





PREFACE



One of life's most puzzling problems has been the enigma of the presence, persistence, and power of the evil, pain, and suffering experienced by mortals. 'Why', we all seem to ask, 'is this happening to me? Why is all of this necessary? Will there never be an end to the mental distress which comes from suffering?'

The difficulty is only sharpened all the more for the believer who attempts to explain how a good God can permit hardship and suffering that weigh so heavily on even the most faithful of His children. What can be done to avoid suffering, if anything? What is one to do when he or she is in the midst of such anguish? Can anything be said to comfort and aid a friend or loved one who is deep in the throes of suffering?

The Old Testament contains one of the most comprehensive surveys of the problem of suffering found anywhere. However, the emphasis of those writers fell on the purpose and result of suffering rather than on the definition, origin, or even rationale for suffering. They were fully persuaded that ours is a moral order guided by a merciful, benevolent, and gracious Lord who is actively involved with the current plight and daily affairs of all men, nations, and events. Although believing men and women







GRIEF AND PAIN IN THE PLAN OF GOD

might have grown impatient and perplexed over what appeared to them to be disparities and inequities between the prosperity of the wicked and the grief of the righteous, still the Old Testament was firmly convinced that God's moral order in the governing of the universe would be vindicated.

In the book of Lamentations, more than perhaps anywhere else except for its individualistic expression in the book of Job, we are led into an experience of suffering and communal pain on a scale seldom endured by many individuals or nations. All too frequently the subject of suffering is avoided, or the realities of human pathos and divine involvement are minimized. Lamentations will not yield to any of these cheap 'cures'. Instead of panaceas, it will direct us to the faithfulness and gracious character of our God.



No book of the Bible is more of an orphan book than Lamentations; rarely, if ever, have interpreters chosen to use this book for a Bible study, an expository series of messages, or as a Bible conference textual exposition. Our generation's neglect of this volume has meant that our pastoral work, our caring ministry for believers, and our own ability to find direction in the midst of calamity, pain, and suffering have been seriously truncated and rendered partially or totally ineffective.




The apostle Paul was able to say after three years of ministry at Ephesus that he had not failed to declare to the Ephesian church 'The whole counsel of God' (Acts 20:27). Surely, he must have taught them how to face suffering. And what better way to teach such realities than by leading God's people in a study of this grossly neglected segment of God's word? Can you as a Bible teacher, daily reader of Scripture, or a pastor charged with the spiritual nurture of your people conclude as Paul did that you have not neglected any area of the biblical canon in your own growth or in the development of those under your care? The point is this: Any time we neglect any portion of the full biblical revelation of God – be it ever so minor in comparison to



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some of the central affirmations of our faith – we are providing the enemy of our souls with a seedbed for planting heresies or doubts. Let us then make full proof of our ministries and ‘study to show ourselves approved unto God as workmen not needing to be ashamed’ (cf. 2 Tim. 2:15). May this volume prove helpful as we fulfil this obligation together. I must express my gratitude to our Lord for His help and strength in composing these chapters in the midst of newly-assumed administrative duties, class preparations, and a heavy schedule of speaking. The reward has come already in the way that Lamentations has ministered to my own heart with a whole new vision of the One whose faithfulness never fails.



Numerous other friends have faithfully ministered to bring this project to fruition. Those who deserve special mention are: Philip Rawley, the editor, whose interest in the project kept us going during the slowdowns; my wife Margaret Ruth, my secretary Lois Armstrong, and secretaries Marty Irwin and Sherry Kull, who each typed various sections of the manuscript; and my graduate assistant Timothy Addington, who helped with the proofreading and indexes. I am grateful to our Lord for the significant part each of these choice servants of God played in bringing this manuscript to publication. One final note: Unless otherwise noted, all translations of the biblical text are my own.

