

Lamentations 3:1-24 Finding Hope During Hardships Falls Ch. AM 10/29/2023

The sorrows of the city became the sorrows of Jeremiah, the weeping prophet. Notice the perspective of Lamentations chapter 3 is individual and personal – there are almost 40 references to I, me, and my, such as “I am the man who has seen affliction” (v.1), many examples of what God has done to me (v.2-18), and what my soul says about God! (v.24) Jeremiah seems to be the man who was delegated by God to carry in his person all that the people were experiencing. Their sorrows were Jeremiah’s sorrows, and so he became The Weeping Prophet. He points us to Christ, the man of sorrows, who carried our sorrows. (Is. 53:3-4) In Jeremiah’s personal response to suffering and to God, here he offers a guide to each person in the city how to cope. That brings us to our main point:

During hardships, we are lovingly led by our faithful God to a breakthrough of finding hope again.

Catastrophes in our community cause suffering for many, and that suffering is always felt by individual persons. We need help relating to God in hard times.

1. Hardships feel dark, overwhelming, and hopeless! (v.1-18)

The format of chapter 3, is like chapters 1 and 2: one section for each of the 22 letters of the Hebrew alphabet. Chapter 3 is unlike the other chapters because here each letter gets 3 verses. These exactly 66 verses have an elaborate structure!

The content of chapter 3 is still on the topic of suffering, but it starts off individual, and moves back to communal. The individual suffering of Jeremiah points ahead to the individual suffering of Jesus FOR the community, and so this chapter has similarities with other such classic passages, such as The Suffering Servant in Isaiah 53 and The Forsaken One in Psalm 22.

The chapter opens with his statement, “*I am the man who has seen affliction...*” Within the suffering of the city, there was the suffering of the man Jeremiah. He provided us with a series of pictures of his distress at the hand of God. Verse 1, he was under the rod of God’s wrath, verse 2, he was being driven into darkness. Verse 3, God’s hand was turned against him. Verse 4, God had caused him sickness, which was so severe it would likely result in his death.

When we remember that the prophet Jeremiah had been thrown into a well (Jeremiah chapters 37-38), we better understand Jeremiah’s poetic hinting here in Lamentations 3, verses 5-9. Verse 5, God has enveloped me with bitterness, verse 6, God made me dwell in darkness, verse 7, God walled me about so that I cannot escape, verse 8, though Jeremiah’s reaction was to pray and to call to God for help, there were times when even prayer was blocked for him! Again this lines up with the Book of Jeremiah, in which there were times when God forbid Jeremiah from praying for the people, such as in Jeremiah chapters 7, 11, and 14. We get what Jeremiah is writing here in verse 8, that God shut out his prayer. Lastly, verse 9 he hints at the well or cistern, that God has blocked my ways with blocks of stones.

Overall, he gave repeated mention of darkness, being trapped, and physical pain leading to deep frustration, approaching despair. If it was not when Jeremiah was physically in the cistern, it was a time when it felt just like it.

God did not answer Jeremiah's prayer. So now Jeremiah descends further through a set of changing pictures in which God becomes more violent against Jeremiah. God was the predator, Jeremiah was the prey, as in verses 10 -11, that God was first a bear and then a lion who was lying in wait for me, hiding, tore me to pieces and has made me desolate. Next in verses 12-13, suddenly God became a hunter with bow and arrow, and Jeremiah became the target. God's arrows in verse 13 went into Jeremiah's kidneys, and today's poets would say the arrow pierced my heart, having both a physical and an emotional meaning. Then in verse 14 Jeremiah wrote of laughter and taunts of people all day long, which matches the experiences of Jeremiah in chapter 16 of his book.

Again, from the Book of Jeremiah, we know that the prophet Jeremiah got very discouraged and down, which matches verse 15, where Jeremiah was forced to eat repulsive food, such as the bitter plant called wormwood, a menu that seemed poetically well-paired for his bitter experiences. In verse 16, God made him grind his teeth on gravel and lay down in ashes. Here the hopelessness of the writer reaches rock bottom when he wrote that he lost peace or well-being that should always belong to him as one who remains in covenant relationship with God. In verse 17, he wrote, "*my soul is bereft of peace,*" and sadly Jeremiah testified "*I have forgotten what happiness is.*" He could not go on anymore, and his hope had died. In his hopelessness and in his darkest hour, Jeremiah wrote what seemed like his final words seemingly from the bottom of the well, in verse 18, "*so I say, 'My endurance has perished; so has my hope from The LORD.'*" That was our first point - hardships feel dark, overwhelming, and hopeless! God knows. Jeremiah knows. Jesus knows. We ought to be thankful for this being in the Bible, because it means that our God understands us!

2. Breakthrough to hope: a) we appeal to God to see our hardships b) we call to mind the truth about God, c) from within our hardships, we re-interpret, daring to hope again. (v.19-21)

There is a change in the poem, as we go forward from verse 18 to verse 19. It seems as if in the hopeless 'last line' of Jeremiah, if you noticed the last word, the very mention of the name of The LORD had a big impact on the despairing outlook of the poet Jeremiah! In verse 19, still Jeremiah could never forget those struggles, the taste of the bitter wormwood and the gall, the bitter tastes matching the bitterness of his life's struggles, but The LORD his God would not allow His weeping prophet to descend further into the well of despair.

So, God prompted Jeremiah with a breakthrough prayer that turned his bitterness into a prayer that Jeremiah would not only remember the bitterness, but also praying that GOD would remember Jeremiah's bitter hardships! Listen carefully to verse 19, where Jeremiah asks God to "*Remember my affliction and my wanderings, the wormwood and the gall! (Jeremiah continues the breakthrough into verse 20) My soul continually remembers it and is bowed down within me. But this I call to mind, and therefore I have hope.*" What is this that Jeremiah called to mind? That God remembered his affliction. The fact that God knew, God saw, God remembered his pain, yes, even the bitter taste of the wormwood and the gall.

- a) we appeal to God to see our hardships
- b) we call to mind the truth about God,
- c) from within our hardships, we re-interpret, daring to hope again.

That brings us to our third point, which is Jeremiah's re-interpretation!

3. Re-interpretation: The LORD is all we need for hope and comfort during our hardships. (v. 22-24)

What is the key turning point here that moved Jeremiah from a downward spiral of despairing to an upward and hopeful soul? It is Jeremiah calling to mind something that gave hopeless Jeremiah hope again. In the next verse Jeremiah tells us poetically what he called to mind that made all the difference, and that caused Jeremiah to turn the corner. Verse 22, "*The steadfast love of The LORD never ceases; His mercies never come to an end; (verse 23) they are new every morning; great is Your faithfulness. (verse 24) 'The LORD is my portion,' says my soul, 'therefore I will hope in Him.'*"

What did Jeremiah call to his mind? Jeremiah called to mind three verses that matched one letter of the Hebrew alphabet. One set of 3 verses. This whole package of truth is what Jeremiah focused on.

Namely what? The unending love of his covenant God! The unending commitment of God to provide fresh mercy every morning. The greatness of the faithfulness of God. The source of Jeremiah's hope was the LORD God alone. All that Jeremiah needs is God, and Jeremiah has God! The LORD is all I have! That is what Jeremiah called to mind. That is the key. That is the turning point. That is how to find hope during hardships!

These verses are well known to us because they are the basis of the classic hymn Great Is Thy Faithfulness, which we have sung the last two Sundays, and we will sing again today at the end of this worship service. It was written by a Christian man named Thomas Chisolm in 1923. It was not the result of some big event. Rather, it was Chisolm deciding to make the observation that he had received a lifetime of God's faithful care in 10,000 little moments. Not long before his death, Chisolm wrote, "My income has never been large at any time due to impaired health in the earlier years which has followed me on until now.

But I must not fail to record here the unfailing faithfulness of a covenant-keeping God and that He has given me many wonderful displays of His providing care which have filled me with astonishing gratefulness.”

Chisholm was calling to mind the same thing as Jeremiah. Both men believed the truth and called it to mind. Both men wrote to us the same ideas. Both had suffered great hardships for many years. Neither man abandoned their confidence in God’s faithfulness. How? They had suffered so much so consistently, that they reached a change point when they gained this key – the ability to notice and appreciate the little mercies God gives every single day that prove the undergirding truth of God’s love for us. The little daily mercies prove the great big love of God!

Both Chisholm and Jeremiah had true sorrows that caused them to weep, and their sorrows pushed them back to God. Both men noticed that God’s character of faithful love created character of faith in both Chisholm and Jeremiah. Both Chisholm and Jeremiah re-discovered God during their hardships, and that is how they found hope during their hardships.

Both men noticed that the little daily mercies of God are plural. With each day, Thomas Chisolm in the early 1900s experienced fresh compassion from God daily through fresh supplies from God daily. Jeremiah in the 500s BC, experienced fresh compassion from God daily through fresh supplies from God daily. In between Chisolm and Jeremiah came the Apostle Paul in the year 60 AD, who experienced fresh compassion from God daily through fresh supplies from God daily. Listen to how Paul says that every Christian can expect this to happen during our hardships, in Philippians 4:19, “*And my God will supply every need of yours according to His riches in Christ Jesus.*”

Here in Lamentations 3:23, the prophet Jeremiah poetically addressed God personally and directly, and what did Jeremiah say? Great is Your Faithfulness! In the process of remembering how faithful God is, Jeremiah was daily pulled back into a living fellowship with His faithful God. Jeremiah talked with God and walked with God and received from God His daily needs, almost as if God were right there at rock bottom, handing over a shopping bag of what was needed for today. Jeremiah did not simply list out God’s character traits like a good theologian does, but Jeremiah also praised God for who God is, like every worshipper does. Jeremiah trusted God to be consistent tomorrow, because Jeremiah had come to trust God’s consistency for today. In fact, Jeremiah looked back, and saw God’s consistency through a lot of days of his personal observation. We have a word for that – a word for trusting God to be consistent tomorrow. The word is **Hope!** In verse 21, ‘...this I call to mind, and therefore I have hope.’ What did he call to mind? God will not let me down tomorrow!

Since nothing can happen to us without God's knowledge and permission, we should endure hardships patiently and without protest, trusting in the mercies of God to bring good out of evil. Romans 8:28, "...we know that for those who love God, all things work together for good, for those who are called according to His purpose."

Conclusion: Do we know how to lament like Christians, in order to cope with hardships? In our passage God gave us a quick lesson on lament in 3 steps.

1. Lamenting means it is okay to admit that we are in pain, we just don't get stuck there. This is verses 1-18. A lament comes from a pain. Remind yourself that hardships can feel dark, overwhelming and hopeless. Give yourself permission to feel what your circumstances push you to feel. It is a normal and healthy human emotional response to be down and discouraged. God sees it. Jeremiah felt it. Jesus felt it. The Psalms are full of pain. Hardships are hard. But don't stop there.
2. Lamenting means we dare to keep hoping during your hardship until a breakthrough. This is verses 19-21.
How? Keep praying and reading the Bible, moving toward God until you have a breakthrough. Use the abc sub-points under sermon point 2.
 - a. appeal to God to see your hardship.
 - b. call to mind the truth about God. Point your own thoughts to truth.
 - c. re-interpret your hardship, while you are still in the hardship.
3. Lamenting means we keep re-interpreting our hardships in the light of our solid hope in God. This is verses 22-24.

In verses 22-24, we have one of the Old Testament's best expressions of hope and faith during a hardship. The writer has placed himself on the thought pathway toward the characteristics of God that are always true, even right now on a dark day when we still feel discouraged and trapped! He starts with love in verse 22. This is the covenant love of God. Steadfast love. This is the first quality of God mentioned for the rediscovery of hope during our hardships!

How can God change over from the one attacking us, to the one saving us? How can God turn from expressing His wrath to expressing His steadfast love? How can God move from executing His justice to showing His daily mercies that never come to an end?

This was answered at the cross.

God cannot destroy His covenant people, because He loves us.

This covenant love arising out of the heart of God is what makes the steadfastness of God's love. This love is what makes the consistency and faithfulness of God. This love is what makes the covenant a trustworthy one, even

when viewed in a skewed way, like in a circus mirror, through the tears of our pain.

This covenant love is what leads back to the cross of Jesus. At the cross, Jesus gave Himself for us, and that is the best demonstration of love. Romans 5:8, “*God shows His love for us in that while we were still sinners, Christ died for us.*”

This is where the love is best seen, where God shows it on full display.

Lamentations 3:23 says that because the love and mercy of God are the central characteristics of God, they are always to be seen, always on display. Every day, the love of God can be discovered. Every morning, the mercy of God can be known and experienced afresh within that day, even during our hardships.

Jeremiah wrote here, that the Lord’s “*...mercies never come to an end; they are new every morning; great is Your faithfulness...*”

This is the center of the book of Lamentations. This is where lament always takes us. This is the value of lamenting – to get us back to the heart of God.

Lamenting is absorbing the gospel despite our pain. Those who have sinned and have become afflicted, we may always return to the LORD God to put our trust in Him again, for our acceptance and for our needed refreshing. God is faithful or unchanging, in His love for us.

What is the result? Lamenting in our deep well teaches us that God is all we need. Verse 24 should always be read together with verses 22-23. Verse 24 is the application of the truth of God’s character of love – to ourselves. Here is verse 24, “*The LORD is my portion, says my soul, therefore I will hope in Him.*”

Whatever the circumstances, God is our portion. God is all we need.

Lamenting means that we can reach a point of hopelessness and despair, but even there, we find that God is upholding us.