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March 1st: Lamentations 5 & Romans 13

February 28, 2021



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Restore us to yourself, O Lord, that we may be restored! Be subject to the governing authorities.

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

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Transcript

Lamentations, chapter 5. Remember, O Lord, what has befallen us. Look and see our disgrace. Our inheritance has been turned over to strangers, our homes to foreigners.

We have become orphans, fatherless. Our mothers are like widows. We must pay for the water we drink.

The wood we get must be bought. Our pursuers are at our necks. We are weary.

We are given no rest. We have given the hand to Egypt and to Assyria to get bread enough. Our fathers sinned and are no more and we bear their iniquities.

Slaves rule over us. There is none to deliver us from their hand. We get our bread at the peril of our lives because of the sword in the wilderness.

Our skin is hot as an oven with the burning heat of famine. Women are raped in Zion, young women in the towns of Judah. Princes are hung up by their hands.

No respect is shown to the elders. Young men are compelled to grind at the mill and boys stagger under loads of wood. The old men have left the city gate, the young men their music.

The joy of our hearts has ceased. Our dancing has been turned to mourning. The crown has fallen from our head.

Woe to us for we have sinned. For this our heart has become sick. For these things our eyes have grown dim.

For Mount Zion which lies desolate. Jackals prowl over it. But you, O Lord, reign forever.

Your throne endures to all generations. Why do you forget us forever? Why do you forsake us for so many days? Restore us to yourself, O Lord, that we may be restored. Renew our days as of old, unless you have utterly rejected us and you remain exceedingly angry with us.

With Chapter 5 Lamentations ends. The shadow of the acrostic pattern remains. There are twenty-two verses, but the actual substance of it is absent.

There isn't the alphabetical sequence in this chapter. It is the shortest of all of the chapters of the book. The first three chapters have sixty-six lines each, the fourth forty-four lines, and now the final chapter just twenty-two.

William Shea has made the case that the relative length of the chapters of Lamentations and their varying use of the acrostic form is an indicator of a pattern equivalent to the metre of the typical line of the earlier chapters being played out over the book as a whole. The acrostic form of the book more generally might serve a broader purpose. Barry Webb writes, As Dilbert Hillers has noted, the acrostic form of the poems has the effect of giving grief a shape, which is itself a kind of resolution.

Grief itself, by its very nature, is a rather formless thing. The mind of a person in deep sorrow characteristically moves in circles, returning again and again to the source of the grief, unable to leave it and unable to resolve it. What the acrostic form does is to allow the grief to be fully expressed, and yet at the same time sets limits to it.

These poems explore grief in its many and varied aspects, viewing it first from one perspective, then from another, and yet another. The whole gamut of human sorrow is explored, the A to Z of sorrow, and yet by that same acrostic pattern the grief is shaped and led to a conclusion, a point of completeness, where everything necessary has been said, at least for the time being, and the mourner can fall silent without feeling he has been stifled. In this sense the acrostic form has more than aesthetic significance, it has

therapeutic and pastoral significance as well.

The meter of the earlier chapters, which generally involved a 3-2 pattern between each set of half-lines, is largely switched in this chapter for a balanced 3-3 pattern. The chapter describes the aftermath of the disaster, and gradually moves us towards what might be a more hopeful note. It begins by calling the Lord to take notice of the condition and the suffering of his people, as he did in the Exodus.

It might remind us of some of the Psalms, like Psalm 74, verse 22, Arise, O God, defend your cause, remember how the foolish scoff at you all the day. Verses 2-18 offer a description of the state of the people, developing various aspects of their plight in succession. In verses 2-4 they are cut off from their inheritance.

In verses 5-10 they experience oppression, poverty and hunger. In verses 11-14 degradation, violation and humiliation. And in verses 15-18 grief and the loss of sovereignty.

The inheritance of the land was the Lord's great gift to his people, a sign of his favour towards them, and the loss of that inheritance, its being turned over to strangers and aliens, and people who were hostile to them as their enemies, was a bitter blow, not just on a national and economic level, but also on a covenantal level. The people are described as having become orphans and fatherless, and their mothers like widows. This may particularly be a reference to the loss of the men of the city, in exile, and also to the sword.

However, since the Lord is the husband of his bride Israel, and according to a different metaphor, the father of Israel as his first born son, Israel's current position as the Lord has abandoned them to their fate, is similar to that of orphans and widows. We might also here recall the first verse of the book, how lonely sits the city that was full of people, how like a widow has she become, she who was great among the nations, she who was a princess among the provinces, has become a slave. Along with this destitution and loss of relationship, Judah has also lost access to the resources of the land, they have to pay for the water that they drink, and the wood that they use for fuel and for construction needs to be bought from others.

They are harried by their enemies on all sides, are defenceless and lack security. In the past they looked to Egypt and Assyria, and the consequences of those past imprudent alliances continue to be felt keenly. Elsewhere in scripture, in Ezekiel chapter 18 for instance, the Lord condemns the saying of his people, that the fathers have eaten sour grapes, and the children's teeth are set on edge, the way that Judah was blaming the sins of their fathers for their current condition.

In verse 7 a similar claim is being made, but it is not used to deny the sin of the people themselves, that is, confess later on. It is not an attempt at blame shifting. Rather in this

communal lament, which unlike the other chapters has a consistent single speaking voice throughout, the people are recognising the consequences of past sins, and the way that the idolatry and rebellion of their fathers has ramifications down to the present day.

Their fathers may have died, but the poisonous legacy that they left behind lives on. The people of the former kingdom of Judah have been so diminished in their status that they are ruled over by slaves. The exact group or groups that are being referred to as slaves here is not entirely clear.

It might be a reference to the Babylonians, or to the authorities that the Babylonians put over them, perhaps to Jewish authorities appointed by the Babylonians, perhaps a reference to Babylonian soldiers, maybe it's a reference to Babylonian slaves over Jewish work parties, or perhaps it's a reference to the other nations round about that are preying upon them. Whatever the group is, and it might be a reference to a number of these different groups, there is no one to deliver them. The oppressors have the upper hand and there is no one to rival them.

They suffer from famine, they struggle to get bread, and their skin is discoloured because of lack of food. One of the most common and tragic results of war is the raping of women. As the men of Judah and Jerusalem have been utterly defeated, their women can be taken and raped by the enemy with impunity.

The leaders of the people also suffer the most severe indignities, princes hung up by their hands, whether as a form of execution or as a display of corpses. The dishonouring of the elders of the people is a further humiliation. The young men are subject to harsh labour, to the back-breaking work that usually is left to slaves and to animals.

The community life of the nation has also dried up. The old men who had been in the city gate as a place of judgement and rule have now left it and the young men have ceased to make music. The joy of the people, perhaps associated with their worship, has ended.

Celebrations of feasts and of marriages have been silenced and mourning and funerals take their place. The fallen crown may be a reference to Jerusalem itself or perhaps to the sovereignty of the people more generally, or maybe more narrowly to the king himself. The people clearly recognise that this is a result of their sin.

This has befallen them, not just on account of what their fathers have done, but also on account of their own iniquities. In verses 19-20 we see the contrast between the eternity and infinitude of God and the temporality and mortality of man. God's rule endures forever, but human beings soon wither and perish, which means that the continued absence of the Lord's favour is most keenly felt.

This is directly addressed to the Lord. The people are calling upon the Lord to remember them, to take note of their suffering, to recognise all the things that they have just

described and to show his mercy towards them. We might here be reminded of places like Psalm 74 verses 1-2.

O God, why do you cast us off forever? Why does your anger smoke against the sheep of your pasture? Remember your congregation, which you have purchased of old, which you have redeemed to be the tribe of your heritage. Remember Mount Zion, where you have dwelt. We might also think of the way that the Lord has expressed his comfort towards his people in similar language, in Isaiah 49 verses 14-15.

But Zion said, The Lord has forsaken me, my Lord has forgotten me. Can a woman forget her nursing child, that she should have no compassion on the son of her womb? Even these may forget, yet I will not forget you. The final verses are a plea for restoration to the Lord.

We might again think of verses like Jeremiah 31 verse 18. I have heard Ephraim grieving. You have disciplined me and I was disciplined like an untrained calf.

Bring me back that I may be restored, for you are the Lord my God. The petition here is for the restoration of the relationship that the Lord once had with his people, for the re-establishment of the covenant. The final line of this chapter, of this poem, and indeed of the book, is a challenging one both to translate and to interpret, and several different readings of it have been advanced.

Some translations and commentators like the ESV read it as, Unless you have utterly rejected us. Others read it as a question, or have you utterly rejected us? Paul House lists several other alternative approaches. Some have read it, but rather you have utterly rejected us and you remain exceedingly angry with us.

A further alternative could be to read it as, even though you had despised us greatly and had been very angry with us. The interpreter of this verse is then left with the challenge of determining the note on which the book ends. Is it a note of refusal, that the Lord has refused to hear the plea of his people? Is it more open-ended, not knowing exactly the way that things might work out? Is it contrasting the restoration that is hoped for with the judgment that the Lord has brought upon them in the past? Following House at this point, it seems most likely to me that this is a reference to the current situation of the people, and a confident and hopeful petition that the Lord will reverse his judgment.

Understood this way, we might think back to Lamentations chapter 3 verses 31-32, for the Lord will not cast off forever, but though he cause grief, he will have compassion according to the abundance of his steadfast love. A question to consider, how does an understanding of the character of God help us better to understand his judgment? Romans chapter 13 But if you do wrong, be afraid, for he does not bear the sword in vain, for he is the servant of God, an avenger who carries out God's wrath on the wrongdoer. Therefore one must be in subjection, not only to avoid God's wrath, but also

for the sake of conscience.

For because of this you also pay taxes, for the authorities are ministers of God, attending to this very thing. Pay to all what is owed to them, taxes to whom taxes are owed, revenue to whom revenue is owed, respect to whom respect is owed, honour to whom honour is owed. Owe no one anything except to love each other, for the one who loves another has fulfilled the law.

For the commandments, You shall not commit adultery, you shall not murder, you shall not steal, you shall not covet, and any other commandment are summed up in this word, You shall love your neighbour as yourself. Love does no wrong to a neighbour, therefore love is the fulfilling of the law. Besides this you know the time, that the hour has come for you to wake from sleep, for salvation is nearer to us now than when we first believed.

The night is far gone, the day is at hand. So then let us cast off the works of darkness, and put on the armour of light. Let us walk properly as in the daytime, not in orgies and drunkenness, not in sexual immorality and sensuality, not in quarrelling and jealousy, but put on the Lord Jesus Christ and make no provision for the flesh to gratify its desires.

Romans chapter 13 is one of the more controversial passages in Paul. Paul's brief statements about our relation to the authorities within it seem to proceed from an exceedingly conservative political vision, one that has troubled many, especially those who have hoped for somewhat more support for political radicalism from an apostle for whom Christ's universal lordship is such a prominent theme. However, as is often the case with Paul, closer examination may reveal a more subtle picture than we initially supposed.

As usual, one of the first things that we need to do is to read these verses in their context, both the wider context and the more immediate one. The wider context of the letter speaks of the great act of God's grace in Christ, by which God's saving righteousness is realised in a manner which puts the ungodly in good standing with God, while manifesting and upholding the just order of the world. Christ declared to be the Son of God by the resurrection from the dead, and the good news of his reign is to be spread to all nations, calling people to the obedience of faith.

Clearly, in the light of such a message, governments cannot simply go on as if nothing had ever happened. Although Paul's statement at this juncture should not be expected to present a full account of the impact of Christ's lordship upon the realm of earthly government, we should read it aware that it belongs within such a larger picture. In the more immediate context of the preceding chapter, we also have teaching about not avenging ourselves, which provides important background for the discussion of the ruler as an avenger, serving God and carrying out God's wrath.

Beyond this, Paul has also just been teaching about how we relate to those outside the

faith. His emphasis upon living at harmony and at peace with others is particularly important. Contrary to what some suppose, there is a very great deal that Christians can have in common with their non-Christian neighbours.

There is no necessary conflict between Christians and their non-Christian neighbours and governments in most situations. We should be those who prioritise and seek peaceful coexistence in our societies. As the Lord addresses the Jewish exiles in Babylon in Jeremiah 29, verse 7, Even where harmony clearly does not exist, Paul has already taught about the importance of blessing those who persecute us.

The persecutors of the early Christians were often those in government. Even in the context of the admittedly early reign of Nero and the commonality of suffering at the hands of the authorities for Christians, Paul can speak as if the ordinary relationship between Christians and government is one of respectful and obedient submission. And he does not seem to be excessively concerned to articulate the potential, and I believe quite real, exceptions to or qualifications of this that we might so desire.

Paul, we should remember, was a man often imprisoned, beaten and otherwise mistreated by authorities of various types, yet who spoke of these authorities as an obedient citizen, rather than as a vengeful revolutionary. He served a lord who had been unjustly condemned by the religious leaders of his people and crucified by the empire of which he was a citizen. Paul had also been a participant in events such as the martyrdom of Stephen, so he was well aware of the evil that could be done in the name of authorities.

He was not someone who viewed authorities with rose-tinted spectacles or had any illusions about their character. If we consider carefully whose words we are reading, we might realise that Romans chapter 13, verses 1-7 are far more radical than we might have supposed. Some have debated whether Paul's statements were merely for Christians in that immediate time and context, telling them to submit to rulers who weren't so bad.

However, there is nothing in Paul's statements here that suggests such narrow scope, nor should we believe that the rulers were really that good. Besides, a broader application to his words resonates with what we find scripture teaching elsewhere. Paul charges his readers to be subject to the governing authorities.

Government as such is ordained and intended by God, and both Christians and non-Christians alike ought to submit to it. Clearly, there are various forms that government can take, and the associated forms of subjection can vary accordingly. What it means and looks like to be subject to a modern democratic government is rather different from what it would have meant for the Roman Christians to submit to the emperor and the various officials of the empire.

Nevertheless, Paul here teaches that we must subject ourselves to non-reciprocal human structures wherein we are commanded and have obligations laid upon us. He grounds this duty upon the fact that all authority ultimately derives from God's own authority, and that the actually existing authorities have been established by God. We might here recall Jesus' words to Pilate in John chapter 19, verse 11.

Jesus answered him, Therefore, he who delivered me over to you has the greater sin. Authority may be exercised rightly or wrongly by different bearers of it. However, it is important that we honour and are subject to authorities.

This is closely related to children's duty to honour their parents. Children must submit to and honour even unrighteous parents as they can, honouring them as they bear a natural authority relative to them. This honouring is not incompatible with conscientious objections to certain immoral requirements that they might make of us.

But those who start with considering such objections are seldom obeying the primary command, which is perhaps most important at the point where the authority is committed to immorality. We might perhaps think of David's attitude to King Saul here. Even after Saul had killed the priests and pursued him without a cause in order to kill him, David still refused to strike the laws anointed and address Saul with humility and with honour.

How does God institute authorities? First, we should recognise that authority is less something that human beings construct from scratch in the world, in the great, for instance, founding events of social contracts imagined by some modern political theorists. Rather, authority is something that emerges more organically and unpredictably in society and, as Paul believes, is raised up by God. Authority emerges in God's providence.

We should begin to recognise a demythologising dimension to Paul's teaching here. In a society with an emperor cult, for instance, the statement that the authorities are providentially raised up by God, and by implication can be brought low or removed in a similar fashion, is a somewhat deflationary account compared with the grand myths of the empires and kingdoms of the day. Authority is fundamentally a gift that God has given to humanity, and not just authority as such, but also the various actually existing authorities.

A world stripped of authorities would not be a good place. In the ordinary and divinely intended state of affairs, rulers function as a terror to evildoers, not to the righteous. There are clearly exceptions to this, as Paul well knew, even from his own personal experience.

However, he is talking about the normal situation, not the exception here. Authority was given by God in places such as Genesis 9, verses 5-6 as a means of dealing with

malefactors. And for your lifeblood I will require a reckoning, from every beast I will require it, and from man.

From his fellow man I will require a reckoning for the life of man. Whoever sheds the blood of man, by man shall his blood be shed, for God made man in his own image. A proper relationship to authority should seek the approval of those in authority over us, through righteous submission.

A fundamental posture of resistance to authorities is a resistance to God's appointment. While there may be times that we cannot submit in good conscience, out of a desire to maintain peace, we will not be seeking out such occasions. When we encounter them we need to behave in a way that recognises and honours authority, even while we resist its unlawful impositions upon us.

Oliver O'Donovan has remarked upon the radical character of Paul's statement here, arguing that while in the light of Christ's victory it is nonetheless God's purpose that the structures of the old age continue to exercise their sway, the manner in which and the purpose for which they do so has been fundamentally reconceived. He writes, That purpose is judgment. Government is an avenger to visit wrath on the wrongdoer.

Correspondingly, as judgment in the ancient world always has in mind a decision between two parties, as in our civil, rather than our criminal, jurisdiction, it is also to praise the party who has acted rightly. This exactly reflects the concept of Mishpat in the Old Testament. What has now changed is the privileging of this aspect of governmental authority so that the whole rationale of government is seen to rest on its capacity to effect the judicial task.

St Paul's new assertion is that the performance of judgment alone justifies government and this reflects his new Christian understanding of the political situation. Reconceiving government in terms of the execution of judgment, once again there is a humbling of it. The ruler is a servant of God, not a God himself.

He has a commission and a standard by which he himself can be judged, and a master to whom he is answerable. The ruler is a steward of God's authority, not someone with independent authority of his own. The ruler is also charged to perform as God's servant something that we are not permitted to do as individuals, in executing vengeance on wrongdoers.

Paul explicitly taught that Christians should not avenge themselves, but here teaches that the authorities can minister God's vengeance. We might again recall Genesis 9, verses 5-6. Beyond our need to subject ourselves to the authorities to avoid the wrath of God that the authorities minister then, we must also subject ourselves out of a conscientious recognition of them as God's servants.

When we encounter authorities, we should render them their due honour, also acting towards them in ways that will sustain their authority, through the payment of taxes and the rendering of respect and honour. We don't get to bargain about taxes or to decide what we think that they should be expended on. Rather we pay authorities the tribute that we are obligated to give them.

Just as we don't get to pick and choose what taxes we pay, we don't get to pick and choose what laws we obey. We respect the authorities as servants of God and ministers of the good of society. This doesn't mean that they are always good servants.

However, even a bad servant is due some honour and recognition on account of his master who has commissioned him and not yet removed him from his office. Paul now declares, O' no one anything. Peter Lighthouse observes of this.

That does not mean, as it might seem, do not become a recipient of benefits. Paul knows that everyone is needy, dependent on God and on others for almost anything. No debts means that benefits are always finely referred to a single divine patron.

In the community of Jesus the only debt is the debt of love. Thanks is owed, but it is owed for, rather than to, benefactors. Recipients of gifts are not indebted to the givers.

They do not owe return payment. Givers do not impose burdens of gratitude on their beneficiaries. They cannot use their gifts to lord over recipients.

The father and his son cover all debts, supplying all needs according to their riches. Such teaching undermines the structures of patronage and clientage which were essential to many structures of rule and social power in the ancient world. Once again Paul is subtly, yet radically reconfiguring people's relationship with authorities.

The authorities are not removed, but they are demythologised, humbled and stripped of their presumed capacity to impose obligations that once raised them up as masters, rather than as stewards and ministers of God's justice. Lest we may have forgotten, which we definitely ought not to have done, that we are still reading the book of Romans, Paul now speaks of love as the fulfilment of the law. This is what it looks like for the righteous requirement of the law to be fulfilled in us as we live by the spirit.

The law is all fulfilled in the command to love your neighbour as yourself. This, we should note, is a central point in Jesus' own teaching concerning the law in such places as the Sermon on the Mount and elsewhere. It is also found elsewhere in the New Testament, in the teaching of James for instance.

The concluding verses of this chapter are perhaps most famous as those which occasion St. Augustine's conversion. As in several other places in the New Testament, they present Christians as living at the time of the approaching dawn, something heralded by the advent of Christ. Christians must consequently live as people of the day, abandoning

the works of darkness.

As some commentators have observed, the behaviours he lists are those behaviours typically encountered in the night time, with drunkenness, sexual immorality and brawling. The alternative to these is to put on the armour of light and the Lord Jesus Christ, something that Paul has associated with baptism in Galatians 3.27. Baptism is like donning armour that will protect us against Satan's assaults. Whenever we are tempted by the insobriety and the iniquity of the night, we must recall that we have been marked out by God's promise as children of the light and we must turn to him for deliverance.

A question to consider. What are some of the ways in which Paul's teaching here frees Christians in their relationship to the law, in their relationship to others and in their relationship to the authorities?