

Introduction

In the opening to the great speech against the religious authorities (23.1-12), Jesus speaks to the crowds and His disciples and says to them, "You have true greatness if you live in pointed contrast to pious-sounding hypocrites." Then Jesus turns His attention to the hypocritical leaders and addresses them *directly* in the body of this speech announcing woes of severe judgment upon them: **But woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites!** Now at the end of the speech, Jesus broadens His indictment to include the entire nation expanding on His word that this generation is in the same boat with the Pharisees (23.36, **Truly, I say to you, all these things will come upon this generation**). Surprisingly, perhaps, Jesus changes His tone from harsh to empathetic. There is a remarkable shift in sentiment from the introduction and body of the speech to its conclusion. The indictment remains, but now we see it in the context of how it affects the *judge* in a personal way, as a person with deep feelings. As I read the text (23.37-39), note the passion Jesus expresses, the outburst of emotion (Cf. Warfield's "The emotional life of our Lord," *Person and Work of Christ*, 93-145).

³⁷ "O Jerusalem, Jerusalem, the city that kills the prophets and stones those who are sent to it! How often would I have gathered your children together as a hen gathers her brood under her wings, and you would not!

³⁸ See, your house is left to you desolate. ³⁹ For I tell you, you will not see me again, until you say, 'Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord.'"

It is difficult to outline this text because it is so brief, things in it overlap, it reeks with emotion, and there are teachings here that many people in the reformed tradition have a hard time absorbing. It seems best to cover this text today by asking and answering three questions: 1) Using the term *lament* means what here? 2) Why is this lament so intense? 3) How can we do justice to this lament in the context of reformed theology?

1A. What does the term lament mean in this context?

A lament is an expression of deep concern, sorrow, and longing almost to the point of regret. It is a type of poetic language that commentators put at the opposite end of the emotional pole from a hymn (cf. Longman, *How to Read the Psalms*, 26). A hymn expresses exuberant joy bursting in song; a lament expresses extreme sorrow overflowing with tears. Luke's Gospel records the tears Christ shed over Jerusalem at the time of the triumphal entry; the context is similar to our text:

Blessed is the King who comes in the name of the Lord! Peace in heaven and glory in the highest!" ³⁹ And some of the Pharisees in the crowd said to him, "Teacher, rebuke your disciples." ⁴⁰ He answered, "I tell you, if these were silent, the very stones would cry out." ⁴¹ And when he drew near and saw the city, he wept over it, ⁴² saying, "Would that you, even you, had known on this day the things that make for peace! But now they are hidden from your eyes. ⁴³ For the days will come upon you, when your enemies will set up a barricade around you and surround you and hem you in on every side ⁴⁴ and tear you down to the ground, you and your children within you. And they will not leave one stone upon another in you, because you did not know the time of your visitation" (Lk. 19.38-44).

In our text (Mat.23), we hear Jesus using the poetic device of personification: Jerusalem is a person over whom Jesus laments: ³⁷ "O Jerusalem, Jerusalem, the city that kills the prophets and stones those who are sent to it! How often would I have gathered your children together as a hen gathers her brood under her wings, and you would not! (v. 37).

2A. Why is this lament so intense?

What intensifies this concern, sorrow, and longing over Jerusalem? Four things bring it about.

1B. Jerusalem refused to listen to His messengers of grace and good will.

She not only rebuffed the message, but she murdered the messengers. Stoning to death was one method they used as in the case of Zechariah (cited at the end of the woes, 23.31). The tenant farmers killed the messengers of the owner of the vineyard by stoning (21.35). The first Christian to die at the hands of the Jews was Stephen; they stoned him to death (Acts 7.59, **which of the prophets did not your fathers persecute?**). What a tragic tradition!

2B. The nation stands under imminent judgment

See, your house is left to you desolate (v. 38; as Lk. 19.38-44). Here He anticipates the fuller treatment of the judgment on the temple, city, and nation that comes up in 24-25. House can be the temple (1 Kings 9.7-8), the city (per the address to the city, v. 37), the entire land (cf. Jer. 22.4-10, house, city, and land come under judgment inseparably) where the covenant people dwell with the Lord (temple, city, land), and thus the nation, the children of the patriarchs, the children of the covenant. When God departs from the covenant people in judgment, He vacates the temple, the city, and the land and then the word holy no longer applies to these places or to the people (cf. when God reverses His movement away from the temple, the city, and the land then the good news will be The Lord is there, Ezek. 48.35).

3B. The covenant people will see Him again in final judgment

For I tell you, you will not see me again, until you say, 'Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord (v.39).

You will not see me again (cf. 26.29, 64) until the Day of Judgment when all people will acknowledge who I am. Then you will acknowledge that I am David's son and David's Lord. The words of your children in the temple will be on your lips (Mat. 21.15-16 based on Ps. 118.19-26, **The stone that the builders rejected has become the cornerstone.** ²³ **This is the LORD's doing; it is marvelous in our eyes.** ²⁴ **This is the day that the LORD has made; let us rejoice and be glad in it.** ²⁵ **Save us, we pray, O LORD! O LORD, we pray, give us success!** ²⁶ **Blessed is he who comes in the name of the LORD! We bless you from the house of the LORD**). At His second coming, all people will confess that He is Lord (Phil. 2.9-11). Their confession will not be a saving confession; it will be a self-condemnation.

4B. Most of all, underlying all the above, the desire of Jesus drives this lament

Jerusalem (His own people) refused His message of grace and good will. Jesus expressed His desire for them and His longing for their repentance and obedience directly throughout the days of His ministry, announcing the arrival of the kingdom of God and calling for entrance into it by repentance. He would gather Israel with the tender love of a hen that gathers her chicks under her protective wings, but she would have none of it (Cf. **Ruth 2:12, ¹² The LORD repay you for what you have done, and a full reward be given you by the LORD, the God of Israel, under whose wings you have come to take refuge!**").

The use of children is striking here. Jerusalem is a mother with many children; the nation is in view in the tender language of children. He presents the children of Israel (of Abraham and his son Jacob-Israel) as the children of the great city of David. Fulfillment of the covenant with Abraham and His children intertwines with the destiny of the city of Jerusalem. If Jesus gathers the children of Jerusalem under His wings of protection, then the city has His blessing; then He cleanses the city and the entire land by cleansing the temple as Jerusalem's true prophet, great priest, and majestic king.

His desire is like that of mother hen that scrambles to gather her little chickens under her wings. He did so often, surely, repeating the call to repentance in earnest across the days of His ministry. He is like a person with concern for a mother and her children; He is like a mother hen that continually seeks the care of her young. He is faithful and persistent in demonstrating His concern "often." This is a *tripled way of expressing the intense desire* of Jesus for the children of Abraham *despite, and in the very face of, their hatred of Him and their adamant refusal* of His overtures of goodness to them. He desired and offered them His blessing of protection and salvation (Ps. 118.21), but they did not desire Him (He had no form that men should desire Him, Isa. 53). Instead, they were willful in their refusal, hatred, jealousy, hypocrisy, and murderous intentions. You would not, He says pointedly.

The messengers came in His name and gave an overture of grace expressing the longing of the Lord for their repentance and obedience (cf. the outstretched hands in Rom. 10 based on

Deut). Likewise, Jesus came in the Father's name proclaiming the same overture often. Still, His desire for them and longing for their repentance and obedience hung in the air unfulfilled!

3A. How can we do justice to this lament in the context of reformed theology?

On one hand, people like Hagner (*Matthew*, 681) take from this passage the idea that God pleads with sinners hoping that they will allow Him to save them with the idea that Jesus will not force Himself on them (misrepresenting efficacious grace); instead, people must determine their own fate (Wilkins, *Matthew*, 757). This way of thinking, of course, goes against the efficacy of the grace of God in Christ. Everyone to whom Jesus chooses to reveal the Father will come to know Him savingly (Mat. 11.27). The power of the coming of His kingdom brings about the inevitable result that former slaves to sin become determined people who seize the kingdom as a prize (Mat. 11.12). Prodigals, lost in the wilderness of this world, return to the Father in repentance because the Good Shepherd, the Lord Jesus, finds them (Lk. 15). Our text, with all its surprises, gives no synergism. There is no cooperation between God and man, such that after God does all He can do, He then depends on us to make salvation work by our willingness. Jesus clearly tells us about His desire for repentance and He clearly speaks of man's unwillingness to repent. What He does not say is that man's unwillingness prevents Him from saving sinners; nor does He tell us that His desire rules out His determination to find lost sinners and efficaciously, certainly, and unquestionably bring them into His kingdom.

On the other hand, we must not do as many reformed thinkers do (Engelsma, *Hyper-Calvinism and the Call of the Gospel*), which is to be so wary of synergism and a wrong conception of God that they deny a well-meaning offer of the gospel to all men everywhere. These thinkers believe that they must rule out any desire in the heart of God for people who in fact perish in order to preserve the doctrines of grace. They claim that if you believe that God desires the salvation of all people, including those who actually perish, then you must believe that God depends on sinners to save them (cf. how he reasons using the view of Hoeksema as a guide. What he denies is that God well-meaningly offers his salvation in Christ to all who hear the gospel," p. 26. He claims that the well-meant offer, the idea that a sincere desire of God lies behind gospel preaching, goes against the thrust of reformed theology it is equivalent to making God dependent on man, p. 81).

The answer to these reformed thinkers is straightforward: Scripture teaches both God's desire and His decree (both His desire and His sovereignty). He effectively and surely saves each person He sets out to save. At the same time, Scripture teaches (here, for example in the lament) that there is a deep desire in the heart of God to bring them under His protective care, and that desire abides as a polar opposite of their unwillingness to come under His care. His desire leads the Lord to plead with them, to invite them to the kingdom feast, and to urge them by warnings and promises to turn to Him in repentance. He urges them with great desire for their good even though they will not submit to His loving care.

Applications

1) We learn about Christ

We learn about His emotional life and about emotions in God.

We learn unmistakably about His desire for the welfare of lost sinners of the most adamant, foolish, and willful kind of sinners. This under girds His joy in the Father's joy when sinners repent (Lk. 15).

Granted, knowing His desire to save is not the same as knowing His determination to save. Knowledge of His determined will to save is assuring and comforting; thus rest in His strength and not at all in our own strength. However, knowledge of His desire fills our understanding of the Lord and His ways. It makes us aware that God is not cold and unfeeling in His dealings with His creation. Although our grasp of the emotional life of our Lord has many

limitations, we learn that emotion exists in God in a way analogous to how it exists in Jesus as a true human being, as both the express image of God and the perfect man. Consider the playfulness of a robin in a birdbath; he comes out more dignified than before while the blue jay comes out looking like a Mohawk. These are testimonies to God at play. According to one of my first professors in college, Noel Smith, we know that God has a sense of humor because “He made the monkeys and He made you.” The fact of emotion in God has to remind us of the important teaching that in the Christian life we may grieve the Holy Spirit. This should draw on our hearts and cause us to be the most sensitive people on earth in our walk with the Spirit and our life before men.

2) It teaches us about grieving the Spirit

In this connection, note the context where Paul speaks of grieving the Spirit: ²⁹ **Let no corrupting talk come out of your mouths, but only such as is good for building up, as fits the occasion, that it may give grace to those who hear.** ³⁰ **And do not grieve the Holy Spirit of God, by whom you were sealed for the day of redemption.** ³¹ **Let all bitterness and wrath and anger and clamor and slander be put away from you, along with all malice.** ³² **Be kind to one another, tenderhearted, forgiving one another, as God in Christ forgave you** (Eph.4.29-32). Paul is dealing with speech that builds other up, giving grace to them, that is, giving them a grace gift knowing that we are all undeserving (v. 29). Up building speech can only occur when some things are “put away from you” (v. 31), things like bitterness, wrath, anger, raising your voice, shouting, and slander. You must then “put on” (cf. 4.22-24) kindness from a forgiving and tender heart following the example of Christ toward you (v. 32). Grieving the Spirit must be the other side of the coin of quenching the Spirit. You quench the Spirit, in a word, by not being open to the Scriptures by testing all things in a context of mutual up building and pastoral instruction (1 Thess. 5.11-22). God is not without feelings and that fact, when digested, will move you with great desire not to hurt your Savior’s feelings by your attitudes and actions. This will cause you to care about the feelings of other people. In turn, this cultivation of godly (God-like) emotional sensitivity will move you along in the right direction in your battle with sin in your life. We need emotional strength in the battle with sin, and contemplation on the emotional life of our Lord is one way to get it.

3) We learn from Him about our duty from the inside out

We have a duty to our neighbors in need.

All are in need of restoration in the image whether initially or progressively (whether they need to begin the journey or to continue it).

Our Lord’s example will soften our hearts if we absorb it into the fabric of our thinking.

He points the way for us to give the gospel to people in need, to invite them to the feast, and to tell them of God’s desire to bless them (that He would gather them under His wings of protection).

We should not shy away from making this offer and extending this invitation to sinners because we do not want to convey the wrong idea about God. Of course, we do not want to present the Lord as weak in His pleading with sinners as if He blessing of them somehow depended on them. Thus, how do we know that we are not giving the wrong impression of God when we tell them that God desires to bless them even though they are unwilling? Is not just saying this going to give the wrong impression? No, we know that this will not in itself create the wrong impression because this is exactly what Jesus does in this lament over Jerusalem. Jesus is our example of what to do and He is the living proof that pleading with sinners is not automatically a misrepresentation of the Lord. It is not automatically a threat to or denial of His sovereignty in saving sinners.

Furthermore, there is an interesting dynamic here in the passion of our Lord for perishing human beings. He pleads with them right in the face of their deep animosity toward Him and His servants. Although sons and daughters of Adam and Eve are lost in the wilderness of this world outside of Eden, and despite the fact that they kill God’s messengers and persecute those who bring them the good news, Jesus pleads with them and tells us by example to plead with them.

Why do we keep trying to bring the neighbor the saving and sanctifying gospel even though they continually reject our message and rebuff our efforts? What insight helps us in this regard? What helps here is the knowledge that the overture of grace, the pleading with sinners with all our hearts is a means that God uses to save and sanctify His elect. Then, whatever we must suffer, we suffer for God and for the sake of His elect (cf. Paul's example, **Therefore I endure everything for the sake of the elect that they also may obtain the salvation that is in Christ Jesus with eternal glory, 2 Tim.2.10**).

May we fall down before the majesty of our risen Lord Jesus in awe of His character and the reality of His emotional life. May we desire to please Him in all things. To Him be all glory, now and forevermore, amen.