

# OpenTheo

## Holy Saturday: Lamentations 3:37-58 & Hebrews 4

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### Alastair Roberts

Prayer in the pit. Entering into rest.

Some passages referenced:

Psalm 88:6-7 (delivered from the pit); Jeremiah 38 (Jeremiah placed in the cistern); Jonah 2:5-6 (Jonah's prayer from the belly of the great fish); Hebrews 5:7 (Jesus' prayers and deliverance from death); Psalm 22:1 ('My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?').

Psalm 95:7-11 (the passage the author of Hebrews expounds in chapters 3-4); 1 Corinthians 10 (the wilderness generation as examples for us); Genesis 2:1-3 (God's establishment of the Sabbath); Hebrews 11:13-16, 39-40 (a greater homeland awaited); Leviticus 25:23 (strangers and sojourners before the Lord in the land); Revelation 14:13 ('Blessed are the dead who die in the Lord from now on').

Reflections upon the readings from the ACNA Book of Common Prayer (<http://bcp2019.anglicanchurch.net/>).

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## Transcript

Lamentations 3.37-58 Who has spoken and it came to pass, unless the Lord has commanded it? Is it not from the mouth of the Most High that good and bad come? Why

should a living man complain, a man about the punishment of his sins? Let us turn 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.

You have wrapped yourself with anger and pursued us, killing without pity. You have wrapped yourself with a cloud, so that no prayer can pass through. You have made us scum and garbage among the peoples.

All our enemies open their mouths against us. Panic and pitfall have come upon us, devastation and destruction. My eyes flow with rivers of tears because of the destruction of the daughter of my people.

My eyes will flow without ceasing, without respite, until the Lord from heaven looks down and sees. My eyes cause me grief at the fate of all the daughters of my city. 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.

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. Lamentations chapter 3, as we have already seen, follows an acrostic pattern. Each set of three verses begins with a particular letter of the Hebrew alphabet, in alphabetical sequence from the beginning of the alphabet to the end.

It is the central chapter of the book and describes within itself a movement from despair beneath God's judgement to confident appeal to the Lord. It begins with the first person lament of the prophet, speaking as one who has personally been buffeted by the blows of God's wrath. The prophet isn't merely declaring a dirge over the fallen city, but speaks as the party under the direct judgement of God himself.

The psychological movement of the passage can be traced, as we have seen, in the shifting pronouns and names. It begins with first person singular pronouns, I and me, and a flurry of third person singular masculine pronouns in relationship to God, he, his, him. But the Lord's name is not used.

There is an inflection point in the prophet's lament that arises when he starts to address himself. No longer trapped in the immediacy of his trials, he can address the truth of the character of the Lord to himself and take comfort from it. In entering into conversation with his soul, another voice, as it were, can speak to his situation.

That interior voice that isn't the immediate voice of suffering and distress, but a voice that can bring up the resources of memory, of conscience, faith and reason, and establish some clarifying distance upon experience, speaking into it with insight and truth that transcends it. As that voice takes its place in the conversation, the first person singular, the I and the me, is replaced by a third person singular, he and him, and the name of the Lord in his character pierces the darkness of the suffering prophet's distress. The prophet now reflects upon firm truths that exceed his present situation, truths that he can grasp onto, and patterns of behaviour appropriate to sufferers that he can live out.

In verses 25-30 we see this. The Lord is good to those who wait for him, to the soul who seeks him. It is good that one should wait quietly for the salvation of the Lord.

It is good for a man that he bear the yoke in his youth. Let him sit alone in silence when it is laid on him. Let him put his mouth in the dust.

There may yet be hope. Let him give his cheek to the one who strikes, and let him be filled with insults. In today's passage this continues.

The prophet acknowledges that all events ultimately come from the hand of the Lord, and that nothing exceeds the Lord's power. Both good fortune and disaster are ultimately from the Lord, and we are in no position to blame him for the punishment of our sins. Indeed, for a living man to do this is to neglect the grace by which he continues to enjoy life.

He hasn't been destroyed, he hasn't been cut off yet. This is a source of comfort then, as the prophet recognizes that he and his people are not the playthings of a capricious fate, but that even the worst things that could befall them ultimately come from the providence of a gracious and good creator, who does not delight in destruction or disaster, and who can restore the sufferer and bring balm to all wounds. At this point then, the sufferer also begins to recognize his own culpability.

His suffering, in this case, is related to the punishment of his sins and the sins of his people. No longer questioning the Lord's goodness, he can see his own responsibility. And at this point a further shift occurs.

The prophet, who began with the immediacy of bitter first-person lament, before addressing the truth of the Lord to himself and resituating his experience in terms of more objective truths, now shifts to the first-person plural and from reflection to exhortation. Let us test and examine our ways and return to the Lord. Let us lift up our hearts and hands to God in heaven.

The prophet is calling the people to the same sort of self-examination and reflection that he has just been engaging in. They must stop fleeing from the Lord and return to him,

presenting themselves to him in fervent prayer. And now the Lord, who was the veiled cause of the prophet's distress in the first 18 verses, and the comforting object of his meditation in the verses that followed, becomes the object of personal address.

The third-person pronouns, he and him, are replaced by second-person address, you. He is no longer talking about God. He is exhorting and leading the community in praying to the Lord.

Now, when he recounts his suffering and the suffering of his people, it is no longer merely sterile lament, but it is being brought before the Lord and calling for the Lord's intervention. So, when he would formally say, he has done X, it shifts to, you have done X. When the prophet returns to the first-person singular and relates his suffering again, a new element appears. He is awaiting the Lord, who will see his tears.

His tears are no longer futile and bitter, but they are a sort of prayer poured out before the Lord, calling upon him to see the sufferer and to act on his behalf. He also returns to the language and the imagery that he began the chapter with, the imagery of being hunted. However, now it is not the Lord who is hunting him, but his enemies who are hunting him.

And he is hunting out the Lord in his crisis. The prophet has been flung alive into the pit, the realm of death, by those who were his enemies without cause. He has been buried and overwhelmed as though drowning in the watery abyss of death.

In that position, he calls upon the name of the Lord. The Lord came near when the prophet called and reassured him, telling him not to fear. The prophet can then declare with reawakened confidence and hope that the Lord has taken up his cause and redeemed his life.

The experience of being cast into or being trapped within the pit is one that is often employed as a metaphor in places such as the Psalms. For instance, in Psalm 88 verses 6-7, being cast into a pit was also an experience that Jeremiah had personally had in Jeremiah chapter 38, when he was placed in a cistern. The veiled he and the afflicted me with which the chapter began has become the you unveiled in salvation and the delivered me.

The God that the prophet was fleeing from as his hunter in the beginning of the chapter has become the Lord that the prophet flees to in all of his distress at the end. The deeply personal character of the deliverance that the prophet experiences at the end of the chapter mirrors the deeply personal crisis that he experienced at the beginning. The Lord's answer to him is an assurance to the entire people that they can turn back to the Lord and find relief in the same manner.

The prophetic sufferer who was trapped by his enemies felt the bitter blows of the Lord's

punishment for the people's sins and called to the Lord in his distress reminds us of our saviour, Jesus Christ. Jeremiah and Joseph might have called upon the Lord in the darkness of their pits, using words similar to those of the Psalmist. Daniel in the lion's den was heard by God and protected from the lion's mouths.

Jonah in the watery abyss of the sea, in the belly of a great fish, also called upon the name of the Lord and was delivered from it. In Jonah chapter 2 verses 5-6 for instance we read, On this holy Saturday, our Saviour lay in a deeper and more terrible pit, a pit whose captives had never been released. Trapped in the prison of a tomb held by the iron clutches of death, and as if that weren't enough, guarded by Roman soldiers, Jesus was delivered from the shackles of death for his fervent prayers.

Hebrews chapter 5 verse 7 reads, On the cross Jesus addressed his Father with the opening words of Psalm 22, The punishment of the rebellious city falling upon his shoulders, the Son resolutely turned his face towards his Father and sought him in his distress, confident in his goodness and praying for his deliverance. At the very moment of death, where it would seem that the blow of God's judgement had fallen most heavily upon his shoulders, Jesus called out, Jesus looked with confidence to the Father who had afflicted him, seeking his redemption from the grave, from the greatest exile of all. Holy Saturday is the agonising silence, the deathly stillness that lies between the prayers of the dying Christ and their answer on Easter morning.

We so quickly pass over Holy Saturday, moving from Good Friday to Easter Sunday without tarrying in that terrible space in between. Yet it is in the darkness of Holy Saturday that we so often find ourselves, in a time when all hope has been extinguished, when the devastating blow has fallen, no recovery seems possible, and all prayers have been unanswered. There is a passage from crisis to the restoration of hope, one in which we must pass under the shadow of death, to be united with our Lord in the cruel silence of the Holy Saturday tomb.

Let us lift up our hearts and our hands as we look to his deliverance. A question to consider, what are some of the practical ways that we can develop our ability to speak God's truth into the suffocating immediacy of our own experience? Hebrews chapter 4 For he has somewhere spoken of the seventh day in this way, and God rested on the seventh day from all his works. And again in this passage he said, They shall not enter my rest.

Since therefore it remains for some to enter it, and those who formerly received the good news failed to enter because of disobedience, again he appoints a certain day. Today, saying through David so long afterward, in the words already quoted, Today, if you hear his voice, do not harden your hearts. For if Joshua had given them rest, God would not have spoken of another day later on.

So then there remains a Sabbath rest for the people of God. For whoever has entered

God's rest has also rested from his works, as God did from his. Let us therefore strive to enter that rest, so that no one may fall by the same sort of disobedience.

For the word of God is living and active, sharper than any two-edged sword, piercing to the division of soul and of spirit, of joints and of marrow, and discerning the thoughts and intentions of the heart. And no creature is hidden from his sight, but all are naked and exposed to the eyes of him to whom we must give account. Since then we have a great High Priest, who has passed through the heavens, Jesus the Son of God, let us hold fast our confession.

For we do not have a High Priest who is unable to sympathize with our weaknesses, but one who in every respect has been tempted as we are, yet without sin. Let us then with confidence draw near to the throne of grace, that we may receive mercy, and find grace to help in time of need. The author of Hebrews presents the experience of the Christians to whom he is writing, in terms of the experience of the generation of the children of Israel in the wilderness during the Exodus.

Like the Israelites, they are in a realm between realms, no longer in Egypt, but not having entered into the rest of the awaited promise, and they must faithfully persevere. Hebrews chapter 4 is part of an argument that the writer has been developing since the previous chapter, expounding Psalm 95 verses 7-11, and exhorting the people in terms of it. As the Apostle Paul does in 1 Corinthians 10, the author of Hebrews encourages the hearers of his epistle to consider themselves in terms of the experience of Israel, learning from that cautionary example.

All of the Israelites were delivered from Egypt, but on account of unbelief an entire generation perished in the wilderness, before entering into the land, into the rest that God had promised them. If Hebrews chapter 3 mostly looks back to the cautionary example of the wilderness generation of the Israelites, reading the verses from Psalm 95 against the backdrop of Numbers 14 and the judgment upon that generation, Hebrews 4 focuses upon looking forward to the rest promised to us, and reads the verses from Psalm 95 against the backdrop of Genesis chapter 2 verses 1-3, where God first establishes the Sabbath. In chapter 4 verse 1, the fear is repeated, not so much in terms of rebellion and punishment as it was earlier, but in terms of missing out on promise.

As in 1 Corinthians 10, the point is strengthened by heightening the awareness of an analogy between the experience of the Christians that are being addressed in the epistle and the experience of Israel. Good news, a gospel, came to Israel, just as it had come in their own days. However, the good news of the rest of the promised land that the Israelites received did them no good.

As they failed to grasp hold of it by faith, the seed of that word fell upon poor soil. True faith effectively receives the promise of God, responds with obedience and holds fast to him, and they failed to do that. Those who believe do enter into the promised rest, the

rest that is testified to even in the warning of Psalm 95 verse 11.

The rest is God's own Sabbath rest, which was established when he first created the world. At this point, he is moving from the unbelief of the wilderness generation that we should learn from, and focusing upon the promise that is still held out to us. Psalm 95's mention of rest, he is arguing, wasn't merely about the promised land of Canaan being offered to the wilderness generation.

It looked beyond that, to entering into the fullness of God's Sabbath rest, the rest described in Genesis chapter 2, that we might rest from our labours just as God rested from his. The movement from the immediate promise of entry into the land, to promise of entry into a greater, a more fundamental and a more permanent rest, is already anticipated in the Psalm, which takes the historical statement made to the wilderness generation and addresses it in the present time to those singing and hearing the Psalm. They are expected to recognise that behind the historic rest of the land promised to Israel is a greater rest.

The very fact that entering God's rest is spoken of as it is in Psalm 95 implies that there is something that is still held open for us. God promised that his people would one day enter into his rest, and this promise looks all the way back to Genesis chapter 2, when God rested from his work in creation on the Sabbath day. He equips man to engage in work within the creation, and the expectation is that man will also enjoy rest when that is completed.

The promise remains, a fact testified to by the word today within Psalm 95, which the author of Hebrews sees as referring to David's own day. So it's obviously continuing beyond the age of Joshua. This clearly demonstrates that even though Joshua brought them into the land, this didn't achieve full entry into God's rest.

Canaan wasn't the great Sabbath for which they were waiting. Even as they enjoyed the land of Canaan, Israel recognised that they were sojourners and pilgrims awaiting a greater homeland. In Hebrews chapter 11, verses 13-16 we read, Therefore God is not ashamed to be called their God, for he has prepared for them a city.

And in verses 39 and 40 of that chapter, And all these, though commended through their faith, did not receive what was promised, since God has provided something better for us, that apart from us they should not be made perfect. Now the notion that the promised land wasn't their full homeland and rest is already something that we can see within the Old Testament. Leviticus chapter 25, verse 26 declares, Even when settled in the land then, Israel still hasn't truly attained to rest and their true homeland.

Consequently there remains a Sabbath rest for us to look forward to, and to strive to enter into as the people of God, Jews and Gentiles alike. The heroes of Hebrews faced the same danger as the Israelites of the wilderness generation. If they didn't strive to

enter into God's rest, they could fall short through disobedience like the Israelites before them.

The word of the living God is itself living and powerful. It discerns and tests the thoughts and intentions of the heart. As God speaks, he exposes hearts.

Every creature is naked and exposed in God's sight, in the sight of him to whom we must give account. So faced with the wonderful continued promise of rest, the fearful risk of falling short of it, and the unmasking power of the word of God, we must respond to that dividing word with faith, holding on firmly to the promise of sharing in God's Sabbath and entering into it. The final three verses of this chapter are the transition into the chapters that follow, concerning the priesthood of Christ.

Jesus, the Son of God, has passed through the heavens and sat down at God's right hand. He has gone in advance of us, as our great High Priest, completing his sacrifice and entering into rest, his work completed. However, despite his character as the great champion that goes before us, he has entered into the same struggle with temptation that we face.

The temptation here isn't so much with sin as we tend to see it. It's not sin as such, it's the struggle with temptation to draw back from calling. The failure to persevere through suffering to the end of this mission that's been set before us.

Despite being tempted to divert from the pain of the cross, Jesus endured the pain and the shame, and has entered into the glorious rest of God as the High Priest and the leader of his people. This is an assurance to us that we will enter too. We must faithfully follow Jesus and look to him.

Through him we can also draw near to God's very throne, which is a throne of grace to us, a place where we will find aid when we need it, and from where we will discover the strength that we need to persevere and receive the promise of rest that God holds out to us. On the cross, Jesus declared, it is finished. And on Holy Saturday, Jesus rested in the tomb.

In the original creation, God finished his labours and rested from them on the Sabbath. Holy Saturday is a sort of conclusion. It's the closure of the story of an old world.

On the first day of a new week, a new creation would be born in the resurrection of our Saviour. But on Holy Saturday, that had not yet arrived. The resting place of Christ was the dread darkness of the tomb, a prison, not a promised land.

The rest of that terrible Saturday seemed like a hollow parody of God's promised rest. But yet, in entering the realm of death, Christ is able to open it up and to release its prisoners. As the first fruits of the resurrection, the firstborn of the dead, Christ overcomes the barrenness of the cold tomb and makes it a fruitful womb.



Thereafter, the tomb is a passage into rest. We rest in peace so that we might rise in glory to the glorious rest of God that Psalm 95 held out to us in promise. In Revelation chapter 14 verse 13 we read, And I heard a voice from heaven saying, Write this, Blessed are the dead who die in the Lord from now on.

Blessed indeed, says the Spirit, that they may rest from their labours, for their deeds follow them. Today, if you hear his voice, do not harden your heart.