

The Cross and Old Testament Prophecy

Chapter 52, verse 7, of the book of Isaiah reads; and I quote: “How beautiful upon the mountain are the feet of him who brings good tidings, who publishes peace,... who publishes salvation, who says to Zion, ‘Your God reigns,’” concludes Isaiah. St Jerome’s insight into this verse is bold and true. I quote: “Christ brought peace to all things in heaven and earth through the blood of his cross,” wrote St Jerome. So, how did this happen? We do not usually associate the beauty of peace with the suffering of Christ on the Cross. How did Jesus Christ bring such a comprehensive peace “to all things in heaven and earth through the blood of his cross?”

Isaiah continues in that same chapter 52, with verses 11 and 12; and I quote: “Depart, depart, go out thence, touch no unclean thing; go out from the midst of her, purify yourselves, you who bear the vessels of the LORD. For you shall not go out in haste, and you shall not be put to flight, for the LORD will go before you, and the God of Israel will be your rear guard,” concludes Isaiah. Origen applies Isaiah’s words about the Israelite priests to us today, with an emphasis on the need for each of us to purify ourselves in order to draw closer to God. Origen wrote; and I quote: “[Isaiah] says, ‘you who carry the vessels of the Lord be separated and depart from the midst [of sinners], says the Lord.’ ‘Separate yourself,’ from earthly deeds; ‘separate yourself’ from the desire[s] of the world... Moreover, [I] say to be set apart not from places but from deeds, not from regions but from ways of life,” concluded Origen. That was difficult to do in ancient Israel, difficult to do during the second and third centuries when Origen lived, and it remains difficult to do in the modern secular world of today.

How Can We Draw Closer to God in Our Lives?

So, how do we each “separate [ourselves] from the desire[s] of the world”? In the book, *Orthodox Spirituality: A Practical Guide for the Faithful and a Definitive Manual for the Scholar*, Father Dumitru Staniloae writes; and I quote: “Our

perfection, or our union with God, is ... not only a goal, but also an unending progress. On this road two great steps can be distinguished: first, the moving ahead toward perfection through purification from the passions and the acquiring of the virtues, and secondly a life progressively moving ahead in the union with God. At this point [humanity's] work is replaced by God's. [But each human being] contributes by opening [themselves] up receptively to an ever-greater filling with the life of God" [pp. 21-22]. Father Dumitru continues: "There are really two deaths: The first is produced by sin and is the death of our nature. The second is a death like Christ's, which is the death of sin and the death produced by it. However, the death of our nature, through the decomposition [that is, the decay] produced by sin, doesn't come only at the final moment; rather it nibbles away for a long time like a worm," concludes Father Dumitru. So, each day is both a new challenge and a new opportunity for us to draw closer to God.

This quest to purify ourselves and to listen to and follow the Lord requires a private personal struggle within each of us. St Augustine writes of the relationship between sin and grace in Psalm 31/32; and I quote: "The first stage of understanding is to recognize that you are a sinner. The second stage of understanding is that when, having received the gift of faith, you begin to do good by choosing to love, you attribute this not to your own powers but to the grace of God," concluded St Augustine.

Facing the Love of Pleasure, Greed and the Love of Glory

The late Archbishop Averky, former Abbot of Holy Trinity Monastery in Jordanville, New York, offers helpful advice on "facing the passions" in the Holy Trinity Publication, *The Struggle for Virtue: Asceticism in a Modern Secular Society*. He writes; and I quote: "All of the Holy Fathers ... agree that the root and source of the passions is egoism or self-love ... [which] gives rise to three principal passions: love of pleasure, greed, and love of glory.... Based upon their own experience and [prayer, the Holy Fathers] ... developed an entire science of fighting the passions, a kind of therapeutic course for the ailing soul. Knowledge of this science, which

bears the name ‘asceticism,’ comprises the most vital, most necessary lifetime task for every Christian ... [in] the battle with evil. What are the principal techniques in this battle? All of the Holy Fathers unanimously advise that we, first of all, [should] take precautionary measures so as not to allow the passions to be conceived and take root in our hearts” [pp. 128-129].

Archbishop Averky continues: “Where do our passions come from? Do we need to struggle with them? Perhaps they are natural for us? Yes, they are natural for us. However, they are not natural for the ideal man [or woman] as God created [them] and as [they] should be according to God’s intention; they are natural for man’s fallen nature.... Therefore, the Holy Fathers say, ‘do not be disturbed, do not be puzzled when you see within yourself the action of a passion. When a passion arises, struggle against it and strive to restrain and eradicate it with humility and prayer’...” Every resistance to ... the passions weakens them; constant resistance to a passion dethrones it. On the other hand, the fondness for a passion strengthens it; the constant fondness for a passion enslaves the one who has become fond of it’ ... A desire to trample ... [the passions through] spiritual struggle is necessary. But it is not spiritual struggle that liberates a Christian from the rule of the passions: it is ... the grace of the Holy Spirit ... that liberates [them]. But ... the grace of the Holy Spirit ... [requires] ... personal struggle. This is why Christ the Saviour says, ‘Strive [literally, ‘make spiritual struggle’] to enter through the narrow gate (Lk 13.24),’” concludes Archbishop Averky [pp. 134-135].

The Confrontation of the Prophet Isaiah with Suffering

To be helped in the midst of our personal struggles with greed and love of pleasure and love of glory, we can pray to Christ for His help. When we turn to Christ, we experience the truth of the words in Isaiah chapter 52, verse 13, to the end of chapter 53—the last of the Servant Songs—about “a man of sorrows [who has] borne our griefs and carried our sorrows” (53-3.4). These verses have been described by C. R. North in *Isaiah 40-55* (SCM Press) as “the most discussed passage

in the Old Testament” [p. 130]. Over the centuries, different interpretations have been offered.

On the one hand, the Church Fathers and many later scholars stated firmly that the Suffering Servant was a foreshadowing—an indication of the coming of Christ to both to the Jewish people and all the nations. On the other hand, the Suffering Servant could have a community-wide interpretation. As Professor Arthur Peake and others have argued “the Servant is the historical Israel” (See Peake’s *The Problem of Suffering in the Old Testament*, Epworth Press, 1904/1947, p.viii; pp. 30-64). Both interpretations have considerable merit. Peake (1865-1929), who was British and a Primitive Methodist Christian, cites the words of Raymond Brucker (1800-1875), a French writer and Roman Catholic on the front cover of his book; and I quote in French: “Dieu, c’est le mot de l’énigme du monde./ Jésus-Christ, c’est le mot de l’énigme de Dieu.” A translation would be: “God is the answer to the mystery of this world. Jesus Christ is the answer to the mystery of God.” Both Peake and Brucker are reaching out for an Orthodox interpretation of the Suffering Servant. Both would possibly have agreed with North; and I quote: “The Christian Church is the heir to the Servant vocation of Israel in the Old Testament,” concludes North [pp. 29-36].” Yet the image of Jesus Christ Himself as the Suffering Servant is also possible.

In the image of the Suffering Servant, the prophet Isaiah and his school of prophets are telling the Jews of Palestine in the eighth century BC that they will suffer and be exiled from their home. However, the fall of Jerusalem and the Exile would not begin until 586 BC, some 100 years after Isaiah died. Some modern Protestant Biblical scholars believe chapters 40 to 66 of the Book of Isaiah were written by another person at the time of the Exile. However, *The Orthodox Study Bible* proposes only one author; and that interpretation is strongly supported by linguistic research in *The New American Study Bible (NASB)*, confirming verbal parallels in the two sections of the book, as well as the unity of the book and its message [p. 957].

Isaiah prophesies both the exile and the return of the people to Jerusalem in the opening verses of chapter 40; and I quote: “Comfort, comfort My people, says your God. Speak tenderly to Jerusalem.... A voice cries, ‘In the wilderness prepare the way of the LORD; Make straight in the desert a highway for our God.... Behold, the LORD God comes with might... He will feed his flock like a shepherd, he will tend gather the lambs in his arms...,’” concludes Isaiah.

How Is Suffering to Be Understood?

In a very real sense, in the Suffering Servant, Isaiah anticipates the suffering and the victory of Jesus Christ—His Crucifixion, Resurrection and Ascension. In contrast, the prophet Jeremiah was actually an eyewitness to the destruction of Jerusalem and laments—that is, expresses great sadness—about what has happened around him. The Lamentations of Jeremiah were probably written by the prophet soon after the destruction of Jerusalem. Both Isaiah’s prophetic awareness of the suffering that was to come (both for the Israelites and for Jesus Christ) and Jeremiah’s actual experience of the suffering of Israel form a unity helping us to understand the meaning of suffering and its relationship to the Cross of Christ.

There is an ancient Jewish tradition that the books of the Old Testament are sometimes known by the opening words of the Hebrew text. Thus, Genesis is known as *bereshith*, meaning “in the beginning;” and the Book of Lamentations is sometimes known as *‘ekah*, meaning “How?”—which is also the opening word of chapters 2 and 4. However, in both Jewish and Christian traditions the Hebrew word *qinot* meaning “Lamentations” is often used. The two titles go well together, because the central question both when the book was written and now is: How is suffering to be understood? What is an appropriate response? Father Dumitru reflects: “Providence attracts [us] to the good by urging [us] to assume certain efforts on [our] initiative, while the method of judgment takes [us] through various sufferings. The method of providence especially makes us reject the temptations of pleasure, that is the passions of the appetite, while the method of judgment takes

[us] through various sufferings,” concludes Father Dumitru [p. 170]. In other words, we should continue to take initiatives but will suffer if we sin.

To Draw Closer to Christ, Lament Sin

The fifth-century Bishop of Cyr, Theodoret, has written a commentary on the Book of Lamentations that offers significant reflections on the causes and purposes of suffering and human sorrow. Of Chapter 1 which begins, “How lonely sits the city [of Jerusalem] that was full of people!” Theodoret writes; and I quote: “While lament is a sign of sympathy and affection, it is my view that the divinely-inspired prophet wrote Lamentations for the benefit not only of the people of that time but also [for] those to come later, so that both [the] former and [the] latter might learn through the text what evils sin is responsible for,” concludes Theodoret.

A note in *The New American Study Bible [NASB]* explains, and I quote: “The author of Lamentations understands clearly that the Babylonians were merely the human agents of divine retribution [that is, punishment for sin and wrongdoing] and that God Himself has destroyed His city and temple. Nor was the Lord’s action arbitrary [that is, random or high-handed] ... [because] God-defying sin and covenant-breaking rebellion were the root cause of His people’s woes,” concludes the *NASB* [p. 1146]. Throughout history, as well as today, that is how God has often dealt with both personal sin and the sins of nations.

Chapter 1, verse 12 of Lamentations asks the question; and I quote: “Is it nothing to you, all you who pass by? Look and see is there any sorrow like my sorrow which was brought upon me, which the LORD inflicted on the day of his fierce anger,” concludes that verse. Theodoret writes in the excellent translation by Robert Charles Hill that the Book of Lamentations; and I quote: “brings out also the justice of that retribution [whose impact is described in the Septuagint translation of chapter 1, verse 14], ‘[The Lord] has watched over my sins, they are entwined about my hands, they have come up to my neck: my strength has failed; for the Lord has laid pains on my hands, I shall not be able to stand,’” ends that verse of which Theodoret writes that the Lord “handed me over to the foe... He ... obliged

me to serve the savage Babylonians,” concludes Theodoret. That is precisely what happens to those who have at times sought to serve the Lord but were drawn to and consumed by sin. Their strength to act fails, they are weakened and must suffer and accept the consequences of their sins, because their will to follow the Lord has been damaged until they repent and change their behaviour. This was true with the destruction of Jerusalem more than 1,500 years ago and it remains true today both for us and for nations.

The Consequences of Sin and the Need for Repentance

The second of the four chapters of the Book of Lamentations opens with another “How”—“How the Lord in his anger has set the daughter of Zion under a cloud!” But now, beginning in verse 10, there is increasing awareness of the reality and consequences of sin. I quote: “The elders of the daughter of Zion sit on the ground in silence; they have cast dust on their heads and put on sackcloth; the maidens of Jerusalem have bowed their heads to the ground. My eyes are spent with weeping: my soul is in tumult [that is, great confusion],” concludes Jeremiah.

St Jerome points out how some 600 years later “The Saviour also wept over the city of Jerusalem because its inhabitants had not repented” leading to the destruction of the city by the Romans. And St Jerome applies this need to weep to the Church today, urging, and I quote: “Weep rather for those who by reason of their crimes and sins go away from the church and who, suffering condemnation for their faults, shall no more return to it. It is in this sense that the prophet [Jeremiah] urges [in the words of Romans, chapter 12, verse 15], ‘Rejoice with them that rejoice and weep with them that weep.’ By your tears you will melt the hard hearts of sinners until they too weep,” concludes St Jerome. That is precisely what is happening in this second chapter of the Book of Lamentations, as the awareness and consequences of sin become present in the minds and hearts of the people. We too can weep and rejoice in the Church today, acknowledging the presence of both sin and grace.

Of chapter 3, verse 26, “It is good that one should wait quietly for the salvation of the Lord, Theodoret writes; and I quote: “[Rise] up then, I beseech you, let us fight for the Lord’s sheep. Their Lord is near. He will certainly appear and scatter the wolves and glorify the shepherds. [As it is written in verse 25], ‘The Lord is good to those who wait for him, to the soul that seeks him.’ Let us not murmur at the storm that has arisen, for the Lord of all knows what is good for us. Wherefore also when the apostle Paul asked for release from his trials [God] would not grant his [request] but said [in Second Corinthians, chapter 12, verse 9], ‘My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness.’ Let us then bravely bear the evils that befall us; it is in war that heroes are discerned, in conflicts that athletes are crowned, in the surge of the sea that the art of the helmsman is shown, in the fire that the gold is tried. And let us not, I beseech you, heed only ourselves; let us rather have forethought [that is, make provision for the future] for [others]... Let us then stretch out our hands to them that lie low, let us tend their wounds and set them at their post to fight the devil. Nothing will so [upset] him as to see [us] fighting and striking [him] again. Our Lord is full of lovingkindness. He receives the repentance of sinners, ... [It is] not as though you were ignorant [of what I] have written to you; rather have I reminded you of what you already know, like those standing safe on the shore help those who are tossed by the storm and show them a rock ...or catch and haul in a rope that has been thrown. [As is written in Romans, chapter 16, verse 20], ‘And the God of peace shall bring Satan under your feet shortly’ and shall gladden our ears with the news that you have passed from storm to calm, at his word to the waves [in the Gospel of St Mark, chapter 4, verse 39,] ‘Peace. Be still.’ And you should offer prayers for [me, urged Theodoret], for you who have undergone peril for the sake of [Christ] can speak with greater boldness,” concludes Theodoret. That is a beautiful statement about how to confront sin in ourselves and others, as our prayer and effort meets the grace and lovingkindness—in Hebrew *hesed*—of the Lord.

The editor of the *Ancient Christian Commentary on Scriptures* volume on Jeremiah and Lamentations, Dr Dean Wenthe, has pointed out that the Book of Lamentations “served the [Church] Fathers well as a description of the challenges that face the Christian in a fallen world.... [Even with] all their imaginative and intellectual capacities, the Fathers remained pastors. Their use of the sacred Scriptures was not the abstract debate of the academy but the concrete pastoral care and nurture of the church. Hence, their use of the Old and New Testaments is shaped by churchly needs.... If modern readers find it difficult to enter the biblical world and to think in its categories, the church fathers provide a helpful entry point. The obfuscating [that is, confusing] veils of the Enlightenment, modernity and postmodernism did not cloud their vision.... [As Robert Louis Wilken has written:] ‘The ... [Old Testament and the New Testament] create a distinctive universe of meaning. As its words took up residence in the minds and hearts of Christian thinkers, it gave them a vocabulary that subtly changed their patterns of thought.... For early Christian thinkers the Bible ... was a book about how to live. God’s word is not something to be looked at but acted on.’ In their use of Scripture in preaching and in pastoral care the church fathers were following the biblical witness in Moses’ preaching and instruction as well as the voice of the prophets in admonition [that is, warning] and encouragement for the faithful in Israel,” concludes Wenthe [Vol XII, pp. xxv, xx-xxi]. That is certainly true for the Book of Lamentations today and for us as Orthodox Christians reading both the Old and New Testaments.

Chapter 4, verse 20, of Lamentations offers a good example of how the Church Fathers passed on to us many insights from Scripture. That verse reads; and I quote: “‘The breath of our nostrils, the LORD’s anointed, was taken in their pits [or in their nets]; he of whom we said, ‘Under his shadow we shall live among the nations,’” that verse concludes. St Augustine wrote in *City of God* 18.33; and I quote: “Jeremiah in prophesying of Christ, says, ‘The breath of our mouth, the Lord Christ, was taken in our sins,’ thus briefly showing both that Christ is our Lord and that he suffered for us,” writes St Augustine. His translation of “the Anointed” as “the Lord Christ” is certainly correct and has been used by the Orthodox scholar David Bentley

Hart in his *The New Testament: A Translation* (Yale University Press, 2017). However, the person who was “captured in their pits” can also refer to King Zedekiah who was captured and blinded by the Babylonians [See Jer 39.4-7; Jer 52.7-11 NASB note on Lam 4.20, p. 1154]. The Church Fathers were often aware of these dual meanings.

For example, St Irenaeus sees different meanings in the word “shadow” in Lamentations, chapter 4, verse 20; and I quote: “‘Under his shadow we shall live among the nations.’ The Scripture announces that, being Spirit of God, Christ was going to become a ... man, also... that he was going to endure the passion... under whose shadow it was said we would live [that is the shadow of the Crucifixion]. And it [also] calls his body a ‘shadow,’ for just as the shadow derives from a body, so the body of Christ derives from his Spirit. But by ‘shadow’ it also signifies the abasement [that is, the lowering and humiliation] ... of his body.... And also, many times, when the Lord passed by... those in the grip of different diseases ... those on whom his shadow fell were delivered [from their diseases],” concludes St Irenaeus.

The Cross of Christ Leads the Church Fathers and Us to Salvation

The Book of Lamentations ends with an affirmation of God’s power, as well as the awareness of the people of Jerusalem that they have sinned and the fear they will continue to be rejected by God. I quote: “Thou, O LORD, rule forever; Your throne is from generation to generation. Why do you forget us forever? Why do You forsake us so long? Restore us to You, O LORD, that we may be restored; Renew our days as of old, Unless You have utterly rejected us and are exceedingly angry with us,” concludes Lamentations.

As a note in *The NASB Bible* [p. 1155] indicates, the prophets Isaiah and Malachi express a similar sadness about the conflict between human sin and God’s love for us. It was clear to the Church Fathers in their study of both the Old Testament and the New Testament, that it was the Cross of Christ that offered the path to salvation. We share that confidence and hope.

Conclusion: Sin, Human Striving and Grace

Our own lamentations for our sins need to be placed beside the Crucifixion of Christ. Like an anonymous 17th century poet we too can become more deeply aware of the Crucifixion, as in the poem “The Call” in which Christ speaks to the heart of every sinner; and I quote: “My blood so red/ For thee was shed,/ Come home again, come home again: My own sweet heart, come home again!/ You’ve gone astray/ Out of your way,/ Come home again, come home again!” concludes that poem in *The Lion Christian Poetry Collection* [p. 296].

However, as the importance of the Crucifixion increases in our lives, there is a danger that we will lament as the disciples lamented before they were aware of the Resurrection. In the poem, “Dead and Buried,” the Christian poet Elizabeth Rooney (1924-1999) expresses the anguish of the early disciples (and of us) if we focus solely on the Crucifixion: and I quote: “And so we took him down/ (Or thought we did),/ Wiped off the sweat and spittle/ From his face,/ Washed the dried blood,/ Threw out the crown of thorns,/ And wrapped him once again/ In waddling clothes./ A tomb can be a cramped,/ Confining place,/ Far smaller than a stable./ We laid him there/ (Or thought we did)./ We were not able/ To comprehend/ The infinite contained./ For us it was the end./ Only the harsh realities/ Of death and stone/ Remained,” she concludes, again in *The Lion Christian Poetry Collection* [p. 308].

It is good that having gained in these Lenten talks a better understanding of how the Crucifixion of Christ has been anticipated in the Old Testament, we can, in the next talk, turn to insights from the Old Testament about the Resurrection of Christ.

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