

Lamentations 3:39

Authorized King James Version (KJV)

Wherefore doth a living man complain, a man for the punishment of his sins?

Analysis

A rhetorical question challenges self-pity: "Wherefore doth a living man complain, a man for the punishment of his sins?" (mah yitonen adam chai gever al-cheta'av, מַה־יִתּוֹן אָדָם חַי גָּבֵר עַל־חֶטְאָיו). The term *chai* (חַי, "living") is significant—the very fact of continued existence demonstrates mercy. Under strict justice, sinners deserve death (Romans 6:23); life itself is grace. The word *yitonen* (יִתּוֹן, "complain") carries negative connotation—not legitimate lament (which Lamentations models) but grumbling, murmuring against God. Numbers 11:1 and 14:27-29 show God's severe response to Israel's complaining in the wilderness. The distinction is crucial: honest expression of pain to God is biblical; complaining against God's justice is sin. The phrase "for the punishment of his sins" (al-cheta'av, עַל־חֶטְאָיו) provides the answer to the rhetorical question. When suffering results from our own sin, complaint is inappropriate. Proverbs 19:3 observes: "The foolishness of man perverteth his way: and his heart fretteth against the LORD." We bring consequences on ourselves, then blame God. The proper response is confession (verse 40-42), not complaint. This verse doesn't address innocent suffering (Job, Psalms 73) but deserved judgment—a critical distinction.

Historical Context

Complaining marked Israel's wilderness generation. Despite miraculous deliverance from Egypt, provision of manna, water from rocks, and God's presence in the pillar of cloud and fire, they repeatedly murmured against God and Moses (Exodus 15:24, 16:2-3, 17:3, Numbers 14:2, 16:41). This complaining spirit

revealed unbelief and ingratitude. The exile generation risked similar attitudes. Having experienced prophesied judgment for covenant breaking, they might blame God for severity or unfairness. The proverb quoted in Ezekiel 18:2—"The fathers have eaten sour grapes, and the children's teeth are set on edge"—reflects this complaint. People blamed previous generations while minimizing their own guilt. But Ezekiel 18 refutes this, emphasizing individual responsibility. Lamentations 3:39 makes similar point: living people experiencing judgment's consequences have no grounds for complaint because sin deserves death. That anyone survives demonstrates mercy. Archaeological evidence shows that while Jerusalem was destroyed and many died, a remnant survived—both those exiled to Babylon and those left in the land under Gedaliah's governorship. The attitude contrasts sharply with genuine lament. David's psalms often cry out in anguish (Psalm 13, 22, 42-43, 77), yet always return to trust in God's character. Job maintained his integrity through horrific loss. The difference lies in whether one accuses God of injustice versus honestly bringing pain to Him while ultimately submitting to His wisdom and sovereignty.

Related Passages

John 3:16 — God's love and salvation

Romans 10:9 — Confession and belief for salvation

Romans 1:17 — The righteous shall live by faith

Hebrews 11:1 — Definition of faith

Study Questions

1. How does recognizing that 'living' itself is evidence of God's mercy transform our perspective on hardship and consequences of sin?
2. What's the difference between biblical lament (crying out to God) and sinful complaining (grumbling against God), and how can we discern which we're doing?
3. When is suffering 'for the punishment of sins' versus innocent suffering, and how should our response differ between these situations?

4. In what areas might you be complaining against God for consequences that actually result from your own choices, and what would confession look like?

Interlinear Text

מָה אֵד מִתְאַגֵּן עַל גֶּבֶר
H4100 complain man Wherefore doth a living a man H5921
H596 H120 H2416 H1397

לְפָנָיו:

for the punishment of his sins

H2399

Additional Cross-References

Proverbs 19:3 (Parallel theme): The foolishness of man perverteth his way: and his heart fretteth against the LORD.

Micah 7:9 (Sin): I will bear the indignation of the LORD, because I have sinned against him, until he plead my cause, and execute judgment for me: he will bring me forth to the light, and I shall behold his righteousness.

Jeremiah 30:15 (Sin): Why criest thou for thine affliction? thy sorrow is incurable for the multitude of thine iniquity: because thy sins were increased, I have done these things unto thee.