

CHAPTER 5

This chapter, though it has the same number of verses with the 1st, 2nd, and 4th, is not alphabetical, as they were, but the scope of it is the same with that of all the foregoing elegies. We have in it,

- I. A representation of the present calamitous state of God's people in their captivity (v. 1-16).
- II. A protestation of their concern for God's sanctuary, as that which lay nearer their heart than any secular interest of their own (v. 17, 18).
- III. A humble supplication to God and expostulation with him, for the returns of mercy (v. 19-22); for those that lament and do not pray sin in their lamentations. Some ancient versions call this chapter, "The Prayer of Jeremiah."

~~231~~ LAMENTATIONS 5:1-16

AN APPEAL TO GOD

Is any afflicted? let him pray; and let him in prayer pour out his complaint to God, and make known before him his trouble. The people of God do so here; being overwhelmed with grief, they give vent to their sorrows at the footstool of the throne of grace, and so give themselves ease. They complain not of evils feared, but of evils felt: "*Remember what has come upon us*, v. 1. What was of old threatened against us, and was long in the coming, has now at length *come upon us*, and we are ready to sink under it. *Remember what is past, consider and behold what is present, and let not all the trouble we are in seem little to thee, and not worth taking notice of,*" ~~402~~ Nehemiah 9:32. Note, As it is a great comfort to us, so it ought to be a sufficient one, in our troubles, that God sees, and considers, and remembers, all that *has come upon us*; and in our prayers we need only to recommend our case to his gracious and compassionate consideration. The one word in which all their grievances are summer up is *reproach*: *Consider, and behold our reproach*. The troubles they were in compared with their former dignity and plenty, were a greater reproach to them than

they would have been to any other people, especially considering their relation to God and dependence upon him, and his former appearances for them; and therefore this they complain of very sensibly, because, as it was a reproach, it reflected upon the name and honour of that God who had owned them for his people. *And what wilt thou do unto thy great name?*

I. They acknowledge the reproach of sin which they bear, *the reproach of their youth* (which Ephraim bemoans himself for, ²⁸¹⁹Jeremiah 31:19), of the early days of their nation. This comes in in the midst of their complaints (v. 7), but may well be put in the front of them: *Our fathers have sinned and are not; they are dead and gone, but we have borne their iniquities.* This is not here a peevish complaint, nor an imputation of unrighteousness to God, like that which we have, ²⁸¹⁹Jeremiah 31:29, ²⁸¹⁹Ezekiel 18:2. *The fathers did eat sour grapes, and the children's teeth are set on edge, and therefore the ways of the Lord are not equal.* But it is a penitent confession of the sins of their ancestors, which they themselves also had persisted in, for which they now justly suffered; the judgments God brought upon them were so very great that it appeared that God had in them an eye to the sins of their ancestors (because they had not been remarkably punished in this world) as well as to their own sins; and thus God was justified both in his connivance at their ancestors (he *laid up their iniquity for their children*) and in his severity with them, on whom he visited that iniquity, ⁴²³⁵Matthew 23:35, 36. Thus they do here,

1. Submit themselves to the divine justice: “Lord, thou art just in all that is brought upon us, for we are a seed of evil doers, children of wrath, and heirs of the curse; we are sinful, and we have it by kind.” Note, The sins which God looks back upon in punishing we must look back upon in repenting, and must take notice of all that which will help to justify God in correcting us.

2. They refer themselves to the divine pity: “Lord, *our fathers have sinned*, and we justly smart for their sins; but *they are not*; they were taken away from the evil to come; they lived not to see and share in these miseries that have *come upon us*, and we are left to *bear their iniquities*. Now, though herein God is righteous, yet it must be owned that our case is pitiable, and worthy of compassion.” Note, If we be penitent and patient under what we suffer for the sins of our fathers, we may expect that he who punishes will pity, and will soon return in mercy to us.

II. They represent the reproach of trouble which they bear, in divers particulars, which tend much to their disgrace.

1. They are disseised of that good land which God gave them, and their enemies have got possession of it, v. 2. Canaan was their inheritance; it was theirs by promise. God gave it to them and their seed, and they held it by grant from his crown, (~~1173~~ Psalm 136:21, 22); but now, “It is turned to strangers; those possess it who have no right to it, who are *strangers to the commonwealth of Israel and aliens from the covenants of promise*; they dwell in the houses that we built, and this is our reproach.” It is the happiness of all God's spiritual Israel that the heavenly Canaan is an inheritance that they cannot be disseised of, that shall never be turned to strangers.

2. Their state and nation are brought into a condition like that of widows and orphans (v. 3): “*We are fatherless* (that is, helpless); we have none to protect us, to provide for us, to take any care of us. Our king, who is the father of the country, is cut off; nay, God our Father seems to have forsaken us and cast us off; *our mothers*, our cities, that were as fruitful mothers in Israel, *are now as widows*, are as wives whose husbands are dead, destitute of comfort, and exposed to wrong and injury, and this is our reproach; for we who made a figure are now looked on with contempt.”

3. They are put hard to it to provide necessaries for themselves and their families, whereas once they lived in abundance and had plenty of every thing. Water used to be free and easily come by, but now (v. 4), *We have drunk our water for money*, and the saying is no longer true, *Usus communis aquarum — Water is free to all*. So hardly did their oppressors use them that they could not have a draught of fair water but they must purchase it either with money or with work. Formerly they had fuel too for the fetching; but now, “*Our wood is sold to us*, and we pay dearly for every faggot.” Now were they punished for employing their children to gather wood for fire with which to *bake cakes for the queen of heaven*, ~~2078~~ Jeremiah 7:18. They were perfectly proscribed by their oppressors, were forbidden the use both of fire and water, according to the ancient form, *Interdico tibi aqua et igni — I forbid thee the use of water and fire*. But what must they do for bread? Truly that was as hard to come at as any thing, for

(1.) Some of them sold their liberty for it (v. 6): “*We have given the hand to the Egyptians and to the Assyrians, have made the best bargain we could with them, to serve them, that we might be satisfied with bread. We were glad to submit to the meanest employment, upon the hardest terms, to get a sorry livelihood; we have yielded ourselves to be their vassals, have parted with all to them, as the Egyptians did to Pharaoh in the years of famine, that we might have something for ourselves and families to subsist on.*” The neighbouring nations used to trade with Judah for wheat (²⁵⁷¹Ezekiel 27:17), for it was a fruitful land; but now it *eats up the inhabitants*, and they are glad to make court to the Egyptians and Assyrians.

(2.) Others of them ventured their lives for it (v. 9): *We got our bread with the peril of our lives*; when, being straitened by the siege and all provisions cut off, they either sallied or stole out of the city, to fetch in some supply, they were in danger of falling into the hands of the besiegers and being put to the sword, *the sword of the wilderness* it is called, or *of the plain* (for so the word signifies), the besiegers lying dispersed every where in the plains that were about the city. Let us take occasion hence to bless God for the plenty that we enjoy, that we get our bread so easily, scarcely with the sweat of our face, much less *with the peril of our lives*; and for the peace we enjoy, that we can go out, and enjoy not only the necessary productions, but the pleasures of the country, without any fear of *the sword of the wilderness*.

4. Those are brought into slavery who were a free people, and not only their own masters, but masters of all about them, and this is as much as any thing their reproach (v. 5): *Our necks are under the grievous and intolerable yoke of persecution* (the iron yoke which Jeremiah foretold should be laid upon them, ²⁸¹⁴Jeremiah 28:14); we are used like beasts in the yoke, that wholly serve their owners, and are at the command of their drivers. That which aggravated the servitude was,

(1.) That their labours were incessant, like those of Israel in Egypt, who were daily tasked, nay, overtasked: *We labour and have no rest*, neither leave nor leisure to rest. The oxen in the yoke are unyoked at night and have rest; so they have, by a particular provision of the law, on the sabbath day; but the poor captives in Babylon, who were compelled to work for their living, *laboured and had no rest*, no night's rest, no sabbath-rest; they were quite tired out with continual toil.

(2.) That their masters were insufferable (v. 8): *Servants have ruled over us*; and nothing is more vexatious than *a servant when he reigns*, ³⁸²²Proverbs 30:22. They were not only the great men of the Chaldeans that commanded them, but even the meanest of their servants abused them at pleasure, and insulted over them; and they must be at their beck too. The curse of Canaan had now become the doom of Judah: *A servant of servants shall he be*. They would not be ruled by their God, and by his servants the prophets, whose rule was gentle and gracious, and therefore justly are they ruled with rigour by their enemies and their servants.

(3.) That they saw no probable way for the redress of their grievances: *“There is none that doth deliver us out of their hand; not only none to rescue us out of our captivity, but none to check and restrain the insolence of the servants that abuse us and trample upon us,”* which one would think their masters should have done, because it was a usurpation of their authority; but, it should seem, they connived at it and encouraged it, and, as if they were not worthy of the correction of gentlemen, they are turned over to the footmen to be spurned by them. Well might they pray, *Lord, consider and behold our reproach*.

5. Those who used to be feasted are now famished (v. 10): *Our skin was black like an oven, dried and parched too, because of the terrible famine, the storms of famine* (so the word is); for, though famine comes gradually upon a people, yet it comes violently, and bears down all before it, and there is no resisting it; and this also is their disgrace; hence we read of *the reproach of famine*, which in captivity they received among the heathen, ³⁸⁵⁰Ezekiel 36:30.

6. All sorts of people, even those whose persons and characters were most inviolable, were abused and dishonoured.

(1.) The *women were ravished, even the women in Zion*, that holy mountain, v. 11. The committing of such abominable wickednesses there is very justly and sadly complained of.

(2.) The great men were not only put to death, but put to ignominious deaths. *Princes were hanged*, as if they had been slaves, *by the hands* of the Chaldeans (v. 12), who took a pride in doing this barbarous execution with *their own hands*. Some think that the dead bodies of the princes, after they were slain with the sword, were hung up, as the bodies of Saul's sons, in disgrace to them, and as it were to expiate the nation's guilt.

(3.) No respect was shown to magistrates and those in authority: *The faces of elders, elders in age, elders in office, were not honoured.* This will be particularly remembered against the Chaldeans another day. ²³⁰⁶Isaiah 47:6, *Upon the ancient hast thou very heavily laid thy yoke.*

(4.) The tenderness of youth was no more considered than the gravity of old age (v. 13): *They took the young men to grind at the hand-mills, nay, perhaps at the horse-mills. The young men have carried the grist (so some), have carried the mill, or mill-stones, so others.* They loaded them as if they had been beasts of burden, and so broke their backs while they were young, and made the rest of their lives the more miserable. Nay, they made *the little children* carry their wood home for fuel, and laid such burdens upon them that they *fell down under* them, so very inhuman were these cruel taskmasters!

7. An end was put to all their gladness, and their joy was quite extinguished (v. 14): *The young men, who used to be disposed to mirth, have ceased from their music, have hung their harps upon the willow-trees.* It does indeed well become old men to cease from their music; it is time to lay it by with a gracious contempt when *all the daughters of music are brought low;* but it speaks some great calamity upon a people when their young men are made to cease from it. It was so with the body of the people (v. 15): *The joy of their heart ceased;* they never knew what joy was since the enemy came in upon them like a flood, for ever since *deep called unto deep,* and one wave flowed in upon the neck of another, so that they were quite overwhelmed: *Our dance is turned into mourning,* instead of leaping for joy, as formerly, we sink and lie down in sorrow. This may refer especially to the joy of their solemn feasts, and the dancing used in them (¹⁰²¹Judges 21:21), which was not only modest, but sacred, dancing; this was *turned into mourning,* which was doubled on their festival days, in remembrance of their former pleasant things.

8. An end was put to all their glory.

(1.) The public administration of justice was their glory, but that was gone: *The elders have ceased from the gate* (v. 14); the course of justice, which used to run down like a river, is now stopped; the courts of justice, which used to be kept with so much solemnity, are put down; for the judges are slain, or carried captive.

(2.) The royal dignity was their glory, but that also was gone: *The crown has fallen from our head*, not only the *king* himself fallen into disgrace, but *the crown*; he has no successor; the regalia are all lost. Note, Earthly crowns are fading falling things; but, blessed be God, there is a *crown of glory that fades not away*, that never falls, a *kingdom that cannot be moved*. Upon this complaint, but with reference to all the foregoing complaints, they make that penitent acknowledgment, “*Woe unto us that we have sinned! Alas for us! Our case is very deplorable, and it is all owing to ourselves; we are undone, and, which aggravates the matter, we are undone by our own hands. God is righteous, for we have sinned.*” Note, All our woes are owing to our own sin and folly. If *the crown of our head be fallen* (for so the words run), if we lose our excellency and become mean, we may thank ourselves, we have by our own iniquity profaned our crown and *laid our honour in the dust*.

~~287~~ LAMENTATIONS 5:17-22

PRAYER FOR MERCY AND GRACE

Here,

I. The people of God express the deep concern they had for the ruins of the temple, more than for any other of their calamities; the interests of God's house lay nearer their hearts than those of their own (v. 17, 18): *For this our heart is faint*, and sinks under the load of its own heaviness; *for these things our eyes are dim*, and our sight is gone, as is usual in a deliquium, or fainting fit. “It is *because of the mountain of Zion, which is desolate*, the holy mountain, and the temple built upon that mountain. For other desolations our hearts grieve and our eyes weep; but for this our hearts faint and our eyes are dim.” Note, Nothing lies so heavily upon the spirits of good people as that which threatens the ruin of religion or weakens its interests; and it is a comfort if we can appeal to God that that afflicts us more than any temporal affliction to ourselves. “The people have polluted the *mountain of Zion* with their sins, and therefore God has justly made it *desolate*, to such a degree that *the foxes walk upon it* as freely and commonly as they do in the woods.” It is sad indeed when the *mountain of Zion* has become a *portion for foxes* (~~288~~ Psalm 63:10); but sin had first made it so, ~~289~~ Ezekiel 13:4.

II. They comfort themselves with the doctrine of God's eternity, and the perpetuity of his government (v. 19): But *thou, O Lord! remainest for ever*. This they are taught to do by that psalm which is entitled, *A prayer of the afflicted*, ⁴⁹⁰²⁷Psalm 102:27, 28. When all our creature-comforts are removed from us, and our hearts fail us, we may then encourage ourselves with the belief,

1. Of God's eternity: *Thou remainest for ever*. What shakes the world gives no disturbance to him who made it; whatever revolutions there are on earth there is no change in the Eternal Mind; God is still the same, and *remains for ever* infinitely wise and holy, just and good; with him there is *no variableness nor shadow of turning*.

2. Of the never-failing continuance of his dominion: *Thy throne is from generation to generation*; the throne of glory, the throne of grace, and the throne of government, are all unchangeable, immovable; and this is matter of comfort to us when *the crown has fallen from our head*. When the thrones of princes, that should be our protectors, are brought to the dust, and buried in it, God's throne continues still; he still rules the world, and rules it for the good of the church. The Lord reigns, reigns for ever, even *thy God, O Zion!*

III. They humbly expostulate with God concerning the low condition they were now in, and the frowns of heaven they were now under (v. 20): *Wherefore dost thou forsake us so long time*, as if we were quite deprived of the tokens of thy presence? Wherefore dost thou defer our deliverance, as if thou hadst utterly abandoned us? Thou art the same, and, though the throne of thy sanctuary is demolished, thy throne in heaven is unshaken. But wilt thou not be the same to us?" Not as if they thought God had forgotten and forsaken them, much less feared his forgetting and forsaking them for ever; but thus they express the value they had for his favour and presence, which they thought it long that they were deprived of the evidence and comfort of. The last verse may be read as such an expostulation, and so the margin reads it: *For wilt thou utterly reject us? Wilt thou be perpetually wrath with us*, not only not smile upon us and remember us in mercy, but frown upon us and lay us under the tokens of thy wrath, not only not draw nigh to us, but cast us out of thy presence and forbid us to draw nigh unto thee? How ill this be reconciled with thy goodness and faithfulness, and the stability of thy covenant?" We read it, *"But thou hast rejected us; thou hast given us cause to fear that thou hast*

Lord, how long shall we be in this temptation?” Note, Thou we may not quarrel with God, yet we may plead with him; and, though we may not conclude that he has cast off, yet we may (with the prophet, ²⁴¹Jeremiah 12:1) humbly reason with him concerning his judgments, especially the continuance of the desolations of his sanctuary.

IV. They earnestly pray to God for mercy and grace: “Lord, do not reject *us for ever*, but *turn thou us unto thee; renew our days*,” v. 21. Though these words are not put last, yet the Rabbin, because they would not have the book to conclude with those melancholy words (v. 22), repeat this prayer again, that the sun may not set under a cloud, and so make these the last words both in writing and reading this chapter. They here pray,

1. For converting grace to prepare and qualify them for mercy: *Turn us to thee, O Lord!* They had complained that God had forsaken and forgotten them, and then their prayer is not, *Turn thou to us*, but, *Turn us to thee*, which implies an acknowledgment that the cause of the distance was in themselves. God never leaves any till they first leave him, nor stands afar off from any longer than while they stand afar off from him; if therefore he turn them to him in a way of duty, no doubt but he will quickly return to them in a way of mercy. This agrees with that repeated prayer (²⁴⁰Psalm 80:3, 7, 19), *Turn us again, and then cause thy face to shine. Turn us* from our idols to thyself, by a sincere repentance and reformation, *and then we shall be turned*. This implies a further acknowledgment of their own weakness and inability to turn themselves. There is in our nature a proneness to backslide from God, but no disposition to return to him till his grace works in us both *to will and to do*. So necessary is that grace that we may truly say, *Turn us or we shall not be turned*, but shall wander endlessly; and so powerful and effectual is that grace that we may as truly say, *Turn us, and we shall be turned*; for it is a day of power, almighty power, in which God's people are made a *willing people*, ²⁴⁰Psalm 110:3.

2. For restoring mercy: *Turn us to thee*, and then *renew our days as of old*, put us into the same happy state that our ancestors were in long ago and that they continued long in; let it be with us as it was *at the first*, and *at the beginning*, ²⁴⁰Isaiah 1:26. Note, If God by his grace renew our hearts, he will be his favour *renew our days*, so that we shall *renew our youth as the eagle*, ²⁴⁰Psalm 103:5. Those that *repent, and do their first works*, shall rejoice, and recover their first comforts. God's mercies to his people have been *ever of old* (²⁴⁰Psalm 25:6); and therefore they may hope, even then

when he seems to have forsaken and forgotten them, that the mercy which was *from everlasting* will be *to everlasting*.