

2. Hope remembering: The Man clings to his people's faith (19–39)

Israel lived by memory and hope. The whole narrative nature of Old Testament scripture proclaims that truth. They looked back to what God had done in their past, and they looked forward to what God would do in fulfilment of the promises that had driven their past and guaranteed their future. Memory and hope dominate verses 18–39, but wildly oscillating between negative and positive.

a. Bad memory (19–20)

To start off with, as we have seen, all hope has gone (18) and the only memories are bad ones (19–20). Both verses 19 and 20 begin with the word *remember*. Some translations take the opening word of verse 19 as an imperative—a plea to God to remember his sufferings (ESV)—but this seems somewhat unlikely in the immediate context. More probably it is an infinitive construct, with the sense, ‘to remember²² my afflictions and my wandering²³ is bitterness and gall’.²⁴

That kind of memory arises unbidden. It is the natural emotional and psychological reaction to great trauma, especially the shattering violence of war—the well-attested phenomenon of unwanted flashbacks and nightmares. So verse 20 intensifies the negative memory, with the typical Hebrew structure, ‘remembering, my soul remembers’—i.e. ‘I vividly, frequently, painfully, wretchedly, continually remember ...’, until my soul sinks down into misery and depression. To have lived through, and witnessed, the final choking fires of Jerusalem and the blood-soaked slaughter or capture of its starved inhabitants must have been an ineradicable and soul-destroying memory.

b. Truth remembered (21–24)

But there is another kind of memory. It is the deliberate, determined, teeth-gritting decision to call something to mind. It is an action of the will, not a reaction of the emotions. It is a conscious and difficult choice: ‘I *will* think about this.’ That is the flavour of the remarkable verse 21—which though it is the last line of a stanza of negative remembering (19–20), becomes the first line of a glorious positive affirmation and the turning point of the whole chapter. ‘Nothing is heavier than one’s head when one is struggling; raising one’s eyes requires great effort. Yet such effort is exactly what is called for here. The man takes himself in hand. He makes a decision, voluntarily affirming his faith, and acts with resolution and determination.’²⁵

‘**This**,’ says the Man, with powerful contrasting emphasis, ‘*This I call to mind*’ (21). But *call to mind* feels a little too weak. The Man says (Heb.) ‘This I cause to return to my heart’. The heart in Hebrew is

²² ‘The thought of my affliction and my homelessness is wormwood and gall!’ (NRSV)

²³ This pair of words echoes 1:7, where they describe Jerusalem, heightening the effect of the Man speaking on behalf of the city. ‘Wandering’ probably refers to the experience of exile.

²⁴ The phrase in the KJV, ‘the wormwood and the gall’, inspired a line in Edward Perronet’s 1780 hymn, ‘All hail the power of Jesus’ name’: ‘Sinners, whose love can ne’er forget / the wormwood and the gall, / go spread your trophies at his feet / and crown him Lord of all.’

²⁵ Coulibaly, p. 929.

the seat not so much of the emotions as of the mind and will. The Man does not just happen to remember something. He *makes it come back* into his conscious thinking, so as to change his whole perspective. This is something he knows that he knows, and he knows that he needs to get it back into his thinking right now. Sometimes it takes a very emphatic act of will to remember what we already know, when everything in our present experience threatens to deny it and overwhelm us.

Something similar happens in the middle of [Psalm 73](#). The author has been lamenting the prosperity of the wicked and the seeming futility of trying to live a godly life when all you get is daily afflictions ([Ps. 73:1–14](#)). But then, as we say in Northern Ireland, he catches himself on. He knows that he is thinking wrongly and if he were to voice his thoughts it would be a betrayal (v. 15). So he goes to the place of worship, into the presence of God, and ‘then I understood’ (v. 17). There is no apparent change in his circumstances, but a radical reversal of his perspective. So the psalm can confidently end where it falteringly began, by affirming the goodness of God (vv. 1, 28).

Something like that happens when the Man chooses to remember *this*. The *hope* that he thought had abandoned him forever reappears: *therefore I have hope*. The contrast between the end of verse 18 and the last word of verse 21 is astonishing. What can he have remembered that lifts a man who says he has lost all he ever hoped for into a place where he can say *I have hope*? What is the *this* that emphatically opens verse 21?

The opening words of verse 22 are the dramatic answer. In fact, they seem to be the intended object of what he calls to mind in verse 21: ‘This is what I call to mind ... YHWH’s acts of faithful love!’

This is what happens, you see, when you let YHWH’s name into the text, even by the back door—as he did at the end of verse 18. Once utter the Lord’s name and you cannot help remembering the multiple proofs of his covenant love. After all, it is how YHWH proclaimed his own identity at the start of Israel’s journey with God


The LORD, the LORD, the compassionate and gracious God,
slow to anger, abounding in love and faithfulness ...²⁶

That journey seemed to have come to an end in the darkness and death of [P 587 BC](#) and exile. But if YHWH was still God, then it surely could not be the end. For the character of the Lord God must be as eternal as God himself. And that is what verse 22 affirms in a beautiful chiasmic structure:²⁷

This I call to mind ...

²⁶ [Exod. 34:6](#).

²⁷ The chiasmic structure of the verse is one reason for adopting the reading ‘*they* are not consumed’ ([NRSV](#), [ESV](#)), rather than the [MT](#) ‘*we* are not consumed’ ([NIV](#)). The inverse parallelism works best with the third person verbs repeated. See Parry, pp. 100–101.

The acts of YHWH's covenant love! for they have not finished;

for they have not come to an end his acts of compassion.

Verse 23 turns this reality into a daily-renewed reminder, *new every morning*, and comes full circle back to the greatness of God's *faithfulness*.

These verses (22–23), resonating as they do with harmonics from all over the scriptures, are deservedly famous. It is grievous that they suffer from being so often extracted from their context in the midst of the surrounding pain of the whole book of Lamentations. But ironically, they are often quoted and sung in the midst of personal suffering and danger by believers who may know nothing of what our Poet describes—the horrors of ♪ 587 BC—but who do know personal or community suffering (illness, bereavement, poverty, persecution, war, dislocation, disaster, etc.). So, in the devotions and songs of multitudes of believers ever since, the sustaining truth at the heart of the Man's memory becomes embedded again in surrounding trauma, bringing a transforming perspective and renewed hope.

Lamentation is not the sole response of those who believe and are broken.

Or better—Lamentation also, though rarely and tentatively—smiles.

As here. Come, urges the poet, walk with me out of the night. God is still God, the promise holds firm.²⁸

Indeed, so psychologically and spiritually powerful is this new act of remembering that the Man forgets for a moment his self-absorption with the suffering that God ('He ...') has afflicted on him and speaks directly to that same God—*great is your faithfulness*. He has not done this before. Lady Zion has addressed God, but the Poet has only ever spoken of God in the third person.²⁹ 'For the first time in the poem, he addresses God directly, as though God had been his silent audience all along and he knows he can turn and make contact with the divine Eavesdropper.'³⁰

When he turns to more prolonged prayer in the second part of the chapter, it will be in a somewhat different tone. But when we get there we should not forget that the confession, protest and appeals that we will hear there are grounded on the solid affirmation of faith here: YHWH is the known and remembered God of proven covenant love, compassion and faithfulness—no matter what he has done, or has not yet done. *All* his actions must be viewed within that light, even if it strains our theology to the limits (as it will).

So the Man talks to himself yet again. In verse 18 (*so I say ...*), he had voiced his utter loss of future and hope. Now, with his perspective transformed by what he has forced back into his mind, he can say

²⁸ Berrigan, p. 76.

²⁹ With one single exception—1:10c. But that is more an accusation or question, than a prayer.

³⁰ O'Connor, p. 50.

something very different: *I say to myself, 'The LORD is my portion;*³¹ *therefore I will wait for him' (24).*³² 'I will wait' is the verb of the same root as the lost 'hope' of verse 18. 'Hope springs eternal',³³ but only when its focus is on the eternal Lord God.

c. *Waiting in hope (25–30)*

Are you ever astonished by the Bible? I hope so. For nothing seems more astonishing to me than that someone who has exploited a whole catalogue of violent metaphors to describe the suffering that God has inflicted on him (1–18) can turn round and say *The LORD is good ... (25)*! How on earth can he say that? Yet he does.³⁴ Remember, this is *the man who has seen affliction by the rod of [his] wrath (1)*. This is the man who has been stung, stifled, savaged and shot in verses 4–16. Read those scary verses again. And *nothing he says now cancels out the suffering described there*. It stands still in his memory and in our text. He does not deny it, and neither should we. But he is no longer drowning in it. For his deliberate act of remembrance has brought a moment of calm to his soul, a moment in which he reflects on some of the core truths of Israel's faith.

And the first core truth is the goodness of God—affirmed here, not in the swelling praise of **Psalm 136**,³⁵ but in the aftermath of the most horrendous suffering under the hand of God's covenant judgment. For if the God who punishes is the God who is good, then punishment cannot be the last word. There must be a future worth waiting for—*it is good to wait quietly for the salvation of the LORD (26)*. That, of course, had been the resilient hope built into the covenant from the start. **Deuteronomy 28–30** (and the Song of **Deut. 32**) had mapped out in advance the history of Israel, including the out-working of the covenant curses, whose textual horrors had now become numbing reality. *But*, God was not bound by the past or boxed in by the present. The future was always open to newness of life and promise because of the unquenchable love and faithfulness of God. 'Even if you have been banished to the most distant land under the heavens, from there the LORD your God will gather you and bring you back.'³⁶ That was Deuteronomy's promise in the gloriously hope-filled chapter 30 with its

³¹ Israelite families had their 'portion' in the land—their inheritance from generation to generation. The Levites, however, were given no territory as their allotted portion of land (so they were dependent on the tithes, first-fruits and offerings of the landed population). Instead, they were told, the Lord himself was their portion (**Num. 18:20**). They could live without land, so long as they had the Lord. That background may be what gives the Man hope. Even without land, city, king or temple, he had the Lord. A friend who worked in Rwanda shortly after the genocide there told me of meeting a man, destitute by the roadside, who had lost his whole family and home. His words were unforgettable: 'I never knew Jesus was all I needed till Jesus was all I had.'

³² This is another echo of the dynamic shift of mood in **Ps. 73**; see **Ps. 73:26**.

³³ Alexander Pope.

³⁴ Indeed, the Poet emphasizes his point by triple repetition of the word *good (tôb)* at the start of every line of the stanza beginning with the Hebrew letter *tet (25–27)*—*good ... good ... good*. This stanza and the next but one (**31–33**; *for ... for ... for*), are the only two stanzas in the poem that use this device of triple repetition of whole first words, not just first letters. It gives significant weight and prominence to the content of these stanzas.

³⁵ And many other psalms, of course, e.g. **Pss 73:1; 100:5; 106:1; 107:1; 118:1; 119:68; 135:3; 145:9**.

³⁶ **Deut. 30:4**.

evangelistic ending.

The Man cannot yet see that far ahead. He cannot even be entirely sure what future hope might look like. The best he can manage is the assertion that the right thing to do is to wait in quiet self-abasement, in the knowledge of God's goodness, and hope that the 'perhaps' of verse 29 will graduate to a clearer certainty. *There may yet be hope* (29) is not quite the negation of his earlier statements that some commentators read into it. The word 'perhaps' is clearly there in Hebrew. But it seems to me that the Poet is not so much questioning whether God ever will act in salvation (26), as simply affirming the freedom of God's sovereignty.³⁷ God will do what God will do; so trust him, even if you know not what or when. As Daniel's three friends said to Nebuchadnezzar: 'Our God whom we serve is able to deliver us ... *but if not* ... we will not serve your gods.'³⁸ There is an element of that cry of the father who brought his child to Jesus, 'I do believe; help me overcome my unbelief!'³⁹

So the Man offers his advice to the suffering. There is something of Job, or Job's friends, in verses 27–30. At first sight, it seems ironic for this Man, who has been anything but quiet himself and who has urged Lady Zion to cry out to God, to advocate that it is *good to wait quietly ... let him sit alone in silence* (26, 28). I think his words must not be taken with wooden literalness, as if he now regrets and denounces every syllable of protest to which he has already given vent. He is not saying that sufferers like himself should *never* speak their pain. No, there is a time for yelling out, but there is also a time to calm down under the recital of remembered truths. This Poet swings from one to the other without denying the validity of either. God allows (indeed encourages, by including it in scripture), the strident voice of pain and protest—the classic outpouring of biblical lament, so common in the psalms, so familiar to Jeremiah, and perfected here in Lamentations. But God also calls for the quiet humility of faith, born of penitence and sustained by hope. That is what emerges here in the midst of a storm that has not yet gone away and will return in force by the end of this chapter and remain unabated through the rest of the book.

³⁷ '... a recognition that God is sovereign and cannot be treated like a blessing-dispensing machine. The prophets also sometimes spoke in terms of the *possibility* of God's salvation after judgment (*Amos 5:15; Zeph. 2:3*)' (Parry, p. 105).

³⁸ *Dan. 3:17–18* (ESV, author's italics).

³⁹ *Mark 9:24*.

Reflections

1. What difference does it make to your former appreciation of a hymn like ‘Great is thy faithfulness’, or a song like ‘The steadfast love of the Lord never ceases’, to have explored the context in which they come here in [Lamentations 3](#)?
2. Has your study of [3:31–33](#) affected or changed your understanding of the character of God?
3. Can a Christian pray the prayer of [3:61–66](#)? If not, why not? And if so, in what circumstances and with what theological qualifications?