



# THE BEREA PAGE

*“Examining . . . to see if these things are so” ~ Acts 17.11*

## To See God, Study Jesus

“The most basic reason for grappling with the historical question of Jesus is that we are made for God: for God’s glory, to worship God and reflect his likeness. That is our heart’s deepest desire, the source of our deepest vocation. But Christianity has always said, with John 1:18, that nobody has ever seen God but that Jesus has revealed God. We shall only discover who the true and living God actually is if we take the risk of looking at Jesus himself. That is why the contemporary debates about Jesus are so important; they are also debates about God himself.”

~ N. T. Wright, *The Challenge of Jesus: Rediscovering Who Jesus Was and Is* (InterVarsity Press, 1999), 16

## Digging Deeper

“Generalities are the peril of the preacher who has a fine scorn of technicalities.” ~ A. T. Robertson, *The Minister and His Greek New Testament*, paperback edition (Baker Book House, 1977), 22

## When Doubts Occur

“‘The shame is not that people have doubts,’ Os Guinness wrote, ‘but that they are ashamed of them.’” ~ Lee Strobel, *The Case for Faith: A Journalist Investigates the Toughest Objections to Christianity* (Zondervan, 2000), 226; citing Guinness, *In Two Minds* (InterVarsity Press, 1976), 61

## Praise from an Abyss of Despair

David Anguish

*Israel unflinchingly saw and affirmed that life as it comes, along with joys, is beset by hurt, betrayal, loneliness, disease, threat, anxiety, bewilderment, anger, hatred, and anguish. The study of the lament may suggest a corrective to the euphoric, celebrative notions of faith that romantically pretend that life is sweetness and joy, even delight. It may be suggested that the one-sided liturgical renewal of today has, in effect, driven the hurtful side of experience either into obscure corners of faith practice or completely out of Christian worship into various forms of psychotherapy and growth groups.*

~ Walter Brueggemann<sup>1</sup>

Walter Brueggemann reminds us that: (1) life sometimes caves in—even on people of faith; (2) many believers have committed to a triumphalism which, among other things, assumes worship should always be “upbeat, perky, positive, and celebrative,” leaving “little room for songs [or sermons or prayers-DA] that express the misery of life”;<sup>2</sup> (3) since they experience trouble and the raw emotions it produces, some believers look elsewhere to assuage their pain, concluding the church has little, if anything, to offer to help them cope.

Brueggemann also reminds us that Israel’s more well-rounded expression of faith gave them needed tools to cope with their hurt, anger, and hatred (cf. Psa 137, esp. vv. 8-9). Notable in this respect is Lamentations, chosen for this discussion because of the widespread use and enthusiasm for Amy Bessire’s 1974 musical setting of 3.22-24, from the RSV:

The steadfast love of the LORD never ceases, his mercies never come to an end; they are new every morning; great is thy faithfulness. “The LORD is my portion,” says my soul, “therefore I will hope in him.”

Let me stipulate that I am not criticizing Bessire; there is just so much one can do with a short chorus. Nor do I suggest we remove “The Steadfast Love of the Lord” from our repertoire. If anything, I hope one result of this musing will be a richer and deeper appreciation of the song, leading to praise that is even more heartfelt and exuberant.

For that to occur, we must see that Lamentations 3.22-24 is a glimmer of light emitting from an abyss of despair. Prompted by Jerusalem’s fall, Lamentations is a prolonged

## Staying on Course

“The church was launched on the day of Pentecost. Through the centuries that followed its trajectory changed as various influences were brought to bear upon it. It is necessary for us to check its course constantly lest the church miss its mark completely. If its trajectory is constantly corrected by honest application of scripture, it will succeed in the purpose for which it was planned. We do not feel that the church has any chance of succeeding in its purpose unless the restoration principle is carefully adhered to. To ignore that principle is to insure apostasy.” ~ Reuel Lemmons, “Foreword,” in Monroe E. Hawley, *Redigging the Wells: Seeking Undenominational Christianity* (Quality Publications, 1976), 11

## Power vs. Truth

“Power need not trump truth, but even if it does, truth remains truth.” ~ Douglas Groothuis, *Truth Decay: Defending Christianity Against the Challenges of Postmodernism* (InterVarsity Press, 2000), 102

## May the Sick Be Well

“Jesus did not disagree with the Pharisees about the spiritual state of the ‘tax collectors and sinners’ [in Luke 5.31]. They were ‘sinners,’ individuals who were spiritually ill; but the Pharisees did nothing beyond diagnosing the illness. Jesus took the initiative to treat it. His view was that the solution to the problem of spiritual impurity was not to build a wall that kept it away from those who kept the Law and were therefore ‘well,’ but to enable the sick to become well.” ~ David Anguish, *Luke 1-9*, Truth for Today Commentary (Resource Publications, 2021), 296

declaration of grief which expresses God’s presence “in a negative way through the motif of divine abandonment.”<sup>3</sup>

Chapter 3’s individual lamentation<sup>4</sup> begins with the poet’s complaint about his severe suffering and God’s role in it (vv. 1-20), summarized in verse 1: “I am the man who has seen affliction under the rod of his wrath.” He continues with a prayer of consolation and hope (vv. 21-39); a plea for repentance and return to the LORD (vv. 40-54); and a cry for vengeance and vindication (vv. 55-66).

His depiction of God’s role in his plight is not easy to read:

He is a bear lying in wait for me, a lion in hiding; he turned aside my steps and tore me to pieces; he has made me desolate; he bent his bow and set me as a target for his arrow. He drove into my kidneys the arrows of his quiver; I have become a laughingstock of all peoples, the objects of their taunts all day long. He has filled me with bitterness; he has sated me with wormwood. He has made my teeth grind on gravel, and made me cower in ashes; *my soul is bereft of peace; I have forgotten what happiness is*; so I say, “My endurance has perished; so has my hope from the LORD” (vv. 10-18; my emphasis).

It is against this backdrop that we should read (and sing) the petition and praise beginning in verse 19.

Remember my affliction and my wanderings, the wormwood and the gall! My soul continually remembers it and is bowed down within me. *But this I call to mind, and therefore I have hope*: The steadfast love of the LORD never ceases; ...” (vv. 19-22a; my emphasis).

Lamentations 3 reminds us to take seriously the fact that, even for people of faith, life is not always easy or pleasant. We gain nothing of ultimate value by pretending otherwise. The text also helps us recall that God is big enough to hear the expressions of our hard questions, grief, frustration, and anger.

But that’s not the whole story. We can also recall a bigger picture, one in which, even as we are forced to endure “wormwood and gall,” the LORD is our “portion” and our “hope [is] in him.” That’s not hard to celebrate when life is easy. Maturing faith remembers when the bottom drops out.

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## Notes

<sup>1</sup> Walter Brueggemann, *The Psalms and the Life of Faith*, Patrick D. Miller, ed. (Augsburg Fortress, 1995), 68.

<sup>2</sup> John Mark Hicks, “Preaching Community Laments: Responding to Disillusionment with God and Injustice in the World,” in Dave Bland and David Flee, eds., *Performing the Psalms* (Chalice Press, 2005), 69.

<sup>3</sup> Andrew E. Hill and John H. Walton, *A Survey of the Old Testament*, 3rd ed. (Zondervan, 2009), 543. The chapter on Lamentations was written by Hill.

<sup>4</sup> Hill, 546-547, notes the difference between a *lamentation*, an expression of grief over catastrophe that is irreversible, and a *lament*, an appeal to a merciful God for divine intervention in a desperate situation. Note that about one-third of the Psalms are laments, more than any other psalm type.

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