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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.*

2nd Corinthians 9:6–7, New Living Translation

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."

French orange cookies.

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 not long after 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. Many of us were working in violation of child labor laws. The migrant workers lived in tumbledown shacks with outhouses located nearby. I'll get back to this. There's something I want to say about the men with whom I picked.

Our two Bible quotes today together make up a mercifully short reading. Our first quote comes from Lamentations. This is a very short book, written entirely as poetry to be read or sung. It consists of five poems. They mourn the tragedy that befell Israel when the Babylonians conquered Israel and destroyed almost the entire city of Jerusalem in 587 B.C. Many people, including important and respected leaders, were deported into exile in Babylon in order to keep the Israelites from forming any sort of resistance against the Babylonians. 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 overall goal of the five poems, which form five chapters, is to ask how this could

have possibly befallen the people of God. The entire book is the work of one writer. 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 it is now believed that this is mistaken – and in truth, we have no idea who wrote the Book of Lamentations. 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, 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 components like these: 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.

Our first quote comes from the second chapter, the second lament. This one 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 first 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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It's pretty clear what it means. It focuses on the impact on children. They are wandering the streets, starving. There is famine. And like any people, the Israelites were most concerned about their kids. While it's true that children were not held in high regard from a social perspective, that they were kept out of sight and not encouraged to mingle with adults in public, they were nonetheless deeply treasured by their families. Remember that one of the three major promises of the Mosaic or Old Covenant was that the Israelites would be granted progeny, children to keep their culture and their faith alive. To a people who did not have full belief in an afterlife, this was of course, an overriding concern. In the Israelite and later Jewish tradition, children, grandchildren, and in general one's descendants were in a sense their form of eternity, of a life ever-after.

I'd like to get back to my days picking citrus. The migrant workers 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 shabby 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 with its indoor plumbing, air conditioning, and full kitchen instead of the migrants' shacks. (This is a joke, please laugh.). It 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 everyone 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 a day picker. A couple of the men then got up and walked over to me and held their hands out, motioning for me to let them help me to my feet. I tried again to say no. 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, I was not able to get them to back down. They just about dragged me over there and made me eat.

When people don't have much, when they live in deprivation, they are more likely to give. They have empathy for those in need. They don't consider themselves above others, and so they don't look through people, as if they weren't there. To those men, I was a valuable human, not just some kid picking citrus. They would never have imagined not sharing their food with me. The poor share from very little, while the rich refuse to share from their vast wealth.

Let's look at our second quote, from Paul's second letter to the Corinthians:

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." It's obvious what this means. 2nd Corinthians deals to a significant extent with the need for Christians to be giving people. 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 believer. So, perhaps the men I picked with were better Christians than many well-off people who call themselves Christians.

I have a little bit more to say about the men which whom I picked citrus and about sharing food. One day I came home from picking with my canvas bag

partially filled with oranges; I did this routinely so that my mother would have to buy them. That night I happened to mention to both of 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. My father, who always looked after people who seemed to need help, said that this was how a man should behave. 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 top of our trees. I noted that this was extremely generous of them: they were paid by the crate, not the hour. My father nodded and 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.

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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 they needed to know that they were appreciated. My mother said that people can't just live for the knowledge that God will love and reward them – they need people to show them that they are needed, that they are valued, and that they are loved. If nothing else, if they are not appreciated, they may stop helping other kids. I told my parents that I would be sure to thank them again. Then she told me to wake her up before I left for the Sunkist facility in the morning. Then, the next day, when I rode away on my bike before sunrise to go pick, my canvas sack was already partially filled. After the migrant workers shared their lunch with me, I handed out desert: French orange cookies that my mother had made with the oranges I had stolen the day before. Please pray briefly with me.

God, please help us remember that giving, sharing, being generous, not being protective of what we have isn't optional. It's a necessary part of being a Christian. And God, let us never forget that when others go out their way to show that they live according to your ways, that they emulate the life of Christ, let us always acknowledge them, uplift them, and affirm their godliness. Let us help others deepen their faith by showing our appreciation. Let us help people live out the joy that comes with being a true Christian. Amen.