Great Is Your Faithfulness: Discovering The Backstory

David J. Reimer

University of St Andrews

INTRODUCTION

Perhaps it's just my impression, but I think the little book of Lamentations is not that well known in our churches.[1] I can't recall hearing a sermon from it, in fact, in my lifetime in the pew. And yet there are a couple verses which, I reckon, many Christians will know, even if they couldn't give chapter-and-verse for them. This is a pair of verses from the middle of the book, Lamentations 3:22–23, and from which comes the *main* title of this evening's lecture. In the rendering of the old RSV, they read this way:

> 22 The steadfast love of the Lord never ceases,
> his mercies never come to an end;
> 23 they are new every morning;
> great is thy faithfulness.

The familiarity of these verses is mostly owing to the familiarity of a traditional hymn, "Great Is Thy Faithfulness", and the popularity of a modern "chorus", "The Steadfast Love of the Lord Never Ceases". (Their composition was, in fact, separated by only 51 years.)

The central business of this paper is actually signalled by the *subtitle*: "Discovering the Backstory". My interest is in understanding what the relationship of these hymns/songs is to these verses from Lamentations which inspired them. Some orientation to this small biblical book is needed: Lamentations is made up of five chapters, each chapter an "acrostic" poem. Each of the poems gives a distinct implementation of the "acrostic pattern", although chapters 1 and 2 are nearly identical in this regard. Together, the poems reflect on aspects of the Babylonian destruction of Judah and Jerusalem in particular, which took place during the ministries of Jeremiah and Ezekiel in the early 6th C BC.

This investigation will begin with a brief study of the most famous hymn and song based on our key verses. I will then consider a textual

[1] This essay represents a lightly revised version of the annual Tilsley Lecture, delivered at Tilsley College, Motherwell, on 18 March 2025. It retains the informal style of presentation for that occasion.

problem affecting these lines and their translation. An account of the context (or "co-text") of these verses in Lamentations 3 follows, and sets up concluding a reflection on the use of this text in Christian worship.

HYMN AND SONG

(1) The hymn referenced in our title is a familiar one. I imagine many of us here this evening could sing at least the first verse by heart. The lyrics for "Great Is Thy Faithfulness" were written by Thomas O. Chisholm. Little is known about Chisholm's life, although the few details that are known retain some interest.[2] He was born in 1866 in Kentucky, and was converted as a young man. He was ordained in 1903 to ministry in the Methodist Episcopal church. Frail health prevented him serving in this role for more than a year. After leaving ministry, he worked as a life insurance agent in the American midwest and northeast. It was during this period, in 1923 when he was 57 years old, that Chisholm wrote "Great is Thy Faithfulness".[3] It appears he had always had a flair for writing poetry, with his early efforts in producing Christian poems benefitting from the feedback and encouragement of Fanny Crosby. He maintained his production of Christian literature through his long life (he died in 1960, aged 94), apparently writing "1,200 sacred poems over his lifetime" (so Wikipedia). The only direct quote I can find from him is relevant to the interest of this study:

> Having been led, for a part of my life, through some difficult paths, I have sought to gather from such experiences material out of which to write hymns of comfort and cheer for those similarly circumstanced.[4]

Of his many "sacred" poems, Chisholm's "Great Is Thy Faithfulness" is a worthy favourite. Its resonant, even insistent, refrain will be familiar to many:

> Great is thy faithfulness,
> Great is thy faithfulness,

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2 Some details also drawn from <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Thomas_Chisholm_(songwriter)>.

3 The records of the Hope Publishing Company online sometimes credit Runyan with both words and music. In most older hymnals, he alone holds copyright, although all of the many hymnals I checked credit Chisholm with the text; see the many scans at <https://hymnary.org/hymn/UMH/page/140>.

4 Quoted by Chas. H. Gabriel, *The Singers and Their Songs: Sketches of Living Gospel Hymn Writers* (Chicago: The Rodeheaver Co., 1916), p. 76.

Morning by morning new mercies I see.
All I have needed thy hand hast provided;
Great is thy faithfulness, Lord unto me.

It draws, of course, on the declaration of Lam 3:23–23. Chisholm takes the two lines of the biblical text in reverse order, starting with the doubling of "great is thy faithfulness" before rooting that general declaration in his *personal* experience—"I see…", "I have needed": a step slightly beyond the biblical assertion that "*they* are new every morning" (3:23a), regardless of "my" experience of them! This, of course, depends in turn verse 22 for the explanation of what are the "they" which newly appear every morning, Chisholm simplifying the text's "steadfast love(s)" *AND* "mercies" simply to "mercies".

It is in any case plain to see that the chorus is heavily dependent on Lam 3:22–23. So where does the rest of the hymn come from?

This evocative expression of the experience of God's unfailing, unending faithfulness summarizes the reflection of the first verse of the hymn:

Great is thy faithfulness, O God, my Father;
There is no shadow of turning with thee.
Thou changest not, thy compassions, they fail not;
As thou hast been, thou forever wilt be.

The hymn begins with closing words of Lam 3:23, but drawing on the preceding biblical verse at only one point, in its third line where the words of 3:22b are used: "his compassions fail not". The other themes in which Chisholm frames this verse come from elsewhere in scripture: from Malachi 3:6a ("For I, the LORD, do not change")[5] provides the notion that "Thou changest not", and from the NT in James 1:17, speaking of the "Father of lights, with whom is no variableness, neither shadow of turning".

The second verse ("Summer and winter and springtime and harvest,...") is mainly based on God's affirmation at the end of the flood story, in which God forswears any future universal judgment (Gen 8:21) and gives a promise, having smelled the "soothing aroma" of Noah's sacrifice: 8:21b "I will never again destroy every living thing, as I have done. 22 While the earth remains, Seedtime and harvest, And cold and heat, And summer and winter, And day and night Shall not cease." The evocative third verse ("Pardon for sin and a peace that endureth, / Thine own dear presence to cheer and to guide;...") begins with a pair of phrases that do

[5] Note Mal 3:6b, "And you, O sons of Jacob, are not consumed [*lō' kəlîtem*]", as an intertext for Lam 3:22.

not echo any particular biblical text, even if many looser parallels might be suggested: passages relating to "pardon for sin" are plentiful, and many of these are connected with intercession, and draw on God's character (e.g. Ex 34:9; Num 14:19 // Neh 9:17; Ps 25:11; Isa 55:11); while the notion of "enduring peace" is less frequent and more diffuse (e.g. Ps 72:7; John 14:27).

So it would be a mistake to assume that Chisholm's wonderful hymn is straightforwardly a reflection on Lamentations 3:22–23, which its first verse and chorus might suggest. The book of Lamentations does not contribute much to the thought of these lyrics other than those two verses. Rather, Chisholm's choices and composition are guided not so much by his foundational text, but by the central theme: divine faithfulness—and that strongly corresponds to the quote we saw from him, that he had experienced difficulties in his life, and his poems were intended to "comfort and cheer those similarly circumstanced".

(2) There is a second song, familiar in many churches, which cleaves more closely to the Lamentations text, of course. That is, of course:

> The steadfast love of the Lord never ceases,
> His mercies never come to an end,
> They are new every morning, new every morning
> Great is thy faithfulness, O Lord! Great is thy faithfulness.

This is, essentially, a setting of Lam 3:22–23, full stop, with only a few concessions to its musical setting. This chorus was written by Edith McNeill (1920–2014, so, like Chisholm, living to the age of 94), and first published in 1974. Even less is known about her than Thomas Chisholm.[6] Significantly, she and her husband were residents of Houston, Texas, and members of the Episcopal Church of the Redeemer in that city. Its leaders around these years were Graham and Betty Pulkingham, well known church leaders (also having a period of high-profile ministry in England). The Pulkinghams in turn were associated also with the Fisherfolk, a very early instance of what we might call a "worship band", who were known especially for pieces described as "scripture in song". McNeill's enduring "Steadfast Love of the Lord" was certainly that. The original form of her modern hymn followed the text of the RSV very closely. Verses 22–23 formed the chorus (with minor tweaks for meter); v. 24 made a short first "verse", while vv. 25–26 are the hymn's second verse, a slightly abbrevi-

[6] The details which follow are drawn mostly from her author page on Hymnary.org <https://hymnary.org/person/McNeill_E>.

ated form of vv. 31–33 make up a third verse, and finally vv. 40–41 make for a fitting conclusion as the hymns verse four.

This discloses nicely the trajectory from the main confession in vv. 22–23. The confession sets up a further reflection on the speaker's personal response, extends the signs of God's mercy, and brings out a "congregational" aspect in the fourth verse. Unfortunately, in many hymnals, songbooks, and church circles, only the chorus of McNeill's original composition is retained,[7]—that the Lord's love is eternal, his mercy unending, and that each day brings a fresh disclosure of this truth. And that is, too be fair, worth quite a lot. But the chorus-only approach also has the effect of stripping this confession from its context: it gives the worshipping community no framework in which to understand more deeply God's merciful provision, nor help in discerning it, should we fail to experience—morning by morning—the sort of divine bounty that the chorus seems to affirm.

So let's probe the "backstory" of this great confession, to see how Scripture itself might deepen our understanding. As we begin this exploration, we need to say something about just what it is that the text of Lam 3:22 (in particular) is affirming. Having examined that, we'll step back to see how this confession arises in Lamentations 3, discover who speaks it, and see what trajectory it then describes. We'll then be better placed to see how understanding the "backstory" of Lam 3:22–23 can contribute to Christian worship.

THE TEXT OF LAMENTATIONS 3:22?

For the many for whom the NIV and its revisions are their Bible of choice, seeing how the text of these hymns matches the biblical text of 3:22 will be problematic. I have provided the ESV so far, because in this verse it reproduces the RSV found in the familiar hymns. This is how that rendering compares to the NIV :

> RSV/ESV | The steadfast love of the LORD never ceases; his mercies never come to an end; . . .
>
> NIV | Because of the LORD's great love we are not consumed, for his compassions never fail.

Two differences immediately leap out. (1) There is a *causal* sense in these translations absent from the version familiar from song: "because of...,"

[7] So, e.g., the widely used *Songs of Fellowship*, vol. 1, no. 549, although *Mission Praise*, vol. 1, no. 666, retains the whole of the original composition.

as the NIV has it, whereas the song version is simply a statement. (2) The Lord's "mercies" have to do with *us*: "we are not consumed". The sense, then, is appreciably different: no longer a straightforward affirmation of the constancy of divine love, but "our" existence is now the focus: what is celebrated is the fact that **we** are still here, on account of the Lord's mercy.[8] So how do we account for these translation choices?

We note, first of all, the textual situation: the best known Hebrew MSS, like Codex Leningrad, read תָּמְנוּ *tāmənû*, "*we* (do not) cease" (NIV: "consumed"). But there are a small number of medieval Hebrew manuscripts that read rather תָּמּוּ *tāmmû* that is, a third person plural of the same verb, in this case referring back to the plural "lovingkindnesses" of the Lord, *they* (do not) "cease". In addition to those Hebrew "witnesses", this appears to be the text that the ancient versions—the Syriac Peshitta and the Aramaic Targum (Greek is lacking for this context)—had in front of them, as they also use a "they" verb, rather than a "we" verb. There is also the contextual consideration, that we are unprepared up to this point for a 1p plural "we", but the natural partner for the following verb in v. 22b, *kalû*, would be, like it, a 3rd person plural, so in the "A/B" parts of the verse "*they* do not cease/*they* do not fail".

The textual situation can be further nuanced, but that gives us are essential pieces of evidence, and confronts us with the choice (for it is a choice) facing translators: do we follow the manuscript tradition found in our printed Hebrew Bibles (like KJV and NIV)? or does one consider the wider range of evidence, and opt for the more natural text (represented by the ESV and NASB versions)?

Before coming to any firm position on that question, though, we need to return to the other, slightly more complicated, translation difference: whether there is a causal aspect to this verse. Twice in our key verse, the little Hebrew word *kî* appears. Suffice it to say that in some linguistic settings this particle can mean "because", as it appears in the NIV. But it can also have the sense of an "emphatic" particle, thus meaning something like "indeed", "surely", or even "moreover".[9] And that is what lies behind the ESV rendering (where it is not explicitly represented at all).

This means translators have a further decision to make in rendering this Hebrew verse in a different language. Most often, the choice between

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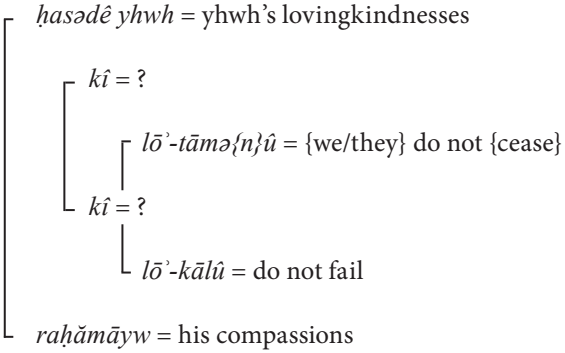
[8] I know of only one composition based on these words, the children's song by Colin Buchanan, "Lamentations 3:22–23 (Because of the Lord's Great Love)", from his 2002 compilation, "10, 9, 8 God is Great" https://youtu.be/W797YH-clT2k. Thanks to Maren Phillips for drawing this to my attention.

[9] It can also have a concessive sense, "although", and other nuances not listed here, as indicated in any of the standard lexica.

alternatives in translating Hebrew particles like this are clear and uncontroversial. On occasion, however, the choice is not obvious, and that is the case in Lamentations 3:22.

Word order adds another layer of complexity. Given the discipline of the acrostic form, the poet at this point must use words beginning with the letter *ḥet* for its three lines. Sometimes, this requires the poet also to use slightly unusual word order, much like some "greeting card" poetry in English.[10] So Lam 3:22 begins with *ḥasədê yhwh*, "the lovingkindnesses of the LORD", ensuring we begin with the correct letter at this point.



So we now see that the NIV translators needed to invert the Hebrew word order to arrive at their "Because of the LORD's great love...".

This is the sort of decision that Bible translators repeatedly have to grapple with. In this case, we can see that faithful translators have weighed their options and made different choices. Some prioritize the reading of the "main" Hebrew manuscript tradition, and we get the NIV version. This alternative affirms that a sign of the steadfast love of the Lord is that his people are preserved: "WE have not come to an end". Others give greater weight to the immediate context, the minority of Hebrew manuscripts, and the ancient translation tradition to reach the wording familiar from our hymn and song, with some minor adjustments: "The LORD'S MERCIES surely do not cease, surely his mercies do not come to an end".

So that deals with a significant puzzle in our understanding of Lam 3:22. But it still leaves a larger question, or set of questions: what frame does this "confession" have in its original context? In particular, *who* says it, and *how* does this stirring declaration arise? So we turn to consider this confession's context, or what we might think of as its "backstory".

[10] An example of bad verse from what might be a Valentine's Day card: "My love for you, so deep it goes / Like a river wide, which always flows...".

LAMENTATIONS 3:22–23 AND ITS SETTING

So we need now to attend to the "how" and "who" questions, for we do not yet even know who it is that speaks these words, nor what their story might be: our songs do not tell us. Thus we need to examine the whole of Lamentations 3.

If one attends especially to the different "voices" that speak through the poem, it divides, more or less, into four unequal chunks:

1. 3:1–17 | the violence experienced by a suffering "man";

2. 3:18–21 | the risk and reward of memory (only four verses, but a pivotal moment in the poem);

3. 3:22–47 | an address to the afflicted community, which itself is formed of two components, of uncertain boundaries:
    1. 3:22–38 | the character of YHWH, and
    2. 3:39–47 | what this requires in response;

4. 3:48–66 | a lament regarding the oppression of the enemy.

The confession which is our focus comes at the beginning of the third section, and thus to some extent sets the tone for what follows.

Each of the five poems in Lamentations speaks with a distinctive voice (or set of voices), and the central chapter, Lam 3, is perhaps the clearest of all, as attention to its opening line discloses:

> I am the man who has seen affliction
> *ʾănî haggeber rāʾâ ʿŏnî*
>
> by the rod of his wrath
> *bəšēbeṭ ʿebrātô*

We begin with the "who" question, and there are two details to unpick here. (1) The word for "man" here is distinctive: *geber* rather than the vastly more frequent *ʾîš* (69× rather than 2,186×). While it often serves as a near synonym for *ʾîš*, it contains a nuance of strength or potency.[11] (A closely related term, *gibbôr*, means "hero, warrior" or the like.) It occurs a further three times in the chapter,[12] and these together appear to have some significance for the progress of this poem as a whole.

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[11] See, among others, *DCH* 2:313, "usu. **man** as distinct from woman ... or from God"; H. Kosmala, "גֶּבֶר", *TDOT*, 2:377–8.

[12] The others are at 3:26, 35, and 39.

So, now we have a speaker, a man who has suffered: "I am the man who has seen affliction". But that, of course, begs the question: who is this "man"? Is it possible to identify this figure any more precisely? This question has often been asked, and many answers provided.[13] One obvious suggestion is Jeremiah, often traditionally claimed as the poet of Lamentations; but if not Jeremiah, then possibly some other prophetic figure. Or if not a prophet, then perhaps a royal person, maybe even a Davidic king like Jehoiachin, who has also been associated with the "Suffering Servant" of Isaiah. But this "man" appears to lack any overtly royal features, so that perhaps this *geber* is someone like Job, a "righteous sufferer", but still unnamed, and so perhaps a representative individual from the suffering community—or an "everyman". Each of these (and others) has had its supporters, and adopting any one of these "identities" can add depth to our appreciation of the poem.

Yet the number and range of identities itself indicates a problem here: the information provided in Lamentations 3 resists any kind of precise identification for this individual, and we are forced to reckon strictly with the profile that this poem provides. Resisting closer identification draws even closer together the "who" and "how" questions: what *is* the "profile" of this individual who arrives at the stirring confession of God's faithfulness?

But the identity of the "man" is not the only puzzle here. (2) The poet goes on to attribute the source of the "affliction" he has experienced to "the rod of *his* wrath". We rightly ask, "*Whose* wrath?!". Some translations don't leave this ambiguity: of widely used English versions, the NIV (in all its flavours) and the NRSV (*not* inherited from the RSV) supply "the LORD's" or "God's" (respectively) instead of "his", as the Hebrew text has it. Does this matter? It becomes clear as we read on that this man's assailant must be able to operate on a cosmic plane—this cannot be a human oppressor (like the Babylonians, for example). Further, the word for "wrath" here is fairly distinctive anger term, including the nuance of "excess", what we might colloquially describe as "boiling over", or "O.T.T."![14] If we are reading through Lamentations, we may have noticed

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13 Cf. Christl M. Maier, "The Afflicted Man in Lamentations 3 as Comrade to Jeremiah", pp. 97–109 in H. Thomas and B. Melton (eds), *Reading Lamentations Intertextually* (LHB/OTS, 714; London: T & T Clark, 2021); also David J. Reimer, "Verse and Voice in Lamentations 3 and Psalm 119", in *Reading Lamentations Intertextually*, pp. 163–4 and the literature cited there.

14 = "Over the top"; cf. Ellen Van Wolde, "Sentiments as Culturally Constructed Emotions: Anger and Love in the Hebrew Bible", *Biblical Interpretation* 16.1 (2008): 1–24 (esp. pp. 7–8).

that this same term is used of YHWH's fierce anger in the previous poem, chapter 2, which is devoted to that theme.

So *whose* fury this is seems not to be a secret. And yet—this poet resists naming his assailant. The catalogue of traumas goes on at length, all the while without the oppressor being identified. The list is given consistently in terms of what "he", always unnamed, has done to the sufferer. The actions are drawn from a variety of spheres: moral (v. 2), judicial (v. 3), medical (v. 4), military (v.5, 12–13), mental (v. 6), social (vv. 7–8), physical (v. 9, 14–15), predation (vv. 10–11) in turn, and then some repeated. It draws to a close on a note of plain cruelty:[15]

> 16 He has made my teeth grind on gravel,
> and made me cower in ashes;
> 17 my soul is bereft of peace;
> I have forgotten what happiness [*ṭôbâ*] is. (ESV)

The admission of mental and spiritual distress in v. 17, terminating this account of sustained onslaught, leads to a "confession" of sorts: of the complete loss of hope:

> 18 So I say, "My endurance [*nēṣaḥ*] has perished;
> so has my hope [*tôḥelet*] from the LORD."

Those last words are of great importance: it is the first time in the poem that YHWH is named, and this stops just short of attributing all the oppression experienced directly to Israel's covenant God. But naming YHWH appears to have a remarkable effect on the "man's" train of thought, expressed in the *zayin* stanza which (like most acrostics at this point) is devoted to *memory*:

> 19 Remember my affliction and my wanderings,
> the wormwood and the gall!
> 20 My soul continually remembers it
> and is bowed down within me.

[15] Clearly a good number of the items in this list are metaphorical; and of those that could be taken literally there is still good reason to see them as cases of hyperbole. This was not lost on e.g. John Calvin, who wrote (commenting on v. 6): "This way of speaking appears indeed hyperbolical; but we must always remember what I have reminded you of, that it is not possible sufficiently to set forth the greatness of that sorrow which the faithful feel when terrified by the wrath of God." John Calvin, *Commentaries on the Book of the Prophet Jeremiah and the Lamentations* (Edinburgh: Calvin Translation Society, 1855), vol. 5, p. 391, quote from p. 393.

21 <...>[a] This I call to mind,
and therefore I have hope:

[a] The concessive "but, yet" added in most translations is not present in the Hebrew text.

Having "named" YHWH, the tone of speech changes slowly, but dramatically. While continuing to reflect on the character of his suffering, the "man" now addresses this memory to—someone else: v. 19 begins with an imperative, imploring some other individual to join in the exercise of memory and reflection, as the "man" himself does (v. 20). But something else arises in verse 21, an effort of mental (spiritual?) discipline that displaces the hopelessness (v. 18) just mentioned with an unexpected hopefulness: "and therefore I have hope" (v. 21b).

This, in essence, is the "backstory" of the famous confession that forms the basis for a well-known, well-loved hymn in so many churches. If the confession of the Lord's unending faithfulness, renewed day by day, is the centrepiece, then we might think of the first part of the chapter as a "prequel"—and one which we would hardly have imagined if we began solely from the lyrics of Thomas Chisholm or Edith McNeill. We'll reflect further on this observation in a moment.

But as we register the "backstory" or "prequel", it is also important to note that the confession also has a "sequel" in the rest of the poem. Just as the affirmation of the Lord's faithfulness does not arise out of a moment of peace and flourishing, but out of an experience of suffering and oppression, so too the trajectory from it does not persist in reflecting on blessing and provision ("All I have needed thy hand hast provided", as true as that is), but on urging the wider community—which has also been subjected to deprivation and trauma—to submit to whatever suffering the Lord's providential governance may bring, however heavy his "yoke" may feel (3:27). Because the poet is able to affirm certain truths about YHWH:

- "The LORD is good to those who wait for him..." (3:25)

- "For the Lord will not cast off forever..." (3:31)

And as the *kaph* stanza continues, the implications for human creatures is teased out:

31 For the Lord will not
cast off forever,
32 for, though he cause grief, he will have compassion [*wəriḥam*]

according to the abundance of his steadfast love [*ḥăsādāyw*][16];
33 for he does not afflict from his heart
or grieve the children of men.

(With v. 32 using the same terms for "compassion" and "lovingkindnesses" as we encountered in 3:22.) After some very Job-like language in vv. 37–39,[17] the conclusion for the community is drawn in the *nun* stanza:

40 Let us test and examine our ways,
and return to the LORD!
41 Let us lift up our hearts and hands
to God in heaven:
42 "We have transgressed and rebelled,
and you have not forgiven."

This is the trajectory that Edith McNeill incorporated into her original composition—tellingly, minus v. 42, and what follows. The call to self-examination, to seeking God in repentance, includes acknowledging that the divine anger they have experienced arises out of their own rebellion. But that is not where these few verses rest. Although *who* speaks the following lines is difficult to discern, it appears to be the case that the appeal for repentance dissipates in the force of a lamenting prayer in which the community ("us", "we") persists in focusing on God's angry actions as the cause of their current pitiful state. It is the communal equivalent of the opening 18 verses—albeit, focusing exclusively on the experience of divine anger and its outcomes, rather than reflecting on what might have occasioned that anger, or on God's character *beyond* his anger.

At verse 48, clarity about the speaker returns with the return of a first person singular voice, "I, me": "*My* eyes flow without ceasing...". Here, I believe the voice of our "man who has seen affliction" returns, the one who has called to mind what he knows to be true of the Lord's character that has led him to repent, to seek God. And out of that experience flows not only tears, but intercession on behalf of his community for rescue and redemption from the onslaughts of the enemy.

So that is both "prequel" and "sequel"—backstory and trajectory—of the familiar confession, "great is your faithfulness". It is time, then, to return to our earlier considerations: how might *this* fuller understanding

[16] Reading the MT's *qere* at this point.

[17] At least, in the manner in which Job responds to his wife in the prologue: "Shall we receive good from God, and shall we not receive evil?", Job 2:10; cf. Job 1:20–22.

of the context of the affirmation of God's unending faithfulness help us to reflect on the character of our worship?

"GREAT IS YOUR FAITHFULNESS" IN CHRISTIAN WORSHIP

That the book of Lamentations has something to offer Christian and Jewish worship is clear from its use in traditional liturgy, at major moments of commemoration in both traditions. That the high point of hope in the book is appealing to Christians in worship, in particular, is evident in the familiarity of the two hymn/song settings we discussed earlier in this lecture.

I trust it will have become clear through our examination of these verses in their context in Lamentations 3, that the familiar hymn, "Great Is Thy Faithfulness" is not, really, a "Lamentations 3" hymn, even though its chorus directly uses two key verses. Thomas Chisholm's goal and vision for this hymn was not to weave the themes of Lamentations 3 into his lyrics, but rather to isolate that theme of hope and faithfulness from the key confession, and draw together its echoes from wider scripture to provide something of "comfort and cheer" (see above) for downcast Christians. And that, surely, is worthwhile.

Still, it stops short of inquiring how this confession came to be articulated, or grappling with the challenge faced by the "man who has seen affliction" in voicing it. This contributes to the puzzle about the newer of those two songs, Edith McNeill's "The Steadfast Love of the Lord". That puzzle is: why is the *whole* of her composition so little known, or even unknown?[18]

Why should the *chorus* of McNeill's hymn be so loved and widely used, while the verses have, virtually, disappeared without a trace? Part of the reason may be musicological: the first verse is half the length of the rest, with irregular meter, so that it doesn't sufficiently set the pattern for the verses which follow. Verses two to four have a somewhat meandering melody line, with some unusual intervals and timings to accommodate the minimally-tweaked RSV text.

Could it still be the case that there's something more that musical taste at work? There are plenty of awkward tunes that churches grow

[18] Perhaps a better sign of this than seeing how it is presented in hymnbooks, is to listen to the many YouTube recordings of it (which alone is a sign of its popularity). I sampled over 30 before calling it quits. Discounting duplicates: 25 were of the chorus alone (one, drawn out to 5m16s!), even though at a sedate 85bpm, the chorus takes just 30 seconds to sing. I could find only one recording that used any of the verses, and this one used only verses 2 and 4 ("Catholic Hymn").

accustomed to and can sing with confidence. Even though McNeill has avoided some of the most challenging, difficult lines, there are still some thoughts which do not frequently feature in hymnody, at least in the form expressed in Lamentations 3: submission in awaiting God's saving acts; acknowledging God as the source of suffering and "affliction" (3:1, 33); and seeking God in confession of sin.

How, then, do we account for the absence of *context* from our use of Lam 3:22–23 in our worship? that the *experience* of "the man who has seen affliction" is simply invisible? It is often observed that there is a reluctance to incorporate the genre of "lament" into Christian worship and liturgy. It may crop up in some niche settings, but it is neither regular nor familiar—at least in my experience, and I am confident that in this, I'm not alone.

One famous attempt to prompt a recovery of lament for Christian liturgy was made by Walter Brueggemann, in an oft-cited and important article published in 1986, "The Costly Loss of Lament".[19] Brueggemann remarked on the frequency of lament in the Psalms in particular—in a sense, its dominant genre—and how in the handling of the psalmists, it was lament that paved the way to *thanksgiving*. There was a personal and pastoral dynamic here which, Brueggemann argued, represented a damaging loss for Christian life and worship (so his title), as he rightly noted. But his understanding of what biblical "lament" is, and how it functions, took a quite sociological, or political turn. Lament, he asserted, gives voice to the cry of pain. And what follows from that?

> Where the cry is not voiced, heaven is not moved and history is not initiated. And then the end is hopelessness. Where the cry is seriously voiced, heaven may answer and earth may have a new chance. The new resolve in heaven and the new possibility on earth depend on the initiation of protest. (p. 66)

When people of faith *lament*, he urged, then the element of protest it expresses (e.g., our "man of affliction" in Lam 3:1–17!) brings about a "redistribution of power" (p. 59). It was for Brueggemann, then, not only a question of justice, but of the authenticity of the worshipping community. Christian worship, he suggested, had become far too *civil*: the clear articulation of pain-as-protest was the recovery he urged on the worshipping community.

But this sits uneasily beside what we have already discovered about the dynamic of "lament" from Lamentations 3, and the voice of the "man

[19] Walter Brueggemann, "The Costly Loss of Lament", *Journal for the Study of the Old Testament* 11.36 (1986): 57–71.

who has seen affliction". And even in Brueggemann's own analysis there are already seeds of a *different* trajectory and understanding. Brueggeman reports faithfully the notion that, in the Psalms, lament leads to thanksgiving,[20] and this dynamic suggests a different orientation than his claims for power and justice, which could amount simply to shouting at God.

Mark Boda responded to Brueggemann's work in a little known article in 2003, pointedly titled: "The Priceless Gain of Penitence".[21] Grappling with some of the dynamics Brueggemann observed in the Psalms, Boda extended the range of relevant biblical texts to include also, e.g., the post-exilic prayers of Ezra 9, Nehemiah 9, and Daniel 9, to observe that the painful articulation of suffering before God (i.e., lament) results, biblically, not in an unequal contest of power—which it becomes in Brueggemann's handling. Boda takes issue with Brueggemann's move to equate the *lack* of lament with "inauthenticity" and its presence with somehow being "authentic" in an imbalance of power. The Bible does not provide a link between "lament" and "authenticity" in this way, Boda observed.

Rather, Boda argued, the "disorientation" of pain leads to "re-orientation" by way of "penitence", or perhaps in language more familiar to us, *repentance*. As we see also in Lamentations 3, the recognition that God is the *source* of this pain and suffering, leads biblically to the further recognition that *sin* is its trigger—so God is also the *goal* of this pain and suffering, with the result that a deep repentance looks to the experience of God's grace. As Dietrich Bonhoeffer put it, in his reflection on suffering in the Psalms: "In the deepest hopelessness God alone remains the one addressed. ... [T]he distressed one in self-pity [does not] lose sight of the origin and goal of all distress, namely God."[22]

Perhaps this makes us a little nervous. Surely it is simplistic and judgmental to assume that someone's suffering is the result of sin! Immediately we call to mind Jesus' response to the disciples questions along these lines in John 9. "Rabbi, who sinned, this man or his parents, that he was born blind?" (9:1), to which Jesus replies: "Neither this man nor his parents sinned, but this happened so that the works of God might be displayed in him." (9:2) And perhaps this sense, too, contributes to our resistance to the element of acknowledging suffering within the context of our prayers

[20] Building on the work of Claus Westermann, especially in his *Praise and Lament in the Psalms* (Atlanta: John Knox, 1980).

[21] Mark J. Boda, "The Priceless Gain of Penitence: From Communal Lament To Penitential Prayer in the 'Exilic' Liturgy of Israel", *Horizons in Biblical Theology* 25.1 (2003): 51–75.

[22] Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Psalms: The Prayer Book of the Bible* (Minneapolis: Augsburg, 1970), pp. 47–48.

and corporate worship. However, we have missed a step in framing the "assumption" this way: it is not someone *else's* suffering that is in question here, but our *own*. The counterpart to Jesus' teaching in John 9 is found in his counsel in John 5 to the paralytic healed at the pool of Bethesda, who languished there for 38 years before Jesus healed him: "See, you are well! Sin no more, that nothing worse may happen to you" (John 5:14).

There is an even more direct teaching from Jesus than this on our question. It comes at the beginning of Luke 13 where the question is put to Jesus as to why certain Galileans had been killed by the Romans, and not others. Jesus adds his own question, not about human violence, but about what we would call natural disaster: about those killed when a tower fell and crushed them. To both these situations Jesus gives the same response: "Do you think they were worse sinners than all the others...? I tell you, no! But unless you repent, you too will all perish" (Luke 13:1–5).

This is the lesson which the "man who has seen affliction" had learned, and attempted to apply, in Lamentations 3. And this is the "backstory" which is conspicuous by its absence in our celebrating the fact that "the steadfast love of the Lord never ceases ... they are new every morning ... great is your faithfulness".

As we meditate on this theme, it also emerges that there is also a "Christological" dimension to Lamentations 3. It is not that the afflicted man himself can act as a redeemer, nor that *he* is that representative individual whose suffering brings hope to the community—but in the sense that the suffering experienced is intended to draw the community to God in submission and repentance, and so to know his grace and mercy. It conveyed something like this for those who framed the liturgy of Tenebrae ("Darkness"; origins in the Middle Ages) celebrated towards the end of Holy Week: of the extracts from Lamentations it used to mark the approach of the death of Jesus, verses 1–9 and 22–30 were used from Lamentations 3—and the first of those set of verses we habitually ignore.[23] Early church fathers also sensed a resonance between Jesus and Lamentations 3 in vv. 28–30, which then anticipated the sufferings of Jesus, much as the Suffering Servant in Isaiah 53 also did (cf. Parry, p. 255):

> 28 Let him sit alone in silence
> when it is laid on him;
> 29 let him put his mouth in the dust—
> there may yet be hope;

[23] For this and the following, see Robin Parry, "Jesus and Jerusalem: Christological Interpretation of Lamentations in the Church", in *Reading Lamentations Intertextually*, pp. 252–265.

30 let him give his cheek to the one who strikes,
and let him be filled with insults.

And these, as it happens, are verses omitted by Edith McNeill in her otherwise judicious selection of verses in the longer form of her song.

CONCLUSION

It is time to draw these reflections to a close. Spending time in the little book of Lamentations can feel like a harrowing experience: it arises from harrowing experiences, after all, especially those detailed in chapter 3. It is no wonder that the best known passage from the book should be the one in which hope burns brightest, and from which greatest comfort might be drawn (3:22–23). But I hope that in "discovering the backstory" of "Great is Your Faithfulness", we might be encouraged to understand the nature of the suffering of the faithful in a fuller light, be curious to explore some neglected hymns which do not shy away from this theme (there are a few), and grow in our own practice of confession—personally and corporately—and so to grow in grace. We can even see that we were given a prompt in this direction by Thomas Chisholm: "Pardon for sin, and a peace that endureth ... blessings all mine, and ten thousand beside".

FURTHER READING

Leslie C. Allen, *A Liturgy of Grief: A Pastoral Commentary on Lamentations*. Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2011.

Mark J. Boda, "The Priceless Gain of Penitence: From Communal Lament To Penitential Prayer in the 'Exilic' Liturgy of Israel", *Horizons in Biblical Theology* 25.1 (2003): 51–75.

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Robin A. Parry, *Lamentations* (Two Horizons Old Testament Commentary). Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2010.