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Lamentations 2:19, New Living Translation

*¹⁹ Rise during the night and cry out.
Pour out your hearts like water to the Lord.
Lift up your hands to him in prayer,
pleading for your children,
for in every street
they are faint with hunger.*

Your father who sees in secret: *Madeleines for dessert.*

When I was a boy, I picked citrus, lemons and oranges, with migrant workers in southern California. I was eleven to fourteen years old. I would ride my bike to the shacks that Sunkist provided for the migrant workers from Mexico, getting there around dawn. We would climb into the back of canvas-covered trucks. We would sit facing each other along two benches that ran down the sides of each truck. At the beginning of the picking season, each of us was issued a large canvas sack with a shoulder strap, a pair of clippers, and two pairs of long leather gloves. The canvas bag was quite big, but I wasn't, and so I rarely filled it more than 1/3 before climbing down my ladder to empty it into a crate. It would take me several trips up and down my ladder to fill a crate, and so, over the course of an hour I could fill just one of them, earning myself 40 cents. The people I picked

with represented a broad range of ages, from my age to well over seventy. Most of the pickers sent virtually everything they earned back to Mexico to feed siblings, children, and grandchildren. The migrant workers lived in tumbledown shacks with outhouses located nearby. I'll get back to this.

We're going to look at a quote from Lamentations. This is a short book, written entirely as poetry to be read or sung. It consists of five poems, sometimes called dirges. They mourn the tragedy that befell Israel when the Babylonians attacked Israel, killed thousands, and destroyed almost the entire city of Jerusalem, including the Temple, in 587 B.C. The Babylonians also destroyed the small settlements around the city, as well as some that were further from Jerusalem. Many people, including important and respected leaders, were deported into exile in Babylon to keep the Israelites from forming any sort of resistance against the Babylonians. The trip, by foot, was 700 miles, and more Israelites died along the way. While the history of the Babylonian invasion and exile is told in Jeremiah and 2nd Kings, Lamentations describes the horrible emotional impact on the Chosen People. The goal of the five poems, which form five chapters, is to ask how this could have possibly befallen the People of God. It tells of the suffering of the people, and it warns about the consequences of rebelling against God. The book also offers a path to repentance and forgiveness.

There is a reference in 2nd Chronicles that says this:

²⁵ The prophet Jeremiah composed funeral songs for Josiah, and to this day choirs still sing these sad songs about his death. These songs of sorrow have become a tradition and are recorded in The Book of Laments.

This led people for many centuries to conclude that the prophet Jeremiah personally wrote Lamentations, but in truth, we have no idea who wrote the Book of Lamentations. We do believe that the entire book is the work of one writer. The book tells the story from the perspective of someone living in Jerusalem during the period when the exiles finally returned to Jerusalem. It was a time of economic disaster. People were starving, in part because farms had been abandoned when their owners and workers were deported as prisoners. The poems were created for use in worship services and were probably sung. Some have conjectured that they were once a part of a much larger collection, but that the rest of the collection has been lost. The Psalms, which are also poems, are sometimes classified into these categories: Psalms of trust in God, Psalms of praise of God, Psalms that are laments about terrible situations in life, Psalms of thanksgiving to God, Psalms on how to live godly lives, Psalms that describe the life of Israel's kings, and Psalms to be used in formal liturgies. Lamentations consists of poems to be used in liturgies and they were also, you guessed it, meant as laments. They talk of the despair of the people who have had to survive

the Babylonian invasion and the resulting forced exile of residents of Israel; these sufferers include both those who were carried away and those who were allowed to stay. A lament might have these components: a statement of the tragedy that has happened, a statement of some sin that might have brought God's wrath in the form of an invading army, a request of God to intercede, and a statement of trust in and praise for God. Christians often use Laments during Holy Week, so that we can focus on how Jesus suffered before and during his crucifixion.

The quote we're looking at is from the second chapter, the second lament. This is a lament over the anger and vengeance of God. In the first lament, the people of God have admitted that they have not lived the way God has commanded them. The results of these sins are then described in the second lament. The second lament can be broken into three parts: 1. Verses 1-17, what has occurred in Jerusalem because of these sins, 2. Verses 18-19, a call for mercy from God, and 3., Verses 20-22, a request that God examine just what has indeed happened. Our quote consists of verse 19, part of the second section, a call for mercy. This is how it reads from the New Living Translation, which I chose because it is a correct translation, and it is also quite readable:

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This is one reason why I like Lamentations so much. While the book focuses on the harm done to the Israelite people as a whole and on Old Testament themes of sinning against God, accepting judgement, and finding hope again, it conveys the special harm that comes to the most innocent, children. The Israelites were attacked by the Babylonians as a punishment by God, but the author understands that they have, as a result, harmed their own people. Kids are wandering the streets, with no parents, starving. There is famine. The Israelites had a somewhat unusual relationship with their children. While it's true that children were not held in high regard from a social perspective, that they were kept out of site and not encouraged to mingle with adults in public, they were nonetheless deeply treasured by their families. Remember the three major promises of the Old Covenant, often called the Mosaic Covenant. God would give them their own homeland, the Promised Land. They would be given God's blessings. And third, the Israelites would be granted progeny, children to keep their culture and their faith alive. These are people who did not have a fully developed belief in an afterlife. The concept of Heaven evolved over a period of time. So early on, they were particularly focused on God protecting them as a people here on this planet.

Children were thus an overriding concern. In the Israelite tradition, children were in a sense a form of eternal life. Thus, the Israelites and later the Jews were extraordinarily devoted to protecting children.

I'd like to get back to my days picking citrus. Children tend to be very valuable to any people who survive on the margins, who find themselves struggling to survive. The migrant workers I picked with came to southern California under a contract that allowed them to enter the U.S. during harvesting season, pick fruit, and then go home. During the months that they were in the U.S., they worked six days a week, often from before sunrise to after sunset. They were given a place to live, albeit a rather crude place that none of us would want to live in. They were also given one hot meal a day, delivered in the orchards. It was, of course, Mexican food. Since I wasn't a migrant worker, I was not covered by their contract. So, I was forced to live in my parents' house and suffer with its indoor plumbing, air conditioning, and full kitchen instead of enjoying the luxury of the migrants' shacks. The conditions of my hiring also meant that I wasn't supposed to eat any of the food that was delivered in the orchards. But the very first day I picked, when we broke for lunch and the workers sat down under the trees to eat, the men called me over to eat. I had brought a sack lunch. I held it up and pointed at it. That didn't pacify them. They kept motioning for me to

come over and get a bowlful of food. I then started saying that I wasn't covered by their contract with Sunkist, that I was just an hourly worker. The point, of course, was that the food was portioned according to the number of pickers under the migrant contract. If they fed me, they were giving away part of their food – and their food was a significant part of their pay. In the end they almost dragged me over there and made me eat. A couple of the older men smiled at me as I sat down, making sure I felt welcome.

Let's step back and talk about having a special place in your heart for children, for doing what you can to protect and guide them. It's a form of giving. Maybe it's the most important form of giving. And who gives the most in general? When people don't have much, when they live in deprivation, they are more likely to give. They don't consider themselves above others, and so they don't look through people, as if they weren't there. They have empathy for those in need - especially for children. So, it's not surprising that our lament points out that the children are faint with hunger. Similarly, those men would never have imagined not sharing their food with me. The poor share from very little, while the rich often refuse to share their wealth. There is a vast amount of unused, or hidden wealth in the U.S., assets that are simply sitting in the hands of the ultra-rich, not being used. There is apparently \$10 trillion in unrealized capital gains

held by the super wealthy. About the same amount of money is hidden in overseas accounts. While people go hungry, while people go homeless and without medical care, unimaginable amounts of money are simply being passed from generation to generation, unused. Imagine what a fraction of it could do for children – if people only cared.

Giving is of course a primary Christian principle, and we don't limit our giving to kids. Let's look at Paul's second letter to the Corinthians, Chapter 9:6-7:

⁶ Remember this—a farmer who plants only a few seeds will get a small crop. But the one who plants generously will get a generous crop. ⁷ You must each decide in your heart how much to give. And don't give reluctantly or in response to pressure. "For God loves a person who gives cheerfully."

2nd Corinthians deals to a significant extent with the need for Christians to be giving people. Here is a critical distinction. Paul argues that God doesn't favor Christians because they give; rather, giving indicates whether we are indeed Christians. It's a necessary attribute, not something special that makes one Christian stand out above another Christian. The men I picked with were almost all believers. There is no question that these men shared their food quite cheerfully. Perhaps they were better Christians than many well-off people who call themselves Christians. And protecting children spiritually is one way in which we protect them. Remember that in the Gospel of Matthew, Jesus said this:

⁵ *“And anyone who welcomes a little child like this on my behalf is welcoming me.*
⁶ *But if you cause one of these little ones who trusts in me to fall into sin, it would be better for you to have a large millstone tied around your neck and be drowned in the depths of the sea.”*

One day I came home from picking with my canvas bag partially filled with oranges; I stole some fruit routinely so that my mother wouldn't have to buy it. That night I told my parents that the men often insisted on picking the tops of the trees assigned to boys and did not let us go to the tops of our thirty-foot ladders. I went on to say that when these men did this for us, they would chalk our numbers on the crates, so that the boys got paid for the fruit that was picked for us from the tops of our trees. I noted that we were paid by the crate, not the hour. My father said that clearly, they were very good men, that they understood what was important in the eyes God. They lived for taking care of others and they didn't mind at all looking after kids who weren't theirs. They may not get paid for the food they give you, he said, and they may not get paid for the time they spend picking the tops of your trees, but they sure as hell will get paid by God for the things that they do for children. My father was, of course, right.

Here are the first four verses of Chapter 6 of the Gospel of Matthew:

6 *“Beware of practicing your righteousness before other people in order to be seen by them, for then you will have no reward from your Father who is in heaven.*

² *“Thus, when you give to the needy, sound no trumpet before you, as the hypocrites do in the synagogues and in the streets, that they may be praised by*

others. Truly, I say to you, they have received their reward. ³ But when you give to the needy, do not let your left hand know what your right hand is doing, ⁴ so that your giving may be in secret. And your Father who sees in secret will reward you.

As Christians, we must make caring for other people, especially children, a core aspect of our daily lives. My mother was particularly concerned that I thank these men for all that they did for me. She said that they may have racked up lots of points with God, but that we don't let God do our work for us. My mother knew that we must acknowledge good people, and affirm their values, and embrace them as living the way Jesus teaches us to live. I told my parents that I would be sure to thank those men again. My mother told me to wake her before I left for the Sunkist facility in the morning. I did so, and when I woke my mother up, she went into the kitchen. I could see that she had been up late, baking something. She said that she had no idea what kind of sweets people in Mexico ate. But she was French, and so she had made Madeleines, she told me, a traditional cookie that she made with orange. She had made a lot of them. As I rode away on my bike before sunrise to go pick, my canvas sack was already partly filled. After the migrant workers shared their lunch with me again, I handed out dessert: French cookies that my mother had made with the oranges I had stolen the day before. I am sure that God the Father saw them in secret and duly rewarded them. But it was a lot of fun to personally acknowledge and encourage their kindness.