

Where Do I Turn?¹

Lamentations 3:40-66

Introduction

Default: What is your go-to celebration meal? Or birthday treat? When we were kids, you couldn't beat a **McDonald's** birthday party (imagine that!). They had characters that would dress up, etc. Or **Chuck-E-Cheese!** Pitchers of soda. The ball pit was probably growing all sorts of biological hazards.

- In good situations and bad, a lot of us have a place we run to. A place of escape or comfort. A place where we can invest our feelings or distract ourselves from them.
 - Maybe you run to isolation or maybe to entertainment. Maybe, inebriation or "retail therapy."
- We all run somewhere when life falls apart. We all have default escape routes for pain. Whether intentionally or instinctively, we run somewhere for comfort, control, or relief.
- *Suffering* has a way of revealing where we really go for refuge.
- Jerusalem has fallen. The city is destroyed. The people are devastated by both their sin and God's judgment. And in the middle of all that devastation, the prophet says something shocking: "Let us... return to the LORD."
 - When things go badly. When you don't understand what God is doing. When you don't *like* what God is doing. You will be tempted to run from him. ***Don't run from him; return to him.***

When everything falls apart, run to God who hears and saves.

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." ⁴³ "You have wrapped yourself with anger and pursued us, killing without pity; ⁴⁴ you have wrapped yourself with a cloud so that no prayer can pass through. ⁴⁵ You have made us scum and garbage among the peoples. ⁴⁶ "All our enemies open their mouths against us; ⁴⁷ panic and pitfall have come upon us, devastation and destruction; ⁴⁸ my eyes flow with rivers of tears because of the destruction of the daughter of my people. ⁴⁹ "My eyes will flow without ceasing, without respite, ⁵⁰ until the LORD from heaven looks down and sees; ⁵¹ my eyes cause me grief at the fate of all the daughters of my city. ⁵² "I have been hunted like a bird by those who were my enemies without cause; ⁵³ they flung me alive into the pit and cast stones on me; ⁵⁴ water closed over my head; I said, 'I am lost.' ⁵⁵ "I called on your name, O LORD, from the depths of the pit; ⁵⁶ you heard my plea, 'Do not close your ear to my cry for help!' ⁵⁷ You came near when I called on you; you said, 'Do not fear!' ⁵⁸ "You have taken up my cause, O Lord; you have redeemed my life. ⁵⁹ You have seen the wrong done to me, O LORD; judge my cause. ⁶⁰ You have seen all their vengeance, all their plots against me. ⁶¹ "You have heard their taunts, O LORD, all their plots against me. ⁶² The lips and thoughts of my assailants are against me all the day long. ⁶³ Behold their sitting and their rising; I am the object of their taunts. ⁶⁴ "You will repay them, O LORD, according to the work of their hands. ⁶⁵ You will give them dullness of heart;

¹ "And I ran / ran so far away / I just ran / I ran all night and day / I couldn't get away" (Flock of Seagulls)

your curse will be on them. ⁶⁶ You will pursue them in anger and destroy them from under your heavens, O LORD.”

1. Start with Honest Repentance (vv. 40-48)

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. ⁴³ “You have wrapped yourself with anger and pursued us, killing without pity; ⁴⁴ you have wrapped yourself with a cloud so that no prayer can pass through. ⁴⁵ You have made us scum and garbage among the peoples. ⁴⁶ “All our enemies open their mouths against us; ⁴⁷ panic and pitfall have come upon us, devastation and destruction; ⁴⁸ my eyes flow with rivers of tears because of the destruction of the daughter of my people.

Self-Awareness: ⁴⁰ Let us test and examine our ways, If we are ever going to repent, then we *have* to be honest.

- There is no path to healing without honesty. There is no path to restoration without acknowledging what is broken. There is no repentance without admitting sin.
- There is no real relationship with God if we refuse to tell the truth about our lives and our world.
 - The world is *not* as it should be.
 - Our lives are *not* as they should be.
 - We are *not* as we should be.
- We have to face the devastation of sin (out there *and* in here).
- Christianity requires *honest* and often *deep* self-examination.
- The gospel *should* expose sin and shortcomings in our lives. Christians should be the most self-aware of all people. We should recognize and know our own sins and faults.
 - Are you able to see your sin without justifying it? Pray for God to open your eyes (e.g., baldness, “let it go, man”).
 - Funny story, illustration.
 - “What you see and what you hear depends a great deal on where you are standing. It also depends on what sort of person you are” (C. S. Lewis, *The Magician’s Nephew*).
- **(1) Humility to examine yourself** (not defensive, or self-justifying; honest about yourself and your patterns).
- **(2) Openness to receive correction** (godly people, Scripture, prayerful reflection)
- **(3) Desire to return to God** (believing God is better than the sin you cling to)

Return: and return to the LORD! **Return**² (primary word for repentance in the OT).

- It’s not enough to simply *acknowledge* your distance from God if you don’t take the steps to come home.
 - Repentance isn’t simply walking the other direction on the train (that’s behavior management), it’s getting off the train and onto another going the other direction (i.e., totally different destinations).

² שׁוּב

- Notice *the destination of repentance*: it is not *first about* behavior modification, self-improvement, or guilt management, but about returning to a person.
 - "It is not the strength of your faith but the object of your faith that actually saves you. Strong faith in a weak branch (object) is fatally inferior to weak faith in a strong branch (object)" (Keller).
 - Your prayers are not answered primarily by their fervency. A weak prayer to our faithful and true God is infinitely more effective than the most fervent prayer to an idol (e.g., the prophets of Baal wailed and cut themselves to no avail).
- Biblical repentance is not merely turning from sin; it is returning to the Lord.
 - Repent therefore, and turn back,³ that your sins may be blotted out, that times of refreshing may come from the presence of the Lord (Acts 3:19-20).
 - Inward repentance and outward return go hand-in-hand.⁴
 - The goal of repentance is not self-loathing or wallowing in guilt, but restoration to God. "My mom didn't raise a quitter, a complainer maybe, but not a quitter." So many of us would rather **complain** than **change**.
- E.g., Prodigal Son (Lk 15:11-32). God is like the loving Father, watching and waiting, longing for you to come home. When you return, he will not berate or chastize you, he will wrap you in his arms.
- Sin is like poor vision. We get so used to the blurry world that putting on glasses takes time to adjust and often gives us a headache, but if we stick it out, we see life more vibrantly and experience more joy.⁵

Hearts and Hands: ⁴¹ Let us lift up our hearts and hands to God in heaven: The inner (heart) and outer (hands) are pictured again. Let us come to God completely!

- "Returning to the Lord begins with the heart, the very place where sin and rebellion originate" (House) and encompasses our actions. *Every aspect of our lives* belongs to God.
 - For some of us, we have lifted our hands to God. We perform outward acts of repentance, but our hearts remain far from God. Stop pretending. If it isn't from the heart, it's just hypocrisy.
 - For others, we have the inward desire to turn to God, but have not taken any practical steps of repentance. Our habits and actions continue in the path of sin. Stop lying. If your faith doesn't change your behavior, it is just empty sentimentality. "The road to hell is paved with good intentions."
 - E.g., showing up on a date, but wishing you were somewhere else (#1). Telling someone you love them, but not showing up on the date (#2). *Both* are wrong. You need to **show up** (#2) with a heart that **wants to be there** (#1).

³ μετανοήσατε οὖν καὶ ἐπιστρέψατε

⁴ LXX does not use μετάνοια here (change of mind, inner), but uses ἐπιστρέφω (relational, toward God).

⁵ Lingering Hurt: 42 "We have transgressed and rebelled and you have not forgiven... 48 my eyes flow with rivers of tears because of the destruction of the daughter of my people. Repentance brings forgiveness, but not always immediate relief. Pain does not remove the need for repentance. He is feeling the experience of unforgiveness. They haven't been forgiven yet (need forgiveness); it's on God to forgive.

Hate Your Sin More: The weeping man leads his people in confession

- I love to see him leading others *in* confession, not demanding it of them. He is demonstrating grief and repentance, and calling others to do the same.
 - His honest assessment is not an accusation meant to crush them, but an invitation to healing.
- If you only notice the sins of others and never your own, you will miss out on the work God wants to do in your life. “It is natural to see other people’s sins; it is grace to see my own” (Kell).
 - I’ve watched people with all sorts of glaring sin become experts in the minor flaws of others; stacking up evidence against everyone around them while remaining blind to their own sin.
 - This is the reason Jesus gives the “log and speck” warning in Matthew 7. The issue is not discernment, or even judgment, but *hypocrisy*.
 - Some people treat conversations like they’re judges on a reality show, constantly evaluating, critiquing, scoring, and analyzing everyone around them. They can tell you every flaw in their church, boss, or friends, but ask them about their own pride, selfishness, or jealousy, and suddenly the room gets quiet.
 - We are incredibly skilled at diagnosing everybody else while refusing spiritual surgery on ourselves. **Do not become an expert in other people’s shortcomings while remaining a stranger to your own heart.** Be *more concerned* with your sin than anybody else’s.

Suffering is a gift that exposes our need for a rescuer. And when you finally come to the end of yourself, you discover God has been listening the whole time.

2. God Hears Your Cries (vv. 49-57)

⁴⁹ “My eyes will flow without ceasing, without respite, ⁵⁰ until the LORD from heaven looks down and sees; ⁵¹ my eyes cause me grief at the fate of all the daughters of my city. ⁵² “I have been hunted like a bird by those who were my enemies without cause; ⁵³ they flung me alive into the pit and cast stones on me; ⁵⁴ water closed over my head; I said, ‘I am lost.’ ⁵⁵ “I called on your name, O LORD, from the depths of the pit; ⁵⁶ you heard my plea, ‘Do not close your ear to my cry for help!’ ⁵⁷ You came near when I called on you; you said, ‘Do not fear!’

Pick Up the Phone: If I promised you \$10,000 for calling someone and they pick up (antiquated phrase; ask Gen Z to answer the phone), who are you going to call? Who are you certain will pick up? It wouldn’t be Evan (better luck with a carrier pigeon). But even the most *responsive* person might be unavailable for some reason.

- This is what Elijah taunted the prophets of Baal with: “Cry aloud, for he is a god. Either he is musing, or he is relieving himself, or he is on a journey, or perhaps he is asleep and must be awakened” (1 Kgs 18:27). Maybe he’s too busy in the bathroom to hear you.

- You know what was even more useful than the first telephone? The second telephone. If there's no one on the other end of the line, it doesn't matter. But God is there.

I Sought the Lord, and He Heard, and He Answered: ⁵⁵ "I called on your name, O LORD, from the depths of the pit; ⁵⁶ you heard my plea, 'Do not close your ear to my cry for help!' ⁵⁷ You came near when I called on you; you said, 'Do not fear!'"

- "Almighty and everlasting God, you are always more ready to hear than we to pray" (Book of Common Prayer).
- The best leaders are good listeners, and God is the perfect leader.
- When things are at their worst, when everything feels too far gone, will you cry out to God?
- He is always listening and paying attention (e.g., unlike a distracted parent or sleeping lifeguard... I guess the next stop is W. Africa).
- Don't confuse God's timing, or the fact that his answers differ from your desires, for him not listening.
 - He listens. He cares. He loves you more than you could love yourself.⁶

Do Not Fear: you said, 'Do not fear!' If God is who he says he is (e.g., sovereign, almighty, creator, sustainer, and ruler of all things), then he is the only one we should fear! He judges the living and the dead!⁷

- The Bible teaches us to fear God⁸ and *not* anything else. When we fear God, the one with ultimate authority and power, who created everything that is, then *we don't have to fear anything else*. The only person you *should* fear (God) has promised to love you and is for you. The one who rightfully should cause us to fear tells us to "fear not."
- A person who only fears God has amazing power in this world. It changes the way you live. Only God can truly make you not afraid. But, in God, you don't have to fear. "For God gave us a spirit not of fear but of power and love and self-control" (2 Tim 1:7). There is no fear in love, but perfect love casts out fear (1 Jn 4:18).
- The love of Christ frees us from fear and allows us to follow Christ into otherwise scary risks. "When you feel stuck while making a decision, ask yourself, 'What would I do if I wasn't afraid?'" (Sarah Mack). "If God is our strength, then we need not fear our weaknesses" (Wyatt).

Our Only Hope: ⁵⁰ until the LORD from heaven looks down and sees;

- What is your only comfort in life and death? That I am not my own, but belong—body and soul, in life and in death—to my faithful Savior, Jesus Christ. He has fully paid for all

⁶ 26 Likewise the Spirit helps us in our weakness. For we do not know what to pray for as we ought, but the Spirit himself intercedes for us with groanings too deep for words. 27 And he who searches hearts knows what is the mind of the Spirit, because the Spirit intercedes for the saints according to the will of God. 28 And we know that for those who love God all things work together for good, for those who are called according to his purpose. 29 For those whom he foreknew he also predestined to be conformed to the image of his Son, in order that he might be the firstborn among many brothers. 30 And those whom he predestined he also called, and those whom he called he also justified, and those whom he justified he also glorified (Rom 8:26-30).

⁷ 2 Tim 4:1; Acts 10:42; 1 Pet 4:5

⁸ Deut 6:13; 10:12; 10:20; 31:12–13; Ps 33:8; 34:9; 111:10; Prov 1:7; 8:13; 9:10; 19:23; Eccl 12:13; Isa 8:13; Jer 32:40; Matt 10:28; Acts 9:31; 2 Cor 7:1; 1 Pet 2:17; Rev 14:7

my sins with his precious blood, and has set me free from the tyranny of the devil. He also watches over me in such a way that not a hair can fall from my head without the will of my Father in heaven; in fact, all things must work together for my salvation.

- This is at the base of our theology, that apart from God we “can do nothing” (Jn 15:5).

Pit: When you're in the pit, where do you go? Like David, in the 69th Psalm, can you say:

- I have come into deep waters, and the flood sweeps over me. I am weary with my crying out; Let not the flood sweep over me, or the deep swallow me up, or the pit close its mouth over me... Answer me, O LORD, for your steadfast love is good; according to your abundant mercy, turn to me. Hide not your face from your servant, for I am in distress; make haste to answer me. Draw near to my soul, redeem me; ransom me because of my enemies!... When the humble see it they will be glad; you who seek God, let your hearts revive. For the LORD hears the needy and does not despise his own people who are prisoners.

When you know God hears you, you no longer have to take vengeance into your own hands. You can stop trying to play judge, jury, and executioner because the God who hears your cries is also the God who sees every injustice and judges rightly.

3. The Lord Will Defend You (vv. 58-66)

⁵⁸ “You have taken up my cause, O Lord; you have redeemed my life. ⁵⁹ You have seen the wrong done to me, O LORD; judge my cause. ⁶⁰ You have seen all their vengeance, all their plots against me. ⁶¹ “You have heard their taunts, O LORD, all their plots against me. ⁶² The lips and thoughts of my assailants are against me all the day long. ⁶³ Behold their sitting and their rising; I am the object of their taunts. ⁶⁴ “You will repay them, O LORD, according to the work of their hands. ⁶⁵ You will give them dullness of heart; your curse will be on them. ⁶⁶ You will pursue them in anger and destroy them from under your heavens, O LORD.”

He Sees: ⁵⁹ You have seen the wrong done to me, O LORD;... ⁶⁰ You have seen all their vengeance, all their plots against me.

- He hears: ⁶¹ “You have heard their taunts, O LORD, all their plots against me. ⁶² The lips and thoughts of my assailants are against me all the day long.
- Do you know why you don't need to keep a record of wrongs? Why you don't need to hold a grudge? Because God sees all the injustice done to you.
 - You think you see what's going on, God sees it all! He sees what you see and what you don't. He sees your sincere motives and your false motives. He sees what's happening now and what the future holds.
- We see things incomplete, mistakenly. God sees it perfectly (e.g., instant replay, slo-mo, 8k has nothing on him).

He Defends: “You have taken up my cause, O Lord; He advocates for you!

- Miranda: You have the right to remain silent. Anything you say can and will be used against you in a court of law. You have a right to an attorney...

- Why are you advised to be quiet and let your lawyer talk? Because he or she knows what to say and what not to say. They are going to stand between you and the judge and zealously advocate for your best interests.
- Jesus is our **advocate**. He **pleads our case**.⁹ He stands before the judge and argues on our behalf (e.g., *Guardian Ad Litem*). What is the substance of our defense? Is it our good behavior? No. It is the finished work of Jesus.

He Judges: ⁶⁴ “You will repay them, O LORD, according to the work of their hands. ⁶⁵ You will give them dullness of heart; your curse will be on them. ⁶⁶ You will pursue them in anger and destroy them from under your heavens, O LORD.”

- God will judge. Remember, to be just and holy, God *has* to judge sin.
 - If God does not judge sin, then we have no hope for justice in the face of evil.
- We *want* the judgment of God, but if we're honest, we *fear* the judgment of God.
- “If there is a judgment day, what hope is there for us? If there is not a judgment day, what hope is there for us?” (Keller).
- A major question underlying this book: How can guilty people ask for justice? The judgment we need on our enemies will also consume us in our sin.
 - How can God defend us and judge us? How can God punish our sin and give us mercy? We deserve judgment, but Christ bears our judgment.
 - But he was pierced for our transgressions; he was crushed for our iniquities; upon him was the chastisement that brought us peace, and with his wounds we are healed. All we like sheep have gone astray; we have turned—every one—to his own way; and the LORD has laid on him the iniquity of us all (Is 53:5-6).
 - For our sake he made him to be sin who knew no sin, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God (2 Cor 5:21).
 - God can defend us without compromising justice because “Jesus is both the advocate and the atoning sacrifice. What he pleads on behalf of sinners is what he himself has done on their behalf” (Marshall).¹⁰
- The only people who can safely ask for God's justice are those who have first asked for God's mercy.
 - For those still stuck in their sin, trying to do it on their own, living in their own power, judgment is a curse. But for those who have placed their lives in the hands of Jesus, relying on him for salvation and forgiveness, judgment is a great comfort.
 - Is the judgment of God a comfort or a curse to you?
 - There is refuge *from* Jesus, only refuge *in* him.
- The only place we can run is to God, there is nowhere else.

Conclusion

⁹ Latin *advocatus*, Greek *παράκλητος*

¹⁰ Be careful not to place Christ against the Father in an adversarial courtroom drama. This is simply the limit of the metaphor. God has already been described as faithful and just to forgive sins (1:9) and will be described as the giver of the Son as the atoning sacrifice (4:9ff).

Where are you running?

- Take a look at your sin (test and examine [your] ways). The ugliest parts of you. The worst version of yourself.
- Now what will you do?
 - Run to despair and self-loathing?
 - Run to comparison and self-justification?
 - Run to self-righteousness and the paper-thin veneer of good behavior?
 - Run to distraction? Entertainment? Self-medication?
- Or, will you run to God?
 - Don't settle for lies that destroy and idols that leave you empty: cry out to God, return to him, run home!