

Dear brothers and sisters

We have recently begun to look at the Book of Lamentations on Wednesday evenings. It is an expression of grief over the destruction of Jerusalem by the forces of Nebuchadnezzar. There are a number of important themes which we need to notice.

First of all, it is the Lord himself who has dealt in this way with his people. Although he has used the armies of Babylon, it is God who has brought this disaster. Secondly, God has inflicted this upon his own people, not some enemy nation. Several times in the first few verses of Chapter 2 it is emphasised that 'the Lord has done this'. Thirdly, this has all happened because of the Lord's anger. He had said that if his people were obedient then he would be 'an enemy to their enemies', but now, when they have disobeyed, he acts as if he were himself their enemy. Fourthly, notice that everything that was once strong and beautiful in Israel has been brought low. Palaces, altar, sanctuary, wall, ramparts and gates are broken down. Fifthly, their rulers have been taken away and the voice of the prophets is silenced. This is the climactic and most terrible judgement of all.

Do we say that because this is an Old Testament book, none of it can have any present-day relevance to us; is it a document of merely historical interest? Not at all. We should take each of these themes and realise that we are still called to give attention to them. The Lord continues to chastise his people when they turn away from him and act unfaithfully. The history of the church, even the history of individual congregations, bears out this lesson very adequately.

We must avoid two opposite dangers, as so often. We must neither pretend that all is perfect, nor that things are as bad as they could ever be. On the one hand there is never a time when Lamentations should *not* be taken up and used by God's people. But neither is there a time when lamentation is the *only* appropriate response. The Christian soul and the Christian congregation that has felt the spiritual force of the Lamentations – a true and godly mourning for sin – will always be enabled to say, and even to sing, 'The steadfast love of the LORD never ceases; his mercies never come to an end; they are new every morning; great is your faithfulness' (3:22-23).

'O Israel, hope in the LORD from this time forth and forevermore'! (Psalm 131:3).

Your brother in Christ

Paul Yeulett