

Genesis 1:26-28

COVENANT RENEWAL

Matthew 28:18-20

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COVENANT RENEWAL: WHAT TO DO WHEN BAD THINGS HAPPEN

by Ray R. Sutton

"Why is there evil in the world?" is one of the oldest questions. It usually rears its ugly head when we experience suffering of any kind. It causes us to ask, "Why," like the story of Glen Chambers. He was headed for an exciting future and ministry with *Voice of the Andes* in Ecuador. He had worked long and hard, and his life represented an accumulation of events and people brought about by the grace of God.

As he sat in the airport, he suddenly thought of something he needed to write his mother. But since there was no paper around, he picked up a piece that had been thrown on the floor. He had to write around the edges because the scrap of paper was a single torn page from some advertisement with one word in the center, **why**. He moved hurriedly to get the note in the mail, for the last call was being made to catch his flight. Perhaps as he sat down in his seat on the plane, he felt safe; he had gotten the note in the mail to his mother, and now he was just a few hours from his destination, his future, his ministry, his work for God.

So he thought! The Avianca Airline flight never reached its destination. It collided with El Tablazo, a 14,000 foot mountain peak on the Columbian mountain range. All aboard, including Glen Chambers, met their Maker in a sudden, instant of a fiery moment.

But what of Glen's letter? It reached his mother several days after her son's unexpected death. It came unexpectedly, just as his death had come. It had an ominous feel as she lifted it from the mailbox. But perhaps she began to treasure it, knowing that it was her son's last message to her. She hurried to open it. When she did, however, the word **why** screamed from the page at her! She knew that her son's untimely death had been captured by his own message that had preceded his own death.

Why? It's a difficult question that is often asked, or should I say nearly **always** asked when something bad happens. It's the kind of question that **anyone** can ask: from seminary student to housewife. But it's a question that rarely gets answered the right way.

I'm not sure anyone can adequately answer the question "why?" I remember well an experience in seminary that has never left me. I was selected with a few other students to be in a special theology class that was being held in the home of one of my professors; it so happened that he was the best professor in systematic theology and one of my favorites. I was honored to be asked, and I went to the first class with anxious anticipation, because we would select the first theological topic for discussion. I sat there and to my amazement everyone wanted to debate the origin of evil. After an hour of giving various views and after we had all talked ourselves into a theological corner with no way out, I joined with the rest of the class in turning to the old professor to await his solution.

He looked at us and he said, "So you think I'm going to

solve the problem of the origins of evil," as he kind of chuckled to himself. He continued, "Listen, if I could solve this one theological problem I'd be **the greatest theologian who ever lived**, greater than Chrysostom, Augustine, and Calvin! So don't expect me to answer the big question, **'why.'**"

I was stunned. I sat there and in my immaturity I thought, "I can't believe it, I've come all this way in theology to find out that the big question can't be solved." But as I have matured in my understanding, I've discovered that God doesn't always answer the "why" question, except to answer, "To the glory of God." I've also discovered that God does not promise that bad things won't happen; to the contrary, He almost guarantees that at some point in our lives suffering, tragedy, and grief will strike.

Now some people would like to live in the illusion that if they just think positively, **bad things can be eradicated**. These folks need to listen to Peter Ustinov, the great actor, who was once being interviewed, when the conversation somehow turned to the subject of suffering. He made an interesting point. To paraphrase him, he said, "I think if some people had the power they would have written a pardon from Pontius Pilate into the script of Jesus' death on the cross, so that at the last minute a Roman soldier would have come riding up to the cross with a parchment in hand, declaring that Jesus be taken down and allowed to live. These script writers just don't want to face the fact that death, judgment, and suffering are part of life!"

Ustinov is right, but are we left helpless with nothing to do and no answers to the "why" question? No, because the Bible tells us **what** to do, regardless of the **why**. It tells us what to do in one phrase: **renew our covenant**. It says, "All the bad things that happen in your life are to be met with the renewing of your covenant relationship to God, even though you may not understand why they have happened." Significantly, the Bible explains this covenantal response in a number of places. In this issue, let's take a look at the Book of Lamentations, which is laid out in the form of a covenant.

Lamentations

Lamentations is a covenant. It has a five-fold division, after the covenantal pattern in Deuteronomy.¹ Granted the chapter divisions are not inspired, but Lamentations clearly has five sections. Each segment becomes a chapter because it is organized around the Hebrew alphabet: chapters one, two, four and five have twenty-two verses for the twenty-two letters of the Hebrew alphabet, every verse beginning with a consecutive letter. Chapter three has sixty-six verses, three times twenty-two. Only, the third chapter changes letters every three verses, each triplet beginning

1. For a fuller discussion of the covenant, see Ray R. Sutton, *That You May Prosper: Dominion By Covenant* (Tyler, Texas: I.C.E., 1987).

with the same letter. Its structure, therefore, is generally recognized, but the real value of seeing the five-fold division is tied to the covenant.

The process of mourning is covenantal. Jeremiah laments the death of Israel's covenant with God. He realizes that he must die to this dying covenant, and that he must wait for a new one. But as he laments, he himself engages in a process of mourning that renews his own covenant with God, so that at the end of the book he exclaims, "Thou, O Lord dost rule forever, Thy throne is from generation to generation" (Lam. 5:19). He agonizingly begins the book by praying a covenantal lamentation, and he concludes by rejoicing over God's sovereign control of his circumstances. Whatever Jeremiah does is the key to dealing with bad things that happen. Whatever he does is the answer to life's deepest struggles. Whatever he does is the power of covenant renewal.

Transcendence

The covenant in Deuteronomy begins with the **transcendence** of the Lord (Deut. 1:3); He is distinct from His creation; He rules over and through the affairs of men; He is sovereign (Deut. 1:3). The covenant in Lamentations opens with the same emphasis in the first chapter, but it may not appear that way from the first few verses; the tone, to say the least, is rather despondent and cynical.

The Lamentations' covenant begins each chapter in the "slough of despond," as *Pilgrim's Progress* describes a state of despondency and depression. It takes us down to where the "trashed out" man lives in the defeat of bad breaks and rotten luck. It starts each chapter in a pit because it speaks to the person who has had something, maybe many things, bad happen to him, and who has been overcome by his circumstances. But the covenant of Lamentations does not stop there, for its real purpose is to teach man how to **covenant** his way through trouble, any kind of trouble. So the first chapter opens on a dismal note, but it rapidly moves to a **transcendent** emphasis. The first verses of the first chapter of the book say,

How lonely sits the city that was full of people! She has become like a **widow** who was once great among the nations! . . . Judah has gone into exile under affliction, and under harsh servitude; She dwells among the nations, but she has found no rest (Lamentations 1:1-3).

The situation is the following. The lamenter, whom I believe to have been Jeremiah or some other special mourner for Israel (II Chronicles 35:25), describes the city as a **woman** (Israel), actually a "widow" who has lost her husband, her home, her friends, her influence, and her dignity. Her husband was the Davidic line of kings, who had all died off. She was left destitute with no one and no hope. She had no groom and she was seemingly without anything.

Why? The "widow" of Lamentations had had a series of bad things happen. She was in a strange land, working as a "forced laborer" (1:1); she had been carried off into captivity by Nebuchadnezzar, the Babylonian king. She was alone and she had no one to "comfort her" (1:2). She had nothing to return to in Judah, her home, because there was nothing there: no place of worship (1:4), no friends, no future. She had lost her "beauty," by which to appeal to any new grooms (1:6), her source of rescue, for they were all scattered, and they had no intentions of coming to free a "widow" who was so ugly. And so, she "weeps bitterly" (1:2).

All she really had was a "remembrance" of the history of Jerusalem (1:7). But this memory was all she needed. It reminded her of where Jerusalem's troubles began: its fall into sin, its "uncleanness," and its failure to "think of the future" (1:7-9). It also recalled to her where the solution to

her problems lay, the **Lord** (1:9).

At this point in the chapter, the Lord's name appears over and over again. After the first few verses speak of all the **bad things that have happened**, the widow's dialogue takes a different course. She speaks of her problems in terms of the Lord; in her case, which is not always the case, the bad things that were happening were due to her own sin. She recognizes that the **Lord** is really the one behind the affliction, because **He** has been dealing with her rebellion. And because she sees her problems in relationship to her sin against the Lord, she begins to see the solution to her problems in terms of the Lord. She closes the chapter by appealing to the Lord for help. She says,

See, O Lord, for I am in distress; my spirit is greatly troubled; my heart is overturned within me, for I have been very rebellious. . . . They have heard that I groan; there is no one to comfort me; all my enemies have heard of my calamity; they are glad that Thou hast done it. Oh, that Thou wouldst bring the day which Thou hast proclaimed, that they may become like me. Let all their wickedness come before Thee; and deal with them as Thou hast dealt with me (Lamentations 1:20-22).

Now we can see the great lesson of **transcendence** in this chapter. The message for the people of God in Jeremiah's time, the people in the Babylonian captivity who first read these words, was that the bad things happening to them were a result of their sin. They had no one to blame except themselves. But they needed to turn to the Lord with the bad things that were happening. Their hope lay in the Lord of the ancient covenant. God made covenant with Abraham and delivered him from his enemies, and they had a covenant relationship with the same Lord. God was the only one who could save them, and He could only be appealed to on the basis of the covenant.

The application for **us** is that **all** bad things are a result of the Fall of man, even though bad things might not be happening directly to us because of our own **personal** sin. Yet, if our consideration stops at sin, which is where a lot of people experiencing bad things stop, then we have missed the real message of Lamentations 1. Sin was met by a deliverer, God the Son, the redeemer of mankind at the Cross, and so we should meet our sin at the greatest point of deliverance. **We should turn to the Transcendent Lord who can deliver us when bad things happen.**

Maybe the bad things are happening because of sin; maybe they're not. Regardless of why we find ourselves grieving, we ought not allow the trauma of our trials to keep us from the Lord, which is unfortunately often the case. People in distress need the Lord and they need to be told that they need the Lord. The answer to their dilemma cannot be found in man; it can only be found in the **Lord**. The Lord is where the covenant begins, and transcendence is the message of Lamentations 1.

Hierarchy

The hierarchy principle of the covenant concerns an authority structure, the two key words being **authority** and **structure**. In Deuteronomy, it taught that the structure was hierarchical, every person being accountable to someone (Deut. 1:12ff.). But it also taught that this structure mediated life to the world (Deut. 1:19ff.). When Israel was faithful to its hierarchy, the land was possessed and peace came to Canaan, which in turn affected the rest of the gentile world because true worship in Israel mediated life out to them. When Israel was unfaithful to the hierarchy, they were dispossessed and the hierarchical structure that provided life and security was destroyed.

In Lamentations 2 we see two similar hierarchical themes. First, the lamenter laments that the **architectural** structure of Israel has been judged.

In His wrath He has thrown down the **strongholds** of the daughters of Judah" (2:2); . . . And He has violently treated His **tabernacle** like a garden booth; He has destroyed His **appointed meeting place** (2:6); . . . He has delivered into the hand of the enemy the **walls** of her palaces . . . The Lord determined to destroy the **wall** of the daughter of Zion (2:8).

And at the end of the chapter, the lamenter even personifies the **wall** of the city, addressing it as a person. He says,

O **wall** of the daughter of Zion, let your tears run down like a river day and night; give yourself no relief; let your eyes have no rest. Arise, cry aloud in the night at the beginning of the night watches; pour out your heart like water before the presence of the Lord; lift up your hands to Him for the life of your little ones who are faint because of hunger (2:18-19).

Why the emphasis on **architecture**? Meredith Kline explains the relationship between hierarchy and architecture. He shows that architecture symbolizes a living hierarchy in creation. He says in his commentary on Genesis,

Creation as described in the Genesis [historical] prologue is strictly a constructive process, without any undercurrent of conflict. Elohim, the Creator, is portrayed not as a mighty warrior but as an omnipotent artisan, not as a cunning conqueror but as an omniscient architect. . . . A major building motif is the dividing of the world structure into compartments suitable for habitation by various types of creatures. For God "created it not to be empty but formed it as a place to live" (Isa. 45:18). Overhead, as a sheltering cover for the earthlings, was spread the sky, called "the firmament" with reference to its canopy-like appearance. In it were installed heavenly lamps to illumine the darkness of the dwelling placed by day and night. . . . [and so he concludes] All the creation of the six days is consecrated to man as the one set over all the works of God's hand, as the **hierarchical** structure of Genesis 1 shows, but man himself in turn is consecrated to the One who did set all things under his feet. Man is king over creation, but he is a vassal-king, he reigns as one under God's authority [hierarchy], obligated to devote his kingdom to the Great King.²

Kline clarifies how the **walls** of the city in Lamentations 2, and especially the **tabernacle**, represented a hierarchical structure. The creation was arranged in a hierarchy. It was a physical structure that was to reflect an ethical structure in society; men are called "living stones" (1 Pet. 2:4ff.). So, the discussion at the beginning of Lamentations 2 on the judgment of the physical hierarchy easily shifts to a discussion of judgment on the hierarchical leaders of society: kings and princes (2:9), elders (2:10), mothers (2:12), and prophets (2:14). Then, the architectural and the human authorities are merged into one at the end of the chapter when the **walls**, symbolizing the hierarchical leadership of Israel, are told to cry out to the Lord.

The lamenter apparently understood several applications of the hierarchical principle of covenant renewal. First he realized that the bad things happening to him affected

the structure of his life. Anyone encountering a crisis or experiencing grief should consider the effect of these things on the hierarchy of his life.

Remember, the hierarchy is a protective covering, like a "building," and when the hierarchy is altered, the covering is threatened, which in turn threatens the security of our lives. The loss of a loved one often has this effect. The death of a husband, father, and wife will change a hierarchy that directly touches our lives. But even the death of a child will affect the birth order among the other children; death of a firstborn will create a new firstborn and so forth.

Second, the lamenter knew that he needed the hierarchy to correct his situation, in this case, a situation where he and his society were being judged. He needed the hierarchy to pray for and represent him. He wanted the "walls," the hierarchy of prophets, kings, and others, to "lift up their hands to Him," the Lord (2:19). He applied the general principle of representation, which holds true in any crisis.

For example, the Bible says to the person who is suffering from an illness, "Is anyone sick? Let him call for the **elders** of the church, and let them pray over him, anointing him with oil in the name of the Lord; and the prayer offered in faith will restore the one who is sick, and the Lord will raise him up, and if he has committed sins, they will be forgiven him" (James 5:14-15).

So when bad things happen remember the hierarchy whose loss will create tension and anxiety, and whose presence can be a tremendous source of comfort and relief.

Ethics

The ethics section of the covenant explains an ethical cause and effect relationship (Deut. 5-26). Faithfulness to the terms of the covenant (covenant-keeping) leads to blessing and unfaithfulness (covenant-breaking) results in cursing. In the third segment of Deuteronomy, not only are laws mentioned, but general faithfulness to the Lord becomes the subject of the entire first chapter of the section, Deuteronomy 5, which summarizes the Ten Commandments in terms of this theme.

When we come to the third and longest chapter of Lamentations, sixty-six verses, the lamenter focuses on cause and effect in a unique way. One, he sees that God is the ultimate cause of all the bad things that are happening to him, and he provides a dramatic description of how his struggle is with the Lord. It is the Lord who has pushed him into the night (3:2), who has trapped him (3:7), who has blocked his prayer (3:8), who stands in his way (3:9), who stalks him like a bear and a wild animal (3:10-11), and who hunts him like a hunter (3:12).

Second, the lamenter turns the largest amount of his attention in the chapter to the **Lord's faithfulness**. He perceives that his struggle is with the Lord, who is dealing with him because of his **unfaithfulness**, but he also comes to the realization that the Lord's faithfulness offsets where he has failed. He proclaims the words from which one of the greatest hymns of the church has been taken, "The Lord's lovingkindnesses indeed never cease, for His compassions never fail. They are new every morning; **Great is thy faithfulness**" (3:22-23).

The insights of the lamenter are quite practical. They show us the double-sidedness of the greatness of the Lord. One side tells us that He is the one with whom we must wrestle through the bad things that are happening, because He is the ultimate cause of that which troubles us. And I know that this side of the lamenter's comments may seem a little disconcerting, but consider the option: a **limited** God, as expressed by the pagan logic of the pagan philosopher Epicurus. He concluded the following: "God either wishes to take away evil, and is unable; or He is able and is unwilling; or He is neither willing nor able; or He is both willing and

2. Meredith G. Kline, *Kingdom Prologue*, vol. 1 (Meredith Kline, 1981), pp. 41-42, 61. Brackets mine.

able." Epicurus did not want to face the truth of an all sovereign God behind all cause and effect, because he really did not want to face the truth that he could not save himself, which brings us to the other side of the sovereignty of God.

The other side is that if God is not limited but the ultimate cause of all things, then He is not limited in delivering us from whatever bad thing confronts us. If, on the other hand, there is some other ultimate cause, then God is limited in His ability to deliver us; He is limited in His **faithfulness**. The lamenter, however, had come to realize the source of his struggle and he knew the source of faithfulness to reverse the judgment cause and effect on his society. So in the last section of the chapter he confidently sings, "Thou hast redeemed me" (3:58), as he calls for the Lord to "judge my case" (3:59), turning our attention to the theme of the next chapter.

Sanctions

The fourth part of the covenant concerns two kinds of judgments or sanctions: a judgment unto death (cursing) and a judgment unto life (blessing). In Deuteronomy the sanctions' section speaks of many different kinds of curses and blessings (Deut. 28). In Lamentations, however, its sanctions' segment cites many of the curses of Deuteronomy in concentrated form, such as they have not previously appeared in the book. A few of them are the following: "The hands of compassionate women boiled their own children" (4:10; cf. Deut. 28:57); "They became food for them because of the destruction of the daughter of my people" (4:10; cf. Deut. 28:53-55); "The kings of the earth did not believe, nor did any of the inhabitants of the world, that the adversary and the enemy could enter the gates of Jerusalem" (4:12; cf. Deut. 29:24); and, "They wandered blind in the streets; they were defiled with blood so that no one could touch their garments" (4:14; cf. Deut. 28:28, 29).

The earlier chapters of Lamentations talk of judgment. They mention some of the sanctions, and they even in one or two places mention the sanctions' section of Deuteronomy. But the previous chapters cannot compare in either the number of judgmental references from Deuteronomy 27-29, nor can they compare in intensity, as the book seems to build to a turning point. The shift arrives in the last verse of the chapter which says, "The punishment of your iniquity has been completed, O daughter of Zion; He will exile you no longer" (4:22).

The lamenter's change of direction means that his **judgment is complete**. After lamenting that the curses of the covenant have fallen on "the Lord's anointed" (4:20), he finally realizes that there is no more judgment for them, and he sends a comforting message for anyone confronting something bad that has happened. He saw that the end of all judgment was the final death blow to the "anointed one," a substitute who diverted the curse away from them. And so he essentially arrives at the good news of the Gospel. Judgment is complete in Jesus Christ. He is the one who can relieve us of all our suffering and misery. No matter what the crises, judgment is over in the death of Christ. One may continue to suffer, but he can suffer knowing that he will never have to face final judgment without the one who completes

all judgment, the final anointed one of history, Christ the Lord.

Continuity

The final portion of the covenant speaks to the transfer of inheritance (Deut. 31-34): the faithful receive the inheritance, and the unfaithful are disinherited. The final chapter of Lamentations focuses on the same themes. The lamenter begins the chapter by saying, "Remember, O Lord, what has befallen us; look, and see our reproach! Our **inheritance** has been turned over to the strangers, our houses to aliens" (5:1-2). He laments in these verses and for most of the chapter that he and his one-time-Biblical-culture have lost many things that belonged to them, and that they will not be regained. He knows that the judgment is over, but the question remains, "Will I ever get back what I lost?"

Yes, his attention turns at the very end of the chapter to the Lord of the covenant who will be faithful to the covenant. He says, "Thou, O Lord, dost rule forever; Thy throne is from generation to generation. . . . Restore us to Thee, O Lord, that we may be restored" (5:19-20). So the lamenter concludes the book certain that God will give back what has been lost; the inheritance will be restored.

The application of covenant renewal in Lamentations concerns that which is lost when bad things happen. Whether it is the loss of a loved one, or the loss of something intangible, our lamenting should turn to not only the lesson of Lamentations but the whole book of Job. The lamenter lost his inheritance, but he appealed to the Lord who is faithful, just as he had been with Job. He lost everything, but his inheritance was returned to him several times over (Job 42:10-17). He was a picture of the totally dedicated disciple to which Jesus referred when He said, "Everyone who has left houses or brothers or sisters or father or mother or children or farms for My name's sake, shall receive many times as much, and shall inherit eternal life" (Matt. 19:29).

So when bad things happen, even things that we don't understand, we should view them as opportunities to renew our covenant with the Lord. If we do, we can rest assured that the inheritance that Jesus promises in Matthew 19:29 will eventually come to us!

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Special Notice:

Several issues ago I issued a "reward" challenge. A number of you have notified me of various whole Bibles in the *King James* translation and other modern versions. I am happy to find that there are pocket-sized whole Bibles available. It cost me a few books, but I am glad that I can provide this information for you. Here are the various publishers to notify if you're interested: Zondervan, NIV; Thomas Nelson, N(ew)KJ and NASV; World Publishers, KJ and NASV; Pentecostal Publishing House, 8855 Dunn Road, Hazelwood, Missouri 63042, KJ and NASV; Cambridge, KJ; Holman, KJ. My thanks to those of you who made this transmission of information possible! If you are one of these folks, you will be receiving a free book as promised.