

Lamentations 3:40

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[0 : 0 0] Let us examine our ways and test them, and let us return to the Lord.

Now, as I've already made mention of in introducing the reading, I want us to think about this in the light of the presbytery visiting us to help us examine ourselves as a congregation.

Now, in the questionnaire that I'm encouraging you to fill in, there's a couple of paragraphs introducing what it's all about, and there Derek, who will be leading the team, expresses himself in this way in terms of explaining the purpose.

He says that the purpose of the visit is to learn more about the local situation and provide encouragement, advice, and recommendations for change, if that is deemed necessary.

And he also rightly and helpfully assures us that the visit is not intended to be inquisitorial. So I think sometimes that's the fear.

[1 : 1 1] What are they going to find out and criticize about us? And obviously that word inquisitorial is almost invariably used in that negative sense of a hostile examination or interrogation.

Of course, the word inquisitorial needn't have, though it almost invariably is used in this way, it needn't have that negative connotation.

It can be used in the neutral sense of investigating or inquiring with a view to establishing the truth. And in that sense, my hope is that those who come to visit us and with the help of ourselves as we participate will be able to inquire and examine and arrive at a conclusion that is truthful or reflective of the reality.

I don't think anybody's suggesting there would be any intention to be anything other than truthful, but we can have the good intention to be truthful, but that doesn't guarantee that we'll actually come to a conclusion that accords with reality.

We might not see or discover the truth. And of course, the important thing is that we do discover the truth about ourselves and individually and together as a congregation.

[2 : 3 2] And the Bible certainly commends the practice or discipline of examination. We tend to think of the word almost invariably with the word coming before it, self-examination.

And that is the subject that I want us to turn our attention to this evening. Others can help us in the matter of examination, but the ultimate responsibility lies with ourselves.

And I hope that as we consider the subject, the light of God's word, the verse that we're focusing in on in particular, that as we do that, it will help us even in the matter of filling in that questionnaire.

There, the concern really is the congregation more than each of us individually. Of course, we are the sum of the parts in many regards also.

The text is found there in Lamentations chapter 3 and verse 40. Let us examine our ways and test them and let us return to the Lord.

[3 : 48] And though that is our text, this evening, more than would ordinarily be the case, we'll bring to bear to the subject other relevant texts from other parts of the Bible and will really give very limited consideration to the immediate historical context in which Jeremiah makes this call to the people of God.

We won't ignore that altogether, but we're not going to spend much time at all considering that aspect of the passage. The outline of what I want to say or want to consider is on the sheet that you'll have been given.

We want to think about the grounds and the call to examination. We want to identify or consider the identity of those called to examination. We want to think about the nature of that examination.

And we want to identify and discover what is the outcome of the examination that we're called to. So let's think of these aspects of the subject and begin with the grounds or the call to examination.

I'm suggesting that the grounds of this is hope and love. Now, I think I probably need to explain a little bit more of what I mean when I say the grounds of our examination.

[5 : 10] When I speak about the grounds of examination, I'm referring to what Jeremiah has discovered about God that leads him to call God's people to examine themselves.

In the chapter, we read a pretty significant chunk of the chapter from the beginning right through to where we find our text. And in that reading, we find, described, Jeremiah's own personal distress and affliction under God's chastening hand.

It's a very hard language that is used. He doesn't hold back in describing just the depth of distress that he was in.

If we just remind ourselves of what he says at the very beginning of the chapter, I am the man who has seen affliction by the rod of his wrath. He has driven me away and made me walk in darkness rather than light.

Indeed, he has turned his hand against me again and again all day long. And he continues in that same vein, verse after verse after verse.

[6 : 18] But he discovers, he discovers that even in the midst of the darkness, in great measure self-inflicted darkness, but even in the midst of the darkness, there is hope.

The words that, again, are very familiar from this chapter from verse 21, Yet this I call to mind, and therefore I have hope. Because of the Lord's great love, we are not consumed.

For his compassions never fail. They are new every morning. Great is your faithfulness. And in the light of this discovery concerning the character of God, his love, his great love, his compassion, his faithfulness, It is in the light of this discovery that Jeremiah emits this call to examination.

Indeed, examination and return to the Lord make perfect sense when we are persuaded of God's character, that he is a God of great love, that he is a compassionate God, that his faithfulness is new every morning.

If we didn't know that to be so, then we might wonder, well, what's the point of examination and return? What's the point? Will we be even received if we do return?

[7 : 38] Have we not drifted too far? Are our sins not too great? Why bother? What confidence can we have that any good purpose will be served? But if we're convinced, as Jeremiah was convinced and came to discover concerning the character of God, then that gives us good reason to examine ourselves and, as we do, return to the Lord.

And we need to have this reality concerning who God is to the fore as we examine ourselves, as we do so personally and as we do so corporately.

And we need to have it to the fore because it will help us at the point, if indeed we participate in this, at the point of discovering what we do discover.

And what we discover may be very unpleasant, but however unpleasant, however dark, however even shameful what we discover, to discover that with that conviction that God is compassionate and that God is faithful will make it possible for us to make that discovery and not be cast down altogether and paralyzed into inaction.

As to the call to examination that's issued by the prophet, it is a call that is born of love in some measure. I think we can fairly say Jeremiah's own love for his own people, but in far greater measure, God's love finds expression in Jeremiah's call.

[9 : 21] We mustn't forget, of course, that Jeremiah is a prophet and his call is a prophetic call. It is God's call issued through the prophet. And as a loving call, ultimately it is God's love that is behind this call.

God lovingly continues to call his people to examination. So that is something we can say concerning the grounds of this call to examination.

Let's think a little bit as well about the identity of those called to examination. If we limited ourselves to the text, then we'd have to say that the identity of those called to examination are the people of God corporately, together.

Let us examine our ways and test them. But we know, of course, that that isn't the whole story. And as we draw to bear or bring to bear other parts of the Bible, we know that there's also a call directed to us individually as believers.

As I say, our text is clearly a call to God's people. But even if we limit ourselves to our text or to the passage within which we find it, I think we can also identify a personal aspect in this regard that Jeremiah issues the call, but he includes himself in identification and solidarity.

[10 : 52] He issues it to all the people. Let us examine ourselves. But as the chapter makes clear, prior to this call that he issues to the people, Jeremiah himself has been engaged in personal self-examination.

And it is in that personal self-examination that he's come to these wonderful discoveries concerning who God is, and he wants to share that as he calls others to join with him.

He continues to examine himself. He's not putting himself aside and saying, well, I've already done it, now it's your turn. But nonetheless, he had. And now he would call others to join with him.

Let us examine our ways and test them. And both are necessary. If we're thinking of the identity of those called to examination, both of these are necessary.

There is a call, a personal call, to you as a believer. If you are a Christian, if you are a believer, then God calls you to examine yourself. And he also calls us to examine ourselves.

[12 : 00] So we think of the personal call. Paul, in writing to the Galatians in chapter 6, in verse 4 of that letter, he states, each one should test his own actions.

And then he goes on to develop his line of thought. But my only concern is how very explicitly the apostle says, each one should test his own actions.

A very personal call. We're probably more familiar with the language that we find in the words of institution of the Lord's Supper and Paul's letter to the Corinthians.

And he's writing in the context of participation in the Lord's Supper. But there too, the call to examination is a very personal one. A man ought to examine himself before he eats of the bread and drinks of the cup.

And our concern this evening isn't to ask ourselves, well, what is it that's being asked in terms of the nature of the examination? Simply to focus on the very personal nature of it.

[13 : 04] A man ought to examine himself. So this is a duty that corresponds to each one of us. And others may choose to be careless in this matter.

But that is not your responsibility. If others fail to examine themselves in one regard, well, that's their problem. It's their responsibility. Your responsibility is to examine your own heart, your own life, your own action, your own ways.

But there is also, the corporate aspect. And it is this aspect that's prominent in our text. Let us examine our ways. The visit of our friends from the Presbytery provides an opportunity for corporate or congregational examination.

And it may be that what is the outcome, what is discovered, as we together engage in this, maybe what we'll discover is that we need to continue the process of self-examination.

It's not a case of, well, that's that done. We've ticked that box. We can just forget about it and move on. Maybe what we'll discover is, well, there's more examining to be done to get to the bottom of where we are and where we need to be.

[14 : 21] We're not going to develop further what I'm just about to say, but I think we can also recognize that there's a place for corporate self-examination that goes beyond the bounds of a congregation.

As a denomination, or as the Church of Christ in Scotland, there may well be a place and a need for such examination. Now, what that would look like is a little bit more difficult.

The bigger you get, then the more complicated it gets in many regards. And we're going to leave that just to one side for this evening. Let's move on to the third aspect that I've identified, and that is the nature of the examination called for.

What does it involve? Now, before I do that, there's one other thing I want to say that if I thought about it as I was putting down the outline, I might have put it as a separate point.

But before thinking about the nature of the examination, I also just want to comment on what we might call the occasion for examination. You know, when are we to do this?

[15 : 29] Now, in one sense, there's a very easy answer to that and say, well, it's always a good thing to examine oneself. In that sense, we don't need to identify a specific occasion or circumstance.

It's always a good thing to do. But that said, in the context of our passage, the issue for the people of God in the day in which the prophet is writing and speaking, the issue, without doubt, was sinful rebellion against God.

And in those circumstances, there was a particular need and demand upon God's people to examine themselves, to consider where they were. And maybe we could suggest one other circumstance, one, you might say, specific circumstance that God presents as a prod to examination, to self-examination.

We might call it fruitlessness. I think we can think of that in our own individual lives as Christians, fruitlessness. But also, as we think of ourselves as a congregation, fruitlessness, I think, also should be something that would lead us to concern and to say, well, we really need to examine ourselves and discover, well, why is this the case?

Let me just read verses in the prophet Haggai that I think confirms that fruitlessness is also something that would lead us, could be the occasion or an occasion for examination.

[16 : 57] What does the prophet say in the first chapter of Haggai, verses 5 to 7? It's what God says through the prophet. Now, this is what the Lord Almighty says, give careful thought to your ways.

That's a call, surely, to self-examination. Give careful thought to your ways. You have planted much, but have harvested little. You eat, but never have enough.

You drink, but never have your fill. You put on clothes, but are not warm. You earn wages, only to put them in a purse with holes in it. This is what the Lord Almighty says, give careful thought to your ways.

Fruitlessness. And I think we can, of course, I think we can take these words even at the material level as they're presented by the prophet.

But, of course, we can also identify a spiritual application where there is an absence of spiritual fruit. And we don't beat ourselves about the head, but we say, well, what's going on?

[17 : 59] Why is that? Why is it that there isn't the harvest that we would long for and that we would desire to see? Why is it that we do this and we do that, but there isn't the outcome, there isn't the fruit that we would seek?

Why is that? Well, let's examine ourselves to try and discover what the reasons are. Moving then to the nature of examination, or what does it involve?

Well, in self-examination, there's certain things that, in our text, it describes what we need to do. Let us examine our ways and test them.

There is a sense in which this examination will provide the knowledge that we need. We examine ourselves in order to discover something.

But I think we also have to be conscious that sometimes even when we do examine ourselves, even when there is a genuine endeavor on our part to examine ourselves, we're limited in our capacity to see what needs to be seen.

[19 : 10] There is often, and I think this is true of Christians, we can be afflicted with a measure of spiritual blindness. It's not absolute. Our eyes have been opened.

And yet, there can still be a measure of spiritual blindness so that when we examine ourselves, or at least make some effort to examine ourselves, we still don't see what we need to see. But be assured that help is available.

God can help us in this matter of examining ourselves in order to discover where we are, to have the knowledge that we need. Listen to Job speaking to God in chapter 13.

And we're not going to read the verses that precede what we're going to read, but in the previous verses it's very clear that Job is addressing God. And what does he say? Well, he says this in that verse, How many wrongs and sins have I committed?

Show me my offense and my sin. Job recognizes that in this matter of self-examination, it's not a process in where we work alone, where we, you know, look in on ourselves and try and find out what's going on in our heart, our dark heart.

[20 : 23] We do this work with God's help. We ask him to help us. Show me my offense and my sin. So with God's help and in the light of God's word, we examine ourselves.

We examine our ways, to use the very language of the text. Let us examine our ways, the life we're living, the motivations that are driving us, the behavior that we're indulging in, the words that we use, the thoughts that we think.

Examine these things to come to discover where we are and where we are falling short. There are two verbs used here in the text.

Let us examine our ways and test them. I don't think, I don't claim to have as deep an understanding of the verbs and their possible meanings to state this with complete confidence, but I don't think we should draw too great a distinction between the two verbs that are employed, examining and testing.

I think rather we should see these two verbs being used simply to emphasize the importance and necessity of the task that is being commended. Examine our ways, test our ways.

[21 : 42] Now at a practical level, this activity, this spiritual exercise or discipline takes time, it takes concentration, it takes focus. And these are the very things that we can, I think, if we're honest with ourselves.

And surely in self-examination that's indispensable, to be honest with ourselves. If we're honest with ourselves, these are the very things, time, focus, concentration, that we can sometimes go weeks and months, maybe sometimes even years, not doing, not focusing on, not ensuring that this is something that we lay hold of, that we give the time, that we concentrate our attention, that we focus our mind on this matter.

We can trundle along, never pausing to consider, never pausing to examine, never pausing to test. Maybe somewhat fearful of what we'll discover, and so we just carry on, and carry on, and weeks go into months and into years.

So that's what the examination involves. It involves examining ourselves with a view to discovering. It involves testing our ways. Then finally, what is the outcome of the examination?

Well, the outcome, we trust, will be that we will discover where we're at, but it doesn't end there, of course. That then must lead on to action.

[23 : 11] We discover, we do, and we enjoy, to use the three words that I've scribbled down there in the outline. The outcome of the examination is that we discover where we are, but this discovery must be followed by action.

The call of Jeremiah to the people is to return to the Lord. Let us examine our ways and test them, and let us return to the Lord. We must do the same, and this return, as the verses that follow make very clear, involves confession of sin and resolve that we would live a life that is pleasing to God.

Let us examine our ways and test us. Let us return to the Lord. Let us lift up our hearts and our hands to God in heaven and say, we have sinned and rebelled, and you have not forgiven.

Not forgiven, because no forgiveness had been sought, but now, it is a seeking after forgiveness. So we discover, and we do, but then also, and with this we close, we enjoy, we enjoy the welcome, the reception that God grants to those who return.

It's heartwarming and revealing that Jeremiah takes it as a given that if the people return, the Lord will receive them. That doesn't need to be debated or discussed.

[24 : 38] It's simply understood that if there is, on the part of the people, heartfelt repentance and a return to the Lord, then, of course, they will be received.

Jeremiah himself has already discovered that the Lord's compassions are new every morning, that great is His faithfulness. We don't need to return like the prodigal son returned, unsure as to the reception that we will receive.

The Lord is waiting with open arms and ready to slay the fattened calf in joyous celebration. That's the outcome, the happy, joyful outcome of a serious process of self-examination, a return to the Lord and being welcomed and embraced by Him.

So, let us examine our ways and test them and let us return to the Lord. Let's pray. Heavenly Father, we are conscious of how we are quite capable of reading the Bible, of being presented with a call that is clear, that is easy for us to understand.

The concepts aren't complicated for us. We can process the information. We understand what is being said in the simple reading of Your Word. and yet we recognize that how often has it been true of us that that understanding has not led to action on our part.

[26 : 19] We confess that and pray that You would forgive us for that and pray that this evening as You have spoken to us through Your Word, we would, each of us, respond.

That we would begin individually, each of us listening to these words directed to our own hearts and that we would examine our ways and test them and return to You.

We pray also that You would help us in what maybe in some ways is a more complex task and that is that together we would know what it is to examine our ways and test them and return to the Lord.

We don't pretend to know really all that that involves or what that might look like and that is why we ask for Your help and direction and these things we pray in Jesus' name.

Amen.