'The deep spiritual sufferings of God's people in the midst of the general distress form the subject of grievous complaint, out of which the soul endeavours to rise, and to see the compassion of the Lord, and the justice of His dealings on earth generally, as well as in this visitation of judgment; and on this is founded the confident expectation of help.' It will be noted that while each of the other chapters of the book contain 22 verses, the third chapter contains 66, with the lines of the poem arranged in triplets, and each triplet beginning with a letter of the Hebrew alphabet (22 in all). The verses of today's reading bewail the tragic condition that has come upon Israel, and give a description of the sufferings of the time. Here is Jerusalem (personified) speaking, and expressing her sufferings and her woe. It is an impressive and remarkably moving utterance. We should note particularly the emphasis on darkness (2, 6), being shut up (5, 7, 9) - the phrase in 7, 'I cannot get out' is particularly poignant - and being left in silence (8). The picture is one of utter despair, echoing the Psalmist's words 'De profundis oro Te, domine' (Out of the depths have I cried unto Thee, O Lord, Psalm 130:1). The awful combination of the silence of God, and the consciousness that He is working in the visitation of suffering is deeply impressive, and the repetition of the words 'He hath' throughout (5, 6, 7, 9, 11, 12, 13, 15, 16) makes it quite overwhelming, and reminds us of the solemn words in Hebrews 10:31, 'It is a fearful thing to fall into the hands of the living God'.

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14) *3:1-20*

The low-point in this terrible experience is reached in 18, 'My strength and my hope is perished from the Lord'. The sense of being 'hemmed in' and 'shut up' beyond any hope of escape (7), with the sense of the intolerable heaviness of the chain - all this underlines the grimness of the divine dealing, and all the more awesome in the realisation that Love is behind it. But this is the point of despair and hopelessness to which He wants, and needs, to bring us, orders for anything to be done for us. For it is there, in the womb of despair, that hope may again be born, as we shall see presently, in the verses that follow. We have already, in a previous Note, quoted Martin Luther's famous saying, 'God made the world out of nothing, and it is only when we are nothing (i.e. brought to an end of ourselves) that He can make anything of us'. This is an important principle for us to grasp, and it is sometimes necessary for us to be reminded that even in the context of great calamity and suffering, when despair threatens to overwhelm us, we may often be far from being at an end of ourselves, but on the contrary be filled with bitterness, anger and recriminations against the Lord. This falls short of what the Bible means by being at an end of ourselves, and may serve to explain why at times the suffering and affliction may continue far beyond what we might reasonably expect to be the end-point of the trial. As Jeremiah himself says (17:9), 'The heart is deceitful above all things, and desperately wicked'.

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15) *3:21-39*

The speaker now calls to mind that running through all the sufferings there had been the grace of God: otherwise, they would have been completely destroyed. This is the point and force of his now calling to mind (21) what he does. And from despair, he turns to hope. The description of this transition from despair to hope is somewhat difficult to follow in the AV rendering of 19ff, and the RSV and other translations should be looked at in this connection. Delitzsch, as ever, is helpful: 'The expression 'If my soul duly meditates thereon (on the deep suffering), it becomes depressed within me', forms the foundation of the request that God would think of his distress, his misery; and in 21 the phrase 'I will lay this to heart' connects itself with the leading thought set forth in 19, the reason for which is given in 20, viz. that my soul is only bowed down within me over the thought of my distress, and must complain of it to God, that He may think of it and alleviate it: This will I lay to heart and set my hope upon.' Here, then, is a process of self-encouragement, such as we have so often in the Psalms, and hope is strengthened by a consideration of the infinite compassion of the Lord (22). Sorrow has brought humility, and out of humility springs hope. With 22ff we come to the high point of the whole book, as the writer sees in the fact that they are not utterly consumed a proof of the Lord's mercies. But these words are so wonderful that we shall have to spend some time looking at them more carefully in the next Note.

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16) *3:21-39*

What the prophet means in 22ff is that the proofs of the grace of God have their foundation in His compassion, from which they flow. The words are very wonderful, and have been immortalised in some of our best hymns:

New every morning is the love
Our wakening and uprising prove,
Through sleep and darkness safely brought,
Restored to life, and power, and thought.

New mercies each returning day,
Hover around us while we pray,
New perils past, new sins forgiven,
New thoughts of God, new hopes of heaven.

Great is Thy faithfulness, O God my Father,
There is no shadow of turning with Thee;
Thou changest not, Thy compassions, they fail not;
As Thou hast been Thou forever wilt be.

Great is Thy faithfulness!
Morning by morning new mercies I see;
All I have needed Thy hand hath provided
Great is Thy faithfulness, Lord, unto me!

It is the constant renewal of divine favour that impels to the exclamation, 'Great is Thy faithfulness', and prompts a hope that cannot be frustrated (24b, 26). As one commentator has put it, 'The Lord is well disposed towards the children of men under all circumstances; for even when He smites them, He seeks their highest interest: they ought so to conduct themselves in adversity, that it is possible for Him to carry out His designs…if the Lord is kind to those who hope in Him, then it is good for man to wait patiently for His help in suffering.' Such is the fundamental idea expressed in 25-33. Well may we be impressed with all that has been learned in such anguish!

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17) *3:21-39*

A very helpful and penetrating comment on these verses is given in the Gilcomston Bible Notes by the Rev W. Still: 'The Lord is good unto them that wait for Him, It is therefore good that a man should wait for Him, and if he has plumbed any of the depths of 'Great is Thy faithfulness' he will be full of hope and quietly wait for salvation. The only way he can learn to do this is by bearing the yoke of God's disciplines, and these are best borne in youth. The world and worldly Christians think youth is the time for a fling, but there is no subscription to that point of view in the Bible, Youth is the time for training and for learning to flee youthful lusts which war against the soul, and the youngster who takes in the whole field of his life on earth and in heaven will not complain at a little irksome training and patient and painful waiting in order to lay a good foundation for the life that now is and is to come. When we see that we are 'a-making' our heavenly body in our earthly one (or its 'clothing' if we prefer to put it that way), it does not seem unreasonable to endure a little hardship in our youth. Such an one will bear both inward irks and outward smarts, and following our Lord's injunction and example will give his cheek to him that smiteth, and be willing to bear the cup of reproach. For he will understand that as the Lord measures the cup of judgment which His children fill up by their sins, so he measures the emptying of it, for their griefs have an end, when the dregs have been drained. It is not His will, far less His pleasure, to afflict His dearly beloved children, it causes Him more sorrow than we know; for 'in all their affliction He was afflicted…in His love and in His pity He redeemed them; and He bare them, and carried them all the days of old'. O that modern Christians and counsellors of youth would see that to initiate young folk into this sweep of faith is to lift them on to a plain of life and build characters for them which will mark them out in any company, and make for them a name for wisdom and trustworthiness. That is not why they should do it, but for the glory of God, but you cannot prevent the by-products of mighty faith in God becoming known!'

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18) *3:21-39*

We must pause another day with these verses in order to consider what is said in the threefold grouping of ideas in 34-36. There are two possible interpretations: one is to take the verses to mean that the fact that the righteous judgment of God is against those who cause wilful and needless suffering is another ground of hope to the sufferer - that is to say, the cruel treatment of prisoners (34), the perversion of justice in a public tribunal (35), every form even of private injustice (36) will inevitably call forth a Divine reaction to vindicate those so unjustly treated. The other interpretation (following Delitzsch) is this: 'That he may bring home to the hearts of God's people the exhortation to bear suffering with patience and resignation, and that he might lead them to see that the weight of sorrow under which they are sighing has been sent from the Lord, as a chastisement for their sins, the prophet carries out the thought (in 34-39) that every wrong committed upon earth is under Divine control (34-36), and generally that nothing happens without God's permission; hence man ought not to mourn over the suffering that befalls him, but rather over his sins (37-39).' This seems to be the more likely interpretation of the verses. Man is not to sigh over suffering and sorrow, but only over his sins: hence the proper course is to repent (40ff). Here is spiritual realism - and, of course, there is so much scope in all this for self-deception and excuse: it is possible to obscure the real issue and problem by self-pity, with sorrow for self rather than sorrow for sin. It is by no means unknown in such situations, when collapse or disaster come, for there to be a temporary - even momentary - acceptance of fault and responsibility, to be followed a little later by an elaborate process of self-justification and avoidance of blame. It is not without significance that the biblical meaning of the word 'confess' - 'to say the same thing as' - is to take the same view of, and adopt the same attitude to, sin as God does, and call it by its proper name. So often we call it something else!

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19) *3:40-47*

Suffering should call a man to self-scrutiny; and hearts as well as hands are lifted up to the Lord - i.e. repentance is a heart work, not a form of words, an inward reality, no mere outward display. The prayer of confession which follows in 42ff has an intensity of feeling matching that in 1-20, and the 'comforts' of 21-39 are almost obscured as it sweeps over him. This is so true of spiritual psychology - we see it in the Psalms again and again. It does not mean that the experience of 21-39 is false or an idle dream, but simply that before it becomes a reality, the pain of conviction is very deep indeed. Thus we have the words in 42, 'Thou hast not pardoned'. It is the sense of the alienation of God that so oppresses the prophet. There is no easy 'technique' of forgiveness here (cf Psalm 130 and the Psalmist's long waiting upon God), So in 43, 44, it is the continuing anger of God upon His people - He has covered himself with anger (43) and not spared, and covered Himself with a cloud (44) so that no prayer could get through to Him. How true all this is to the thoughts and theme of 1-20! The reference to offscouring in 45-47 seems to have their dispersion among the heathen in view (but cf 1 Corinthians 4:9-13, and Paul's experience of sharing the reproach of Christ - is there not at least something of this in the prophet's thoughts?).

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20) *3:48-54*

'Over this calamity (says Delitzsch) rivers of tears must be shed, until the Lord looks down from heaven on it. The prophet once more utters this complaint in the first person, because he who has risked his life in his endeavour to keep the people in the service of God must feel the deepest sympathy for them in their misfortunes'. The 'rivers of water' in 48 echo 1:16 and 2:18 and it is difficult not to associate these references with Jeremiah's words in his prophecy (9:1). The 'till' in 50 again expresses the idea of long and agonised waiting upon the Lord, and the sense of being in the depths ('in the dungeon', 53) calls to mind yet again the moving utterance of the Psalmist in Psalm 130. There are indeed many echoes of the Psalter's anguish in these verses, and it is an 'evidence of how deeply the prophet's mind had fed on Scripture that he should instinctively use scriptural language to describe his deepest feelings in these verses. This in itself, we need to see, is an attitude and expression of faith, for in using the words of Scripture to describe his distress, he also fortified his soul with the promises of deliverance that these same Scriptures record, in the lives of those who first gave expression to them. And the message to us surely is: 'Go and do thou likewise'.

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21) *3:55-66*

The last verses of the chapter show that the prophet has at last got through in prayer to God (in contrast to the desolating experience of 44). In words similar to those in Psalm 130, he bears testimony that his cry from the depths has been heard by God. We should note the series of perfect tenses in 56-60, 'thou hast…'. The commentators point out that they express what has already happened, and still happens. Here is a message of hope indeed - the darkest experience gives way to better things, and light dawns for the prophet in the faith and confidence that God has heard his cry. There is a remarkable swing from confidence to entreaty in 56, after the assurance that his cry had been heard. It is as if, after that assurance had come to him he was suddenly assailed by doubt and darkness once more. This is all too true to spiritual experience, and is an evidence of how hardly, even in the context of God breaking through to us, we can sometimes grasp the good news and how prone we are to falter in our faith. In such a situation and experience, it is well for us to do what the prophet did in 57: he reminded himself of what God had said, and rested his soul upon that faithful word: 'Thou saidst' (cf Genesis 32:9, 12). In 58, God plays the part of advocate and kinsman, pleading the cause of His servant, to vindicate him before his enemies, and this thought is continued in 59ff. And the God who has drawn near to help His distressed servant also takes dealing with those who have caused that distress. The call for vengeance in the final verses is similar in content to many of the imprecatory Psalms. To criticise the alleged 'sub-Christian' tone of these Psalms and of this passage is really to miss the point, for they only ask God to do what He Himself has revealed He will do to all who do despite to His chosen people. Can it be wrong, then, to align oneself with that divine purpose, and is it not possible to do so without being charged with vindictiveness or bitterness? Surely.

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22) *4:1-11*

This chapter 'exhibits a contrast between Zion's former splendour and her present condition' (E.J. Young). As Delitzsch says, 'The lamentation over the terrible calamity that has befallen Jerusalem is distinguished in this poem from the lamentations in chs 1 and 2 not merely by the fact that in it the fate of the several classes of the population is contemplated, but chiefly by the circumstance that the calamity is set forth as a well merited punishment by God for the grievous sins of the inhabitants of Jerusalem'. This represents an advance in the general thought of the book, for where there is recognition of suffering as punishment it is possible to advance, as Delitzsch says, not merely to the hope regarding the future, but also to prayer for deliverance, which we find in ch 5. In these opening verses, which are particularly filled with distress and misery, the consciousness is expressed that Zion has sunk into this terrible state because her guilt was greater than the sin of Sodom. This consciousness has indeed been present earlier in the book, but here it comes to full expression. The point that is made is that only when they reach the depth of this awareness, that there can in fact be no help for them apart from a full confession and full recognition that only God can help them, can there be any forgiveness. God's dealings with His sinning people are deeply and devastatingly thorough.

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23) *4:1-11*

In 1-6 we are given a figurative account of the destruction of all that was precious and glorious in Israel - not the destruction of the sanctuary and of Zion, but a lamentation over the fearful change that had taken place in the fate of the citizens of Zion. It is they who are likened to gold and sacred stones. The reference in 2 to 'earthen pitchers' reminds us of 2 Timothy 2:20, 'vessels unto dishonour'. Is this the origin of Paul's thought? The metaphor is applied first to the children in 3ff, and the extreme straits of the people in the city are shown by a comparison of the way in which wild animals act towards their young with the behaviour of the mothers of Jerusalem towards their young children ('sea monsters', AV is elsewhere rendered 'jackals'). The contrast continues in 5 in reference to the adults: formerly feeding on dainties, they are now desolate in the streets. The reference to 'no hands' in 6 is to the fact that Sodom's judgment was from God alone, with no human instrument used in its destruction, whereas with Israel the hands of the oppressor came upon her and her woe was prolonged and made bitter. Sodom's doom was instant and swift, with no dragging on of agony and suffering, as Zion's had been. In 7ff it is the misery that befell the princes of Judah: once marked out by royal demeanour, but now every trace of splendour has vanished from them and they are so disfigured as to be no longer recognisable. The picture in 10 is very terrible: it is not that the womenfolk showed pity to their children, but indeed the opposite. The true instinct of women is to care for their children, but in this extremity the natural compassion of their hands is belied and denied by their actions. They have become dehumanised in the judgment that had come upon them. This is the 'reprobate mind' referred to by Paul in Romans 1, in which the absence of 'natural affection' represents the nadir of human sin and shame when men are given up by God.

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24) *4:1-11*

The language in passages like these has sometimes been used by older divines to describe the effects of the fall of man. Here are some lines from a great Scottish classic, Thomas Boston's 'Fourfold State': 'Here was a stately building; man carved like a fair palace, but now lying in ashes: let us stand and look on the ruins, and drop a tear. This is a lamentation, and shall be for lamentation. Could we avoid weeping, if we saw our country ruined, and turned by the enemy into a wilderness? If we saw our houses on fire, and our property perishing in the flames? But all this comes far short of the dismal sight; Man fallen as a star from heaven! Ah, may we not now say, 'O that we were as in months past!' when there was no stain in our nature, no cloud on our minds, no pollution in our hearts! Had we never been in better case, the matter had been less; but they that were brought up in scarlet, do now embrace dunghills. Where is our primitive glory now? Once no darkness in the mind, no rebellion in the will, no disorder in the affections. But ah! 'How has the faithful city become a harlot? – Righteousness lodged in it; but now murderers. Our silver is become dross, our wine mixed with water.' That heart, which was once the temple of God, is now turned into a den of thieves. Let our name be Ichabod, for the glory is departed. Happy was thou, O man! Who was like unto thee! Neither pain nor sickness could affect thee, no death could approach thee, no sigh was heard from thee, till these bitter fruits were plucked from the forbidden tree. Heaven shone upon thee, and earth smiled: thou wast the companion of angels, and the envy of devils. But how low is he now laid, who was created for dominion, and made lord of the world! 'The crown has fallen from our head: woe unto us that we have sinned'.'

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25) *4:12-20*

In 12-16 the prophet speaks of the judgment brought upon Judah because of the sins of prophets and priests. The statement in 12 is remarkable: the kings of the earth would never have believed it possible that Jerusalem should ever be destroyed, he says. But why should they think thus? They knew that God's hand was upon Jerusalem, yet the incredible had happened! Why? The reason is given in 13: the sins of the prophets and the priests (for evidence and example of this see Jeremiah 26:1-24, and the relevant Notes). Their fate, described so graphically in 14, 15, was to be smitten of God in consequence of their blood-guiltiness (cf Deuteronomy 28:28ff). As Delitzsch puts it, 'Not merely were they shunned at home, like lepers, by their fellow-countrymen, but also, when they wished to find a place of refuge beyond their native land, they were compelled to wander about without finding rest.... Thus the threatening in Deuteronomy 28:50 is fulfilled.' In the verses which follow (17ff) what is being said is that in spite of the evidence (in 12-16) of God's wrath being poured out and of the prophets and priests being smitten by Him for their sins, the people were still waiting for succour, vainly relying on the help of man, i.e. on Egypt, a nation that could not save them. This in itself is grim evidence that the disaster that had overtaken them had not as yet opened their eyes to the truth of their situation. That, alas, was to take some considerable time and considerably more suffering, as the next Note will make plain.

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26) *4:12-20*

Already they are in the hands of their captors (18). How should any nation help them against the conqueror of nations? Such a vain hope is surely an evidence of the complete unrealism of their thinking. The grim thoroughness of the Babylonians, expressed in 19, is borne out in Jeremiah 39:1-7 (which see). In 20 the reference is to the fact that Zedekiah, their king, and therefore their hope of continuing as a united people under him, even though in captivity, was finally destroyed. As Delitzsch says, 'So long as there remained to them the king whom God had given, together with the promises attached to the kingdom, they might cherish the hope that the Lord would still fulfil to them these promises also. But this hope seemed to be destroyed when the king was taken prisoner, deprived of sight, and carried away to Babylon into captivity.' Thus Judah was stripped right down - their false belief in the impregnability of the city of Jerusalem destroyed, the false hope and trust in Egypt shown to be empty and illusory, and finally the hope placed in their king - everything was taken from them, and they were brought to an utter end of themselves.

One cannot but see a disturbing parallel in all this to our own national situation, in the disarray within the power structures of those who want to rule over us, with one party bent on tearing itself apart, another showing ominous signs of strain and disagreement within itself, and yet another unable to agree on its policies, its politicians or its leaders. The dismal and dreary pattern of recurrent crisis prompts the question whether we will ever learn the lessons of history.

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27) *4:21-22*

The last word, however, in the chapter is a word of grace: the people of God will yet be restored (22). The note struck here is very similar to that in Isaiah 40:1, 2. The words 'Rejoice and be glad' in 21 are ironical, and the meaning is, 'let the enemy (Edom) rejoice as much as he please, he will not escape punishment of his sin, for God will deal with him for the despite he has done to His chosen people. That this is a messianic note can hardly be controverted, nor does the suddenness of its sounding at the end of a chapter of woe or its unexpectedness in such a context invalidate it in any way. It is the same kind of transition from darkness to light and from despair to hope that we see in many of the Psalms, and it surely springs from the firm conviction, as Delitzsch says, 'that Israel has most assuredly been chosen as the nation with whom the Lord has made His covenant, which He cannot break.... The Lord will assuredly visit His ever-rebellious people with the heaviest punishments, until they come to acknowledge their sin and repent of their apostasy; but He will afterwards again take pity on the penitent remnant, gather them from among the heathen, and fulfil all His promises to them.' For a covenant people judgment is always God's 'strange work', and therefore never His final word: mercy triumphs over wrath, and judgment yields to grace.

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28) *5:1-7*

In this final chapter (following Delitzsch's analysis) 'The Lord is entreated to remove the disgrace from His people, and restore them to their former state of grace.' E.J. Young sums it up as follows: 'The nation appeals to the Lord to remember its affliction. This affliction is truly great, but the nation would trust in the eternal God (19).' H.L. Ellison has the following extended comment which will prove useful in our study of the chapter: 'Fittingly the book closes with an appeal to Jehovah. In the first eighteen verses the poet describes the afflictions of Jehovah's people, and then ends with the abiding power of God. The closing verse should be rendered as in the RV margin:

> Unless thou hast utterly rejected us and art very wroth against us.

It is the note of hope, but of subdued hope. To avoid ending the reading of the book on even a qualified minor key, the Synagogue has v 21 repeated after v 22. Since the generation of the destruction could not plead personal innocence, it looks as though 7 implies a date some time on in the exile of this the last of the poems.'

The chapter begins with a request to the Lord to consider their reproach (1). Then, in 2-7, there is a description of their misery, ending with the confession that their fathers had sinned. This is followed, in 8-16, with a further description, ending with the confession of their own sins. 17, 18 form a transition to the final request in 19-22 for deliverance.

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29) *5:1-7*

The request made in 1 refers to the oppression unfolded in what follows. What the Lord is asked to remember (1) is expanded in 2ff. First of all it is the loss of their God-given inheritance. What sin does to men is to rob them of their true dignity. A graphic illustration of the end-product of sin may be seen in the degradation of the 'wino' so often seen in our streets who forces on us the thought of what he once was compared to what he is now. In 3 it is the desolation of the situation that is in view, and the people devoid of protection like widows and orphans. In 4 it is penury and want. Water and food are the great necessities of life, without which it is impossible to exist, and now they have to purchase these things which they had for nothing before. Their persecutors (5) are always close behind them, and there is incessant opposition from the enemy, who make their superiority felt like a goad. In order to satisfy themselves with bread (so as to prolong their lives) they 'give the hand' to Egypt and Assyria - i.e. they make the sign of submission and subjection to their enemies. As to 7, Delitzsch suggests the meaning is 'We suffer more than we are guilty, we are compelled to bear the iniquities of our fathers' - i.e. to atone for their guilt. This is an important thought and we shall spend more time in the next Note discussing it.

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30) *5:7*

What is in view in this verse expresses the idea of solidarity. As Delitzsch puts it, 'the fall of the kingdom had not been brought about by the guilt of that generation merely, and of none before; it was due also to the sins of their fathers before them, in previous generations'. Not that they were not themselves just as guilty (cf 16): they were all guilty men. God does not punish the sins of the fathers in innocent children, but in children who continue the sins of their fathers. This means that there can be no kind of justification for the 'stop-the-world-I-want-to-get-off' syndrome, no 'them, not us' attitude. This is the fact of the matter; it is not our fathers only, but we also who are in the wrong. No section of the community can be exculpated in our present parlous situation either: it is idle for the younger generation today to say to their elders, for example, 'you dropped the bomb on Hiroshima', as if this could wash their hands of responsibility. Nor will it do to say that America did it. It was 20th century man who did it, nay more, it was sinful man that did it, and no one can opt out of the responsibility. And what about the Beirut massacres (1982)? Was it the Jews who committed the atrocities? Or the Christian Falangists? Or the nations who supplied arms to both? Who, indeed, is able to opt out of responsibility?

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31) *5:8-16*

The reference in 8 is to the Chaldeans; what is in view is the reversal of the position of one who had been 'royal' in God's eyes (cf 1:1, where Jerusalem is spoken of as a princess among the countries of the world). In 9 it is again the experience of destitution that is in view, in which bread is obtained at the risk of life (cf Deuteronomy 28:48). Delitzsch suggests that the phrase 'The sword of the wilderness' refers to the predatory Bedouins of the desert, 'who, falling upon those that were bringing in the bread, plundered, and probably even killed them'. The scantiness of this bread was not sufficient to allay hunger, and their skin (10) 'glowed like a baker's oven' - an expression for the fever-heat produced by hunger. The extremity of the indignities to which they were subjected is underlined in 11-13 - the all too common assault and pillage that were part and parcel of ancient conquests. It is a heart-rending picture. The reference in 14 is to the breakdown of all recognised systems of law as exercised by the elders. 'Crown' in 16 is a figurative expression for the honourable position of the people in its entirety, but which is now lost. Indeed, all was now lost: the desolation was utter and complete. One thinks of the prodigal's words in the parable, 'How many hired servants of my father's have bread enough and to spare, and I perish with hunger?' This was the 'want' that he experienced, and which finally brought him to himself, and this was the point of the terrible discipline the people of God were now having to suffer.

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32) *5:17-22*

17, 18 form the transition from the previous verses to the request and prayer expressed in 19-22. The words 'for this' (17) mean 'because of this', and refer back to what has already been said. The faintness of heart and dimness of eye belong together: the grief of the heart finds expression in tears, and it is the multitude of tears that makes the eyes dim. The glory of Mount Zion, the holy mount on which the house of God stood, is now departed (18) and the place so laid waste that jackals now roam on it. Yet, desolate though the picture is, it awakens a prayer, in the knowledge that although the glory of the earthly habitation of the Lord is at an end, His throne endures eternally (19). Zion may be desolate, but faith, born of despair, can still look to that eternal throne; and this thought leads to the prayer that God would yet restore His people. As Delitzsch puts it, 'Since His throne endures eternally in heaven, He cannot let His kingdom perish on the earth'. Hence the prayer in 20, implicit in the words 'Wherefore dost thou forget us forever…'. It is unthinkable that He should finally forsake His people, because of His unchanging grace, and His covenant. It is this that lends both credence and confidence to the prayer that follows in 21, 'Turn thou us unto Thee O Lord,' words which signify the re-establishment of the gracious relation between them and the Lord, which is, of course, impossible without repentance and conversion on the part of Israel. The nature of the prayer in 21 (which echoes Psalm 80:3, 7, 18, 19) recognises the fact that although any restoration is contingent upon the repentance of the people, nevertheless it is only God who can bring this about. It is He who gives the grace of repentance to His people (Acts 5:31).

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33) *5:17-22*

The statement in 22 'But Thou hast utterly rejected us' is, as has already been suggested (see page 30), better taken as in the RV margin, 'Unless thou hast utterly rejected us...'. The word translated 'But' actually has this force in the original. It is merely a possibility, or a supposition, that is stated, as Delitzsch says, 'the actual occurrence of which is out of the question. The idea is the same as that expressed by Jeremiah (14:19) in the form of a question, in order to give greater emphasis to his intercession for his nation. The Lord cannot have utterly rejected His people Israel, because He would thereby make His name to be despised in the eyes of the nations (Jeremiah 14:21)'. Delitzsch goes on to say, in his concluding comments on the chapter: 'In many Hebrew manuscripts 21 is found repeated after 22, to make the whole more suitable for public reading in the synagogue, that the poem may not end with the mention of the wrath of God, as is the case also at the close of Isaiah, Malachi, and Ecclesiastes: the intention is, to conclude with words of comfort. But 22, rightly understood did not require this repetition.... The character of the Lamentations (requires that) complaint and supplication should continue to the end - not, however, without an element of hope, although the latter may not rise to the heights of joyful victory, but 'merely glimmers from afar, like the morning star through the clouds, which does not indeed itself dispel the shadows of the night, though it announces that the rising of the sun is near, and that it shall obtain the victory'.'

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34) *5:17-22*

The solemnity of the ending of the book reminds us of the words of P.T. Forsyth which we have already quoted in this study, 'Our suffering can only be finally dealt with by Him who is more concerned about our sin; who is strong enough to resist pity till grief has done its gracious work even in His Son.' The historical evidence is sufficient to indicate that that resistance of pity lasted a very considerable time. Significantly, Lamentations stands in the canon between Jeremiah and Ezekiel, and Ezekiel's message insists to the captives of 597 BC, now by the river Chebar, that (i) the city will be utterly destroyed, contrary to their confident expectations that the Lord would surely preserve it, and (ii) the exile will be long, not short, as they anticipate. It was so necessary, and God was intent, that all false confidence in them should be destroyed before any restoration could be possible. It can hardly be doubted that this is a lesson grimly relevant for our own day and generation, and one that our own nation sorely needs to learn. Until we do, God will surely show Himself strong enough to resist pity in face of our plaintive cries and squirming, as economic pressures continue to hurt us. It may be that more grief - a great deal more - will need to be experienced before we come to ourselves and see our need of returning to the ways of God.

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35) *5:17-22*

The following is an excerpt from the final Note on Lamentations by the Rev William Still, in the Gilcomston Record: 'The prophet seems to take a last look round Jerusalem, and what he sees makes him shudder and turn sick at heart. He takes refuge in the verities of his inward faith, and stands very near Job in the moment of his direct agony when he cried in defiant faith, 'Though he slay me, yet will I trust in Him.' Jeremiah does the same. When his hope of relief is at its lowest ebb he too cries out defiantly; we may depart and cease to be, but the Lord, never! Thou, O Lord, remainest forever: thy throne from generation to generation. But why dost Thou not take heed of our cry. If Thou didst turn us to thyself in repentance, we would be turned, Do it, Lord, and renew the glorious days of old. But God does not answer. Of course, the seventy years' captivity will end, and the captive remnant return to Jerusalem, but not as a sovereign state. They will have to wait well nigh 2,500 years for that, to AD 1948! And Jeremiah's last lament trails away in grief stricken resignation. Poor man, to have been called to such a thankless task. Small wonder you shrank from the prophet's calling in ch 1! Had you known all you would suffer to the bitter end, you would have shrunk more, but God is gracious. But you have been faithful, and have patiently shared the grief of the people, and there is a reward for faithfulness. Indeed, it will be a wonder if there is reward for anything else in heaven. That is what makes us think that you, Jeremiah, are going to shine as brightly in heaven as any of the saints. May we be able to hold a candle to you!'

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36) *5:17-22*

In an earlier Note we quoted from Thomas Boston's 'Fourfold State', illustrating the use that has sometimes been made of the language of Lamentations to describe the effects of the fall of man. Here is the continuation of that quotation to form our concluding meditation on this remarkable book: 'The creatures that waited to do him service are now, since the fall, set in battle array against him, and the least of them, having commission, proves too hard for him. Waters overflow the old world; fire consumes Sodom; the stars in their courses fight against Sisera; frogs, flies, lice, etc, become executioners to Pharaoh and his Egyptians; worms eat up Herod; yea, man needs a league with the beasts; yea, with the very stones of the field (Job 5:23), having reason to fear, that everyone who findeth him will slay him. Alas! how are we fallen! how are we plunged into a gulf of misery! The sun has gone down on us, death has come in at our windows; our enemies have put out our two eyes, and sport themselves with our miseries. Let us then lie down in the dust, let shame and confusion cover us. Nevertheless, there is hope in Israel concerning this thing. Come then, O sinner, look to Jesus Christ the second Adam: quit the first Adam and his covenant; come over to the Mediator and Surety of the new and better covenant; and let your hearts say, 'Be thou our ruler, and let this breach be under thy hand'. Let your 'eye trickle down, and cease not, without any intermission, till the Lord look down and behold from heaven.' Lamentations 3:49, 50.'

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