



O DEATH,
**WHERE
IS THY
STING?**

COLLECTED SERMONS



JOHN MURRAY
Foreword by SINCLAIR B. FERGUSON

This I Call to Mind

This I recall to my mind, therefore have I hope. It is of the Lord's mercies that we are not consumed, because his compassions fail not . . . The Lord is my portion, saith my soul; therefore will I hope in him.

—LAMENTATIONS 3:21–22, 24

The prophet Jeremiah lived in those days when Judah was carried into captivity. The book of Lamentations consists of the lamentations of Jeremiah connected particularly with the desolations of Zion. That is perfectly obvious from the preceding and the succeeding parts of this book. At the beginning of the first chapter, we read:

How doth the city sit solitary, that was full of people!
How is she become as a widow! She that was great among the nations, and princess among the provinces, how is she become tributary! She weepeth sore in the night, and her tears are on her cheeks: among all her lovers she hath none to comfort her: all her friends have dealt treacherously with her, they are become her enemies. Judah has gone

into captivity because of affliction, and because of great servitude: she dwelleth among the heathen, she findeth no rest: all her persecutors overtook her between the straits. (Lam 1:1–3)

And again at the beginning of the second chapter:

How hath the Lord covered the daughter of Zion with a cloud in his anger, and cast down from heaven unto the earth the beauty of Israel, and remembered not his footstool in the day of his anger! The Lord hath swallowed up all the habitations of Jacob, and hath not pitied: he hath thrown down in his wrath the strong holds of the daughter of Judah; he hath brought them down to the ground: he hath polluted the kingdom and the princes thereof. He hath cut off in his fierce anger all the horn of Israel. (Lam 2:1–3)

And yet again, at the beginning of the fourth chapter, there is a similar refrain:

How is the gold become dim! How is the most fine gold changed! The stones of the sanctuary are poured out in the top of every street. The precious sons of Zion, comparable to fine gold, how are they esteemed as earthen pitchers, the work of the hands of the potter! (Lam 4:1–2)

These are Jeremiah's lamentations, but they are the lamentations of Jeremiah because of the Lord's indignation against

Zion, against the people of his possession. We read that “the Lord’s portion is his people” and that “Jacob is the lot of his inheritance” (Deut 32:9), but now Jacob has gone into captivity and is trodden down: “Our gold is become dim.” The Lord’s indignation is perfectly apparent even at the beginning of our chapter. “I am the man that hath seen affliction by the rod of his wrath” (Lam 3:1).

Jeremiah was so identified with the welfare of Zion in his interests, in his affections, in his aspirations, and in his hopes, that mourning and weeping now took hold of the inmost recesses of his being. That is the portrait that we have in this particular book. Can it be otherwise with us today? It is one thing to read this book of Lamentations as a commentary on the past, but it also has relevance for us. “These things happened . . . for our admonition, upon whom the ends of the ages are come” (1 Cor 10:11). “All Scripture is given by inspiration of God and is profitable for doctrine, for reproof, for correction, and for the instruction which is in righteousness, that the man of God may be perfect, thoroughly furnished unto every good work” (2 Tim 3:16–17).

So, the book of Lamentations has a great lesson for us. Our interests, affections, aspirations, and hopes must likewise be identified with that to which the Old Testament Zion corresponded: the church of Christ. If we do not identify ourselves—in our interests, affections, aspirations, and hopes—with the church of Christ, then we do not identify ourselves in our faith and affection with him who is the head of the church. You can never separate Christ from his church or the church from Christ. Christ is meaningless apart from his interest in the church; it was

for the sake of the church that he came into this world. “Christ loved *the church* and gave himself for it; that he might sanctify and cleanse it by the washing of water by the word to present it to himself a glorious church” (Eph 5:25–27).

And, as we can never think of Christ apart from the church or the church apart from Christ, so our own interest in Christ can very well be gauged by our interest in his church. We can well take up the lamentations of Jeremiah as we may take up the lamentations of another prophet: “Our holy and our beautiful house, where our fathers praised thee, is burned up with fire: and all our pleasant things are laid waste” (Isa 64:11). We cannot disassociate ourselves from the situation in which the church of Christ finds itself. There is a corporate responsibility, and we cannot possibly disassociate our own responsibility from that which afflicts the church of Christ in our particular day and generation. We cannot shrug our shoulders and say that we have no responsibility for the plight in which the church of Christ finds itself when our gold has become dim and our wine mixed with water (Lam 4:1; Isa 1:22). There is the grave danger that people in a particular location or in a particular denomination will shrug their shoulders and say that we have no responsibility. My friends, there is a corporate responsibility that we cannot divest ourselves of.

Not only is there this corporate responsibility for the defecation and the impurity that are so rampant in the professing church of Christ, but we are responsible for our own individual, personal iniquities. Another prophet said, “I will bear the indignation of the Lord, because I have sinned against him, until he plead my cause, and execute judgment for me” (Mic 7:9). You

cannot read this chapter of the lamentations of Jeremiah without recognizing, on the part of Jeremiah himself, a profound sense of his own sin and the indignation of the Lord against him for his iniquity. “I am the man that hath seen affliction by the rod of his wrath. He hath led me, and brought me into darkness, but not into light” (Lam 3:1–2). There is, here, profound recognition of his own individual, personal iniquity, and frustration in self-humiliation before God.

Not only do we find the reflection in this chapter of the indignation of the Lord against the sin of Zion and even against Jeremiah himself because of *his* own personal, individual iniquity, but we also find a reflection of those mysterious dispensations of God’s providence that are ever tending to bewilder even the people of God. God’s providences to his people are not all dictated by his anger and indignation. There are indeed providences that are the expression of his indignation for his people’s iniquity, and there are indeed dispensations of chastisement, which, of course, are always for sin and for its correction. But there are also those dispensations of God’s providence that do not find their explanation in God’s indignation against the particular recipients of these dispensations.

If you take, for example, the patriarch Job, God did not visit him with afflictions because of indignation for his iniquity. Not at all! There was something in the unseen spirit world that was the explanation of Job’s affliction. And yet, notwithstanding the fact that the dispensations of God’s providence to him were not dictated by God’s indignation against him, Job could nevertheless say, “Behold, I go forward, but he is not there; and backward, but I cannot perceive him: On the left hand, where

he doth work, but I cannot behold him: he hideth himself on the right hand, that I cannot see him” (Job 23:8–9). Job was encompassed with great darkness and bewilderment because he did not understand at that time the unseen purpose of God in the tribulation that overtook him.

So it is often the case with the people of God, as Jeremiah says in this very chapter, “He hath set me in dark places, as they that be dead of old. He hath hedged me about, that I cannot get out: he hath made my chain heavy. Also when I cry and shout, he shutteth out my prayer” (Lam 3:6–8). And again, “Thou hast covered thyself with a cloud, that our prayer should not pass through” (Lam 3:44). When the people of God have to walk in darkness and have no light in the mystery or the abyss of God’s providential dealings towards them, and they cannot understand the reason, it causes the bewilderment and the distress of heart, mind, and soul reflected in Lamentations 3.

Now all of that is simply by way of introduction, in order to appreciate that pinnacle of praise, of thanksgiving, and of hope that we find in the words of our text. In the face of all this perplexity, darkness, dismay, even bewilderment, in the face of this profound sense of the indignation of the Lord against Zion and against the prophet himself individually, is there any outlet of confidence, joy, and hope for the prophet in this unspeakable situation of grief and sorrow and travail? Yes, there is! “This I recall to mind, therefore have I hope.” And what is the secret of this hope? Jeremiah remembered certain things; there were certain considerations that he called to mind, that entered into his thought, notwithstanding the bewilderment, the darkness, and the dismay that possessed the inmost recesses of his heart

and being. Very briefly I'm going to call your attention to these particular considerations that the prophet called to mind.

First of all, there is his own self-humiliation before God: "It is of the Lord's mercies that we are not consumed" (Lam 3:22). The prophet recognized that he had not received, that there had not been visibly dealt to him, that which was equal to the measure of his deserts. God had visited him with much less affliction than his iniquities deserved (Ezra 9:13). We find this expression of his own self-humiliation and his abasement before God so eloquently set forth in Lamentations 3:28–30:

He sitteth alone [that is, the person who is in this particular situation of self-humiliation] and keepeth silence, because he hath borne it upon him. He putteth his mouth in the dust; if so be there may be hope. He giveth his cheek to him that smiteth him: he is filled full with reproach.

He giveth his very cheek to God himself, who smiteth him! Here is humble recognition of what the prophet says again in a later part of this chapter, "Why should a living man complain, a man for the punishment of his sins?" (Lam 3:39).

Self-humiliation is far too frequently overlooked in our relationship to God and is the very starting point for deliverance. Of course, it is the very starting point for deliverance even at the inception of the Christian life, but it is also the starting point for deliverance for the people of God themselves when they are under God's afflicting hand and when they are experiencing those bewildering dispensations of his providence. Self-humiliation before God recognizes that however bitterly God may be dealing with

us, however severe may be the dispensations of his providence, however stinging may be the aloes of his holy displeasure and wrath, we have not received anything yet that is equal to the measure of our deserts. Why should a living man complain for the punishment of his sins, when he thinks that what he deserves is not the afflictions of this life—however severe they may be—but the blackness of darkness forever (Jude 13)?

I tell you, my friends, that a great deal of the superficiality that is in the church of God today, and a great deal of the impiety that even characterizes the people of God, is due to this failure to recognize that we are ourselves in the presence of God. We fail to measure ourselves by the criterion of God's holiness, his majesty, his justice, and his truth. When we apprehend the glory and the majesty of God, then the only reaction that is proper and that can be appropriate to our situation is that of the prophet Isaiah: "Woe is me! for I am undone; because I am a man of unclean lips, and I dwell in the midst of a people of unclean lips" (Isa 6:5).

That, my friends, is the starting point for any deliverance—deliverance at the inception of Christian profession and faith, and deliverance in the pilgrimage of the people of God as they experience the bitterness of God's dispensations toward them. We shall never properly assess God's dispensations to us—whatever their character and whatever their purpose in the divine mind—until we prostrate ourselves before God in the recognition of our own iniquity. "It is of the Lord's mercies that we are not consumed. . . . Why should a living man complain, a man for the punishment of his sins?" (Lam 3:22, 39).

The second element in this text that fills the mind of the prophet with hope, with confidence, and with expectation—and

that likewise must fill our minds with hope and expectation—is the mercy and the compassion of the Lord. “This I recall to mind, therefore have I hope. It is of the Lord’s mercies that we are not consumed, because his compassions fail not. They are new every morning: great is thy faithfulness” (Lam 3:21–23). I tell you again, my friends, that we cannot have any true appreciation of those provisions of God’s grace for our deliverance at the very inception of the Christian life on into the pilgrimage of the people of God until we have an apprehension of the mercy of God in Christ Jesus.

The fact that God is merciful is the outlet from our misery—our outlet from our misery at the beginning and in every onward step of our pilgrimage until we come to the “city which hath the foundations, of which God is the builder and the maker” (Heb 11:10). The fact that the Lord is the Lord God, merciful and gracious, slow to wrath, abundant in loving kindness and truth, forgiving iniquity and transgression and sin (Exod 34:6–7)—that’s the outlet. You can see this so conspicuously in the case of Jeremiah. It is that great truth so emblazoned on one of the psalms so familiar to us: “For the Lord is good; his mercy is everlasting; and his truth endureth to all generations” (Ps 100:5). Don’t you see that what the prophet here lays hold upon is the mercy and the faithfulness of God, and these are the key notes of this great psalm of thanksgiving: the Lord is good, his mercy is everlasting, and his truth—his *faithfulness*—endureth to all generations.

May I plead very humbly, my friends, that as we prostrate ourselves before God’s majesty in recognition of what our iniquity deserves, let us also have the apprehension of the mercy of

God in Christ Jesus. Let us reach out our hand to him in faith. Oh, let it be humble faith, faith as of a grain of mustard seed. Nevertheless, in the outreach of that faith, we have the guarantee of experiencing the exaltation that the prophet Jeremiah reflects in this particular chapter.

The third element that Jeremiah recalls to mind, and therefore has hope, is found in verse 24 of this chapter: “The Lord is my portion, saith my soul; therefore will I hope in him.” The Lord is my *portion*. You don’t ascend to a higher pinnacle of faith in the whole of Scripture than that which the prophet enunciates at this particular point: “The Lord is my portion.” We read, of course, in the Scripture that “the Lord’s portion is his people” and that “Jacob is the lot of his inheritance” (Deut 32:9). God has peculiar delight in his people, which is why he sent his Son into the world that he might redeem his people from all iniquity and present them “faultless before the presence of his glory with exceeding joy” (Jude 24). The Lord’s portion is his people; Jacob is the lot of his inheritance. But you also have the complementary truth: the Lord is the portion of his people.

Perhaps there is nothing in the New Testament that enunciates what you might call the very apex of the Christian privilege, the very apex of God’s provision of grace, than that expression of the apostle Paul that “we might be filled unto all the fullness of God” (Eph 3:19). Being filled unto all the fullness of God is the New Testament counterpart of this Old Testament concept of the Lord being the portion of his people. It means that we come into the very possession of God himself, that God is ours. If Christ is ours, then all things are ours, and God himself is ours. You find it in that very psalm that we were singing,

“Whom have I in heaven but thee? And there is none upon earth that I desire besides thee. My flesh and my heart faileth: but God is the strength of my heart, and my portion forever” (Ps 73:25–26).

I tell you, my friends, that eternity will not exhaust the meaning of that truth that God is our portion; we can only have a very dim glimmering of it even at the very best. But it is something that is *true*, and it is something that you are to appropriate. “The Lord is my portion, saith my soul.” And if God himself is the portion of his people, surely everything in his dispensations to them is the unrolling of his own favor and his own mercy. If God is our possession, then no evil can befall us (Ps 91:9–10).

That’s the third; now the fourth: and that is hope. “The Lord is good unto them that wait for him, to the soul that seeketh him. It is good that a man should both hope and quietly wait for the salvation of the Lord” (Lam 3:25–26). Oh, my friends, what endless misery we reap for ourselves, and what dishonor we do to the God who is the portion of his people, when we take illegitimate methods of getting away from the bitter dispensations of God’s providence. We must wait. God doesn’t dispense to his people all his favor in this life or at any one time in this life. We have to wait; we have to have hope.

You know how utterly hopeless is a situation in which there is no hope. If a person is caught in the toils of tribulation, of distress, and perhaps of pain and torment, what a difference it makes if there is just a glimmer of hope. If a person is overtaken by a very serious disease and is racked with pain, what a difference between whether the person has absolutely no hope of deliverance from it and whether that person has even a glimmer

of hope. Hope gives him endurance; it gives him a measure of patience. He is willing to endure it or she is willing to endure it because there is going to be deliverance. That is what is true in a much more transcendent realm in reference to our relationship to God and our relationship to the dispensations of his providence. “It is good that a man should both hope and quietly wait for the salvation of the Lord.” To quote again the word of another prophet, “I will bear the indignation of the Lord, because I have sinned against him, until he plead my cause, and execute judgment for me: he will bring me forth to the light, and I shall behold his righteousness” (Mic 7:9).

It is this hoping and waiting of which the prophet Isaiah speaks, “But they that wait upon the Lord shall renew their strength; they shall mount up with wings as eagles; they shall run, and not be weary; and they shall walk, and not faint” (Isa 40:31). The secret of endurance, patience, and waiting with expectation is submission to God’s providences until he brings us forth to the light, and we shall then behold his righteousness. This hope is well-grounded for the reasons that have been already enunciated: that the Lord is full of compassion and of tender mercy and that the Lord is the portion of his people. Therefore, there cannot possibly be anything else but a glorious finale; it can’t be otherwise! If the Lord is the portion of his people, and if that has its issue in our being filled unto all the fullness of God unto the plentitude of that grace and truth that reside in the mediator Jesus Christ and that have been communicated to his people, then there cannot possibly be but a grand and glorious finale.

Now fifth and finally, what the prophet here brings to mind and what fills him, therefore, with hope and expectation is the

vindication of God himself, that there is no arbitrariness in God. You might think that that's a sort of anticlimax. You might think that it is not on the plane of these other great truths like the lovingkindness and tender mercy of God or that the Lord's portion is his people and that God is the portion of his people. You might not think that it is on the plane of the glorious hope set before the people of God of a grand finale, a finale that will fill their hearts with praise and thanksgiving throughout the endless ages of eternity. But the vindication of God himself is not an anticlimax; it is on the very summit of faith. You find it in verses 33 to 36: "For he doth not afflict willingly nor grieve the children of men. To crush under his feet all the prisoners of the earth. To turn aside the right of a man before the face of the most High, to subvert a man in his cause, the Lord approveth not." That was no anticlimax for Jeremiah.

And it should not be an anticlimax for us, either. What is the secret of the fact that there is no arbitrariness in God, that he doth not afflict willingly nor grieve the children of men? It is just this: that the Lord is just in all his ways and holy in all his works (Ps 145:17), that the judge of all the earth will do right (Gen 18:25). I tell you, my friends, that whatever may be our affliction, however much we may cringe under the chastening hand of God, and however much the arrows of the Almighty may enter into the innermost recesses of our being (Job 6:4)—when we have come to the point of vindicating God's ways by recognizing that he is holy, just, sovereign, and good, then we have the outlet, then we escape. "As a bird under the snare of the fowlers, our soul is escaped and our help is in the name of the Lord who made heaven and earth" (Ps 124:7–8). "The Lord," we can then say, "will light

my candle so that it shall shine full bright; the Lord, my God, will also make my darkness to be light” (Ps 18:28).

My friends, I would appeal to you, as I would address my own heart and soul, that the very secret of escape in the midst of tribulation and darkness and anguish is that we are able to justify God. And we are able to justify God in all his works because we recognize that we always have less than our iniquities deserve. There is a very close connection between that which the prophet first brings to remembrance—self-humiliation before God because of his own iniquities—and that which has just been enunciated in verses 33 to 36—the vindication of the justice and holiness and goodness of God.

We must never forget that God does not afflict willingly nor grieve the children of men. God is never motivated by vindictive revenge. He is, indeed, motivated by vindicatory justice, but never by unholy, vindictive revenge. And that’s what is enunciated here as elsewhere. The Lord does not afflict willingly (that is, arbitrarily); he doesn’t afflict simply for the sake of afflicting. God is not *vindictively* executing his wrath; he is *vindicatorily* executing his wrath. It is the same great truth in another connection that the prophet Ezekiel sets forth in the words of God himself: “As I live,” saith the Lord God, “I have no pleasure in the death of the wicked; but that the wicked turn from his way and live” (Ezek 33:11).

It is well for us, my friends, whatever may be the dispensations of providence to us, to recognize his sovereign holiness and bow before his sovereign majesty. When we are able to do that, we shall also be able, in the strength of God’s grace and by the energizing of his Spirit, to rejoice with the prophet: “The Lord is

my portion, saith my soul, therefore will I hope in him. My flesh and my heart faileth: but God is the strength of my heart, and my portion forever” (Lam 3:24; Ps 73:26). In these days, when we are encompassed about with so much that causes dismay, that causes us to walk in darkness and have no light, may we, by the grace of God and by the effectual application of the Holy Spirit, be able to reproduce in our own experience, faith, and hope, that blessed assurance described by the prophet: “This I have called to mind, therefore have I hope.”



Oh God, we praise and magnify thy name that thou hast not dealt with us after our sins nor rewarded us according to our iniquities. And we praise thee that thou dost give us the precious privilege of receiving thy Word in all its fullness. May it be reflected in our hearts in faith and love and hope. Oh, grant that we may be more than conquerors through him that loved us, knowing that neither death nor life, nor angels nor principalities, nor powers, nor things present nor things to come, nor height nor depth, nor any other creature will be able to separate us from the love of God, which is in Christ Jesus our Lord. For his name's sake, amen.