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ACQUAINTED WITH GRIEF: THE SPECIAL CONTRIBUTION OF THE BOOK OF LAMENTATIONS

Paul Bowers

Set off in a remote corner of the Old Testament is the perplexing, disquieting little book of Lamentations. Here in the form of a desolate funeral dirge is memorialised the great national tragedy of ancient Israel, the sack and destruction of Jerusalem by Nebuchadnezzar in the sixth century before Christ.

Especially problematic for this little work is the question how it possibly accords with the New Testament affirmation that *every* Scripture is profitable for the complete equipping of the man of God. One wonders what contribution this obscure book can make towards such equipment. To what purpose is it included in Scripture?

The special contribution of Lamentations cannot principally lie in a distinctive message, for the message of the book is largely paralleled in other parts of Scripture. The contribution of the book is better sought, I wish to suggest, in the distinctive *method* by which it undertakes to convey its message. A helpful way to clarify this method is to consider another book, a modern lamentation, amazingly parallel to the Old Testament book, not only in theology, content, and form, but especially in the distinctive way in which it seeks to convey its message.

A Modern Lament

The well-known Christian thinker and author C. S. Lewis, a bachelor for the most part of his life, surprised his friends (and doubtless himself) by falling deeply in love at the age of 57 and getting married. Within a very short while it was discovered that his wife Joy had an advanced case of cancer and seemed only to have months to live. Special prayer was made, resulting in an apparent miracle. Good health seemed for a time to be restored. Joy was able to take long walks with her husband and to resume a normal life. She had always wanted to visit Greece, so the two made a memorable trip there together. Joy died soon after their return to England. She was forty-five, and they had been married only a little more than three years.¹

The following year a slim volume, *A Grief Observed*, appeared in England under a pseudonym.² Here in short, compact paragraph on paragraph was all the hollow despair that had wracked Lewis in the weeks and months immediately following his wife's death. Reading the book is an experience in itself, an intensely discomfiting experience. Lewis uncharacteristically lays bare his soul in all its anguish, as he struggles with the reality of his loss and grasps out for some understanding. The book reflects a great mind shocked, baffled, and prostrated. Indeed, Lewis begins to write in a daze:

It feels like being mildly drunk or concussed. There is a sort of invisible blanket between the world and me. I find it hard to take in what anyone says (p. 7).

The stark finality of death jostled itself into his awareness:

This cold truth, this terrible traffic-regulation ('You, Madam, to the right—you, Sir, to the left') is just the beginning of the separation which is death itself (p. 15).

God's apparent designs in the marriage seem cruelly dashed:

Oh, God, God, why did you take such trouble to force this creature out of its shell if it is now doomed to crawl back—to be sucked back—into it? (p. 18).

The intensity of the grief numbed the sense of God's presence:

Meanwhile, where is God? This is one of the most disquieting symptoms. When you are happy, . . . if you remember yourself and turn to Him with gratitude and praise, you will be—or so it feels—welcomed with open arms. But go to Him when your need is desperate, when all other help is vain, and what do you find? A door slammed in your face, and a sound of bolting and double bolting on the inside. . . . Why is He so present a commander in our time of prosperity and so very absent a help in time of trouble? (p. 9).

Stout words. Desperately he continued:

What chokes every prayer and every hope is the memory of all the prayers [Joy] and I offered and all the false hopes we had. Hot hopes raised merely by our own wishful thinking; hopes encouraged, even forced upon us, by false diagnosis, by X-ray photographs, by strange remissions, by one temporary recovery that might have ranked as a miracle. Step by step we were 'led up the garden path'. Time after time, when He seemed most gracious, He was really preparing the next torture (pp. 26-27).

The agonised thoughts were not all in one direction. After this last bitter entry, Lewis thought better: "I wrote that last night. It was a yell rather than a thought" (p. 27). He arrives quietly, perhaps with a touch of sad humour, at his own true state. Someone had quoted to him "Do not mourn like those that have no hope".

It astonishes me, the way we are invited to apply to ourselves words so obviously addressed to our betters. What St. Paul says can comfort only those who love God better than the dead, and the dead better than themselves (pp. 23-24).

Lewis begins to sense a confused value system being uncovered beneath the exterior of his own till then apparently profound faith. He becomes sharp with himself:

The case is too plain. If my house has collapsed at one blow, it is because it was a house of cards. . . . If I had really cared, as I thought I did, about the sorrows of the world, I should not have been so overwhelmed when my own sorrow came. It has been an imaginary faith playing with innocuous counters labelled 'Illness,' 'Pain,' 'Death' and 'Loneliness' (p. 31).

If his faith was a house of cards, then it required knocking down. His previous bitterness in new light appeared as an abusive attempt to strike back at God. As for his sensation of God's bolted door, it was his own frantic "hammering and kicking the door like a maniac that made it seem closed." Can God give to one who is grabbing? "After all, you must have a capacity to receive, or even omnipotence can't give. Perhaps your own passion temporarily destroys the capacity (p. 38)."

When I lay these questions before God I get no answer. But a rather special sort of "No answer". It is not the locked door. It is more like a silent, certainly not uncompassionate, gaze. As though He shook His head not in refusal but waiving the question. Like, 'Peace, child; you don't understand' (pp. 54-55).

Relation to the Book of Lamentations

There are certainly differences between the book of Lamentations and C. S. Lewis' *A Grief Observed*. While Lewis writes out of an intensely personal loss, Lamentations reflects a collective tragedy. Lewis grieves the death of his wife; Lamentations grieves the destruction of a city and a people. In *A Grief Observed*, the thought progresses, tortuously but discernibly; in Lamentations the thought rotates. One expresses itself in prose, the other in poetry. Lewis wrote in the midst of his despair; the Lamentor reflects afterward upon the bitter experience. And at the end Lewis acknowledges to God: "I needed this experience as a lesson"; Lamentations prays: "We deserved this experience as a punishment."

But the concurrences between these two laments, one ancient and the other modern, are far more striking. Let me list eight points of contact:

(1) *In both instances the tragedy was the sudden destruction of a central point of meaning for life.* The loss to Lewis was so shattering because he had focused so much of his life in the new happiness found in his marriage, and in the meaning which that gave to his being. His wife's death hollowed him out.

The people of Israel suffered a similar inward devastation. They had been taught to understand their true core significance in terms of God's redemptive action toward and through them. Now they were unexpectedly overwhelmed and extinguished. George Knight puts it vividly:

The book of Lamentations is the book of Israel's Easter Saturday. That is to say, we find in it a cry from the heart of men and women who are facing the astounding fact that God had deliberately (as it seemed) undone the plan of cosmic salvation upon which he had long determined, and had destroyed of his own volition the instrument he had already taken over a millennium to educate for his use.¹³

Tragedy in any form is bitter. Yet not all tragedy wipes out life's very point of meaning. The tragedies underlying *A Grief Observed* and *Lamentations* were both precisely of this most crushing form.

(2) *In both instances the sufferers chose to express their numbed grief through writing.* Lewis defends his action to himself: "In so far as this record was a defence against total collapse, a safety-valve, it has done some good (p. 47)." The same intention, for himself and for his people, would appear to underlie the Lamenter's literary expression. Norman Gottwald writes:

This total expression of grief, wrung from the hearts which only reluctantly have submitted to the decisions of God, has all the earmarks of a liturgical catharsis. . . . It can readily be seen that the public recital of the poems of *Lamentations* on the appropriate memorial day . . . must have been an effective outlet for all the pent-up emotion of a people who had lost practically everything that belonged to their previous mode of life.¹⁵

(3) *In both instances the incongruity of the tragedy numbed the sense of God's presence.* Lewis thought he heard the door bolted and double bolted within. The writer of *Lamentations* grieves:

He hath walled me about that I cannot go forth;
He hath made my chain heavy.
Yea, when I cry, and call for help,
He shutteth out my prayer (3:7, 8).

(4) *In both instances there is a bitter realism.* Lewis recounts how God deceived his wife and him, giving hope while He only prepared "the next torture". *Lamentations* is no less stark in expressing its grief over the brutal events of Jerusalem's siege and fall:

See O Lord, and behold
To whom thou hast done this!
Shall the women eat their fruit,
The children that are dandled in the hands?
My virgins and my young men are fallen by the sword:
Thou has slain them in the day of thine anger;
Thou hast slaughtered, and not pitied (2:20-21).

The accusations against God are not minced:

He hath led me
And caused me to walk in darkness
And not in light (3:2).
He hath bent his bow like an enemy,
He hath stood with his right hand as an adversary;
The Lord is become as an enemy,
And hath swallowed up Israel (2:4-5).

(5) *In both instances the grief and complaint are overwhelmingly theocentric.* Here is anguish of the believer when the unbelievable happens. Look, O God, see what you have done! How could God have done this? The incongruity is experienced precisely because of an intense awareness of the reality and

control of God. The staggered faith itself resides within a faith. Lewis wonders if God is good – but the very problem roots itself in a conviction of the reality of God. Lamentations complains, and asks, and grieves, but always, significantly, *to God*. The grief is theocentrically experienced.

(6) *In both instances the writer comes to accept the suffering as necessary.* Lewis senses that his faith had been a house of cards, which required knocking down. Throughout Lamentations the writer reveals the conviction to which he had come, that the tragedy was a punishment justly deserved:

Jerusalem hath grievously sinned;
Therefore she is become as an unclean thing (1:8).
For the Lord hath afflicted her
For the multitude of her transgressions (1:5).
The Lord is righteous;
For I have rebelled against his commandment (1:18).

(7) *In both instances grief remains intense.* Near the end of Lewis' book, just as he is regaining a measure of emotional balance, the entry appears, "Tonight all the hells of young grief have opened again; the mad words, the bitter resentment, the fluttering in the stomach, the nightmare unreality, the wallowed-in tears. For in grief nothing 'stays put'" (p. 46). Nor did the writer of Lamentations ever outlive the awful sensations; the very last words of the book are a painful sob:

But thou hast utterly rejected us,
Thou art very wroth against us (5:22).⁵

(8) *In both instances a hope emerges in the midst of the grief.* Lewis did not hear answers to all the questions of his pained and probing mind, but he did speak of a "silent, certainly not uncompassionate, gaze". And he heard not a door being bolted but "Peace, child; you don't understand". The writer of Lamentations also re-met his Lord in the midst of his grief. The daily freshness of God's personal lovingkindness swept through him as he penned certainly one of the most beautiful passages in the Bible:

This I recall to my mind,
Therefore have I hope:
It is of the Lord's lovingkindness
That we are not consumed,
Because his compassions fail not.
They are new every morning;
Great is thy faithfulness (3:21-23).

The Special Contribution of *A Grief Observed*

A Grief Observed and the book of Lamentations present ancient and modern literary expressions of theocentric grief with remarkable parallels in form and content. The crucial question for our inquiry, however, is why each of these authors chose to publish his work. No doubt many diaries of sorrow have been kept, only to have their privacy jealously guarded. Why did these two authors

make their feelings public? What value did they expect to accrue to others through their cathartic efforts?

In commenting on *A Grief Observed*, Kathryn Lindskoog makes an illuminating observation: "In spite of its attractive clarity, brevity, and ultimate hopefulness, this is hardly another gift book for the bereaved. It is too vivid, ruthless, and startling. . . . Just to read the record is a racking experience."⁶ *A Grief Observed* is not in fact appropriate for comforting those in grief. Rather, it is appropriate for those who are not grieving. And it is appropriate for this purpose not because of its message, which can be found elsewhere, for example from Lewis' own earlier book, *The Problem of Pain*. The special contribution of *A Grief Observed* is rather in the way its message is given: the dreaded experience of the loss of life's very core of significance presented truthfully, compellingly, emotionally, so that one cannot help but pass with the writer through some of the agony, the questioning, the hollowed-out feeling, ultimately back toward God—a vicarious passage fraught with painful education for the reader. No theological treatise could contribute this possibility in any way comparable to the harrowing experience of reading *A Grief Observed* and passing through the tragedy with C. S. Lewis.

The Special Contribution of Lamentations

The book of Lamentations is ancient and culturally foreign to us. Perhaps the extended demonstration of close parallelism with the modern lament, *A Grief Observed*, suggests what that brief, neglected, but powerful Old Testament book was meant to provide. Like its modern counterpart, Lamentations is gravely unsettling to read, therapy not usually appropriate for those in sorrow. Perhaps, like *A Grief Observed*, Lamentations was not really meant to comfort the grieving, but rather to discomfort the ungrieving—to acquaint them with grief; to offer an in-depth emotional understanding of this unavoidable aspect of life by means of the stark, aching memory of one such experience poetically expressed. No analytic reflection, no prophetic utterance, no historical account could ever contribute a comparable opportunity.

How then is Lamentations to be used? Not merely as a source for historical information on the fall of Jerusalem. Not only for theological reflection on great catastrophe. For the person who would be "fully equipped for every good work", Lamentations is meant not least to be used as an experience, as an emotionally-shared experience in theocentric grief—shared so that we might achieve in some measure an existential understanding both for our own inevitable journey through sorrow, and for giving help to others about us who may be caught in raw tragedy. Lamentations will offer its most substantive contribution when it is *felt* as well as read. The equipping it will thereby provide is of no trifling import.

ENDNOTES

¹The story of the love and marriage of C. S. Lewis and Joy Davidman has now been made the subject both of a BBC television film, *Shadowlands*, and of a book by the same title written by Brian Sibley (London: Hodder, 1985). More recently the material was turned into a highly acclaimed and very moving play, written by William Nicholson, also titled *Shadowlands*, which had its first performance at Queens Theatre, London, on 23 October 1989. Amidst the wealth of additional material, see especially Lyle Dorsett, *And God Came In: The Extraordinary Story of Joy Davidman* (New York: Macmillan, 1983); Douglas Gresham, *Lenten Lands: My Childhood with Joy Davidman and C. S. Lewis* (New York: Macmillan, 1988); and the standard biography by R. L. Green and W. Hooper, *C. S. Lewis* (London: Collins, 1974).

²N. W. Clerk, *A Grief Observed* (London: Faber, 1961). In 1964, the year after Lewis' death, the book was reissued under his own name.

³George A. F. Knight, *Esther, Song of Songs, Lamentations* (London: SCM, 1955) p. 104.

⁴Norman K. Gottwald, "Lamentations" *Interpretation* ix. 3 (July 1955) p. 322.

⁵Whether taken as a question or, as given in the text here, as a statement, the impact is the same.

⁶Kathryn Lindskoog, Review of *A Grief Observed* by C. S. Lewis, *Eternity Magazine* xv.7 (July 1964) p. 42.