

Lamentations 4:17

Authorized King James Version (KJV)

As for us, our eyes as yet failed for our vain help: in our watching we have watched for a nation that could not save us.

Analysis

False hope remembered: **"As for us, our eyes as yet failed for our vain help: in our watching we have watched for a nation that could not save us."** The Hebrew *odeinah tikhlena eineinu el-ezratenu havel bemitsapenu tsippinu el-goy lo yoshi'a* confesses misplaced trust. *Tikhlena eineinu* (תִּכְלֶנָּה עֵינֵינוּ, "our eyes failed") indicates exhausting watchfulness that yields no result. *Havel* (הֶבֶל, "vain, breath, vapor") describes empty, worthless hope.

"In our watching we have watched" uses repetition (*bemitsapenu tsippinu*, בְּמִצָּפֵנוּ וְצִפִּינוּ) emphasizing intense, sustained vigilance. They looked desperately for military aid. "A nation that could not save" (*goy lo yoshi'a*, גּוֹי לֹא יוֹשִׁיעַ) refers to Egypt—the foreign ally Judah trusted instead of God. *Yasha* (יָשָׁע, "save, deliver") is ironic—only God saves, yet they looked to Egypt.

Theologically, this verse illustrates the futility of trusting human alliances over divine covenant. Isaiah 31:1-3 condemned this: "Woe to them that go down to Egypt for help...but they look not unto the Holy One of Israel, neither seek the LORD...Now the Egyptians are men, and not God; and their horses flesh, and not spirit." When believers trust created things rather than Creator, disappointment is inevitable. Only God saves; all other hopes prove vain.

Historical Context

The historical referent is Judah's alliance with Egypt during Babylon's siege. King Zedekiah rebelled against Babylon, trusting Egyptian support (Ezekiel 17:11-15). Jeremiah consistently opposed this policy, urging submission to Babylon as God's appointed judgment (Jeremiah 27:12-15, 38:17-23). But political leaders preferred Egyptian military might over prophetic counsel.

Egypt did send an army toward Jerusalem, causing Babylon to temporarily lift the siege (Jeremiah 37:5). This created false hope—watchers on Jerusalem's walls saw Egyptian forces approaching and believed deliverance had come. But Jeremiah 37:7-8 prophesied: "Thus saith the LORD, the God of Israel...Pharaoh's army, which is come forth to help you, shall return to Egypt into their own land. And the Chaldeans shall come again, and fight against this city, and take it, and burn it with fire."

This prophecy fulfilled exactly. Egypt's army withdrew without engaging Babylon seriously (Jeremiah 37:11). The hoped-for savior proved unable or unwilling to save. Jerusalem's watchmen, who strained their eyes looking for Egyptian relief, watched in vain. The siege resumed, and eventually walls were breached (2 Kings 25:3-4). The lesson: human alliances fail; only God delivers. Yet this lesson remains difficult to learn—every generation is tempted to trust visible military or political power rather than invisible divine promises.

Related Passages

James 2:17 — Faith and works

Romans 1:17 — The righteous shall live by faith

Study Questions

1. What does 'our eyes failed for our vain help' teach about the exhausting futility of trusting wrong sources for deliverance?

2. How does watching for 'a nation that could not save' illustrate the common temptation to trust visible military/political power over God?
3. In what ways do Christians today sometimes 'watch for a nation that cannot save'—trusting political solutions over spiritual realities?
4. How do Isaiah 31:1-3 and Psalm 146:3 ('Put not your trust in princes') connect to this verse's warning?

Interlinear Text

עוֹד יִנָּה H5750	תִּכְלָ יִנָּה H3615	עֵינֵי יִנּוּ H5869	אֶל H413	עֲזָרָתִי נֹ H5833	הֶ בָּל H1892
	as yet failed	As for us our eyes		help	for our vain
בְּצִפּוֹתֵי נֹ H6836	צִפּוּ יִנּוּ H6822	אֶל H413	גַּ וִי H1471	לֹ אֶ H3808	יֹשָׁעַ: H3467
in our watching	we have watched		for a nation		that could not save

Additional Cross-References

Ezekiel 29:16 (Parallel theme): And it shall be no more the confidence of the house of Israel, which bringeth their iniquity to remembrance, when they shall look after them: but they shall know that I am the Lord GOD.

Isaiah 20:5 (Parallel theme): And they shall be afraid and ashamed of Ethiopia their expectation, and of Egypt their glory.

2 Kings 24:7 (Parallel theme): And the king of Egypt came not again any more out of his land: for the king of Babylon had taken from the river of Egypt unto the river Euphrates all that pertained to the king of Egypt.