

I found it interesting that all of the commentaries I consulted were bothered that the hymn, “Great Is Thy Faithfulness,” takes only the “good parts” of Lamentations 3. All of them agreed that the hymn-writer should have written very different stanzas for that chorus. Lamentations 3:22-24 was originally a response to bitter memories and a failed hope.

“Great Is Thy Faithfulness” is a fine hymn.
But it has no real connection to Lamentations 3.
“Strength for today and bright hope for tomorrow”
is hardly a fair way of talking about Lamentations 3!

Lamentations 3 is a song that arises out of the deepest sorrows and sufferings ever known to mankind.

I want you to imagine for a moment what it would be like if you could not worship.

This is a bit of a challenge for us
because we know that because of what Jesus has done,
we *always* have access to the throne of God!

But imagine, if you will, what would happen if you did *not* have access to God’s throne!

That’s what had happened in 586 BC – when the temple was destroyed –
when joy and celebration ended,
because there was no way to have peace with God.
(Remember that prior to the ascension of Jesus to the right hand of the Father,
the only way to have peace with God was through the burnt offering and peace offering.
If there is no altar, if there are no sacrifices, then there is no access to God.)

Indeed, the point of the NT is that we *have* a once-for-all sacrifice
that opens the way into the heavenlies.

So there is a way in which the utter grief and hopelessness of Lamentations 3
cannot be found in the NT.
And yet, there is also a sense in which the grief and despair of Lamentations 3
recognizes that same NT dynamic –
because even though the temple is gone and there is no access to the heavenly throne,
the poet still speaks directly to God!

In the first two poems in Lamentations,
the poet has focused on the sorrows and troubles of Daughter Zion – Lady Jerusalem.

Now, in Lamentations 3, the poet uses *himself* as the example.
“I am the man who has seen affliction.”

In your bulletin I have given you the outline of the whole chapter –

but tonight we will only get through the first two points.
I have edited the outline a bit (I had only worked through the first half carefully while I was in China),
so let me give you the rest right now:

1. **“I Am the Man”**: Hope Perishes in the Sixth Stanza (v1-18)
2. **“Great Is Thy Faithfulness”**: Hope Returns in the Eighth Stanza (v19-24)
3. **“Wait Quietly for the Salvation of the LORD”** (v25-39)
4. **“Let Us Return to the LORD”**: The Prayer of Repentance (v40-48)
5. **“I Am Lost”**: The Devastation of Jerusalem (v49-54)
6. **“Do Not Fear”**: God’s Answer (v55-66)

Let me just say that there are probably 15 different ways that you could outline Lamentations 3.
Each outline that I have seen
is valuable for communicating something important about the poem.
In fact, by next week, I may be convinced to use a different outline!

What I’m doing in this outline is highlighting the change in voice that occurs throughout the poem.

In verses 1-18, the poet speaks of the LORD in the third person –
He has done all these things to me –
But only in verse 18 does he finally identify the LORD by name.
And also, in verse 18, he concludes this list of all the things that God has done to him,
with a change in voice, “so I say, ‘My endurance has perished;
so has my hope from the LORD.’”

It is at least noteworthy that six is the number of man –
and this is the sixth stanza.
In the sixth stanza, hope perishes.

Then in verses 19-24 we have two stanzas remembering both affliction and comfort –
and particularly in the 8th stanza hope returns
as the poet remembers the steadfast love – the *hesed* – of Yahweh.
And again, at the end of the 8th stanza there is this change in voice –
from the poet to the *soul* of the poet.
(Yes, in one sense, it is the same person speaking,
which convinces me that this is an intentional literary device
used to capture our attention and say, *this is really important!!*)
“The LORD is my portion, says my soul, therefore I will hope in him.”

So hope perishes in the sixth stanza – the stanza of man.
And hope returns beginning in the seventh stanza (v21),
and coming to its glorious conclusion in the eighth stanza (v24).

You might think that the poem would stop there!
How do you say anything more once you have hope?!

Well, now, that’s the problem.
Hope, by definition, exists in the context of affliction.

It is all nice and good (and true) to say that the steadfast love of the LORD never ceases,
but I am not experiencing steadfast love and mercy.

Hope, by definition, refers to something future –
something that we do not have.

As Paul will say so well, “Who hopes for what he sees?” (Rom. 8:24).

And so in verses 25-39, the poet turns to his hearers – turns outward –
and admonishes us to wait for the LORD, to seek him,
and to wait quietly for the salvation of the LORD.
(as verse 29 says, “there may yet be hope”).

Remember that God is just – and God is sovereign.
He will make all things right.

And that means that we need to recognize that our affliction is at least in part self-inflicted.
We have sinned.
Therefore we suffer.

And so therefore we must repent.
And that is the focus of verses 40-48.
These three stanzas open with an acknowledgement of sin and rebellion,
as the poet leads Israel in a prayer of repentance,
pleading with God to have mercy.

The repetition of “eyes flowing” with tears in verses 48-49 shows the transition
as the poet turns back from the “we” of verses 40-48,
to the “I” of verses 49-54.

The problem is that there *is no* “us” anymore!
Most of God’s people have been exiled to Babylon.
Most of the rest have fled to Egypt.
There is no “us.”
There is only *me*.
And so my eyes flow with rivers of tears –
and the section ends with the cry of the poet, “I am lost.”

This is the 18th stanza.
The number 18 is the number of the Hebrew word “life” –
and that word (“life”) happens to be the exact middle word of this eighteenth stanza.

But life is precisely the thing that is most precarious in this stanza –
“they flung me alive into the pit.”

And finally, the poem ends in verses 55-66 [four stanzas] with a prayer of confidence.
Because when I said, “I am lost” –
you said, “Do not fear!”

And so the final four stanzas focus on *you*, O LORD.

I want you to think about the dynamic of this poem.

I have urged you to take Lamentations as a model for teaching you how to lament –
how to mourn and pour out your heart before God.

This poem starts out with a clear expression of the poet’s distress.

And it is really important that we come to God in our distress –
with the clear confession that *God has done this to me!*

Some people think that God only does the good things – Satan does the bad things.
That view offers no hope.

Because it means either that God doesn’t want to help you –
or that he can’t.

Lamentations 3 offers a very different diagnosis of your troubles!

God has done this to you!

Lamentations 3 deals very forthrightly with the central problem of monotheism!

If there is only one God – and that one God is all-powerful and all-knowing –
then that means that everything that happens is under his control.

And that means that the bad things – as well as the good things – come from God.

It might appear that this is *not* good news.

If *God* has done this to me,
then where is my hope?

And that is precisely where the poem starts.

1. “I Am the Man”: Hope Perishes in the Sixth Stanza (v1-18)

*I am the man who has seen affliction
under the rod of his wrath;*

² *he has driven and brought me
into darkness without any light;*

³ *surely against me he turns his hand
again and again the whole day long.*

I am the man.

Many have wanted to identify this man!

For many it was obvious that this was Jeremiah the prophet
(and certainly there are lots of parallels with Jeremiah –
think about the language of being thrown into a pit in v53!).

But nowhere in the text of Lamentation are we ever told who the author is.

The author chose to remain anonymous –
and so we need to respect that.

The anonymity of the author allows us to see “the man” of Lamentations 3
as the embodiment of Israel.

The experience of Jerusalem – of all the people of God in the cataclysm of 586 BC –
is taken up in the voice of one man.

“I am the man who has seen affliction under the rod of his wrath.”

In a very real way, this is the voice of Jesus.

Jesus will become *the man* – the suffering one –
the who bears the wrath of God that was due to us for sin.

But before it could become the voice of Jesus,
it had to be the voice of Israel.

In chapters 1-2 we heard the voice of Lady Zion – daughter Zion –
the experience of Jerusalem told through the voice of a woman,
with the suffering of the widow, the faithless wife, the raped woman.

Now in chapter 3 we hear the voice of the man –

and the afflictions of chapter 3 are particularly masculine in nature –
the physical brutality of war –
being walled in, chained, crushed, shot with arrows.

“Taken together, chapters 1 and 3 give us gendered pictures of a female and male victim –
the city, battered and ruined, that remained behind;
and the people, entrapped and injured, who were conquered and deported.” (Berlin, 85)

There is also another shift in chapter 3.

In chs 1 and 2, there was one verse that began with successive letters of the Hebrew alphabet.

Here in chapter 3, there are the *three* verses that begin with each letter.

But each verse is much shorter.

The effect is a more rapid and insistent beat of the poem.

It is hard to capture this in translation.

One commentator has tried.

Let me read the opening of his translation.

Listen for the repetition of words that begin with A, then B, then C.

“Afflicted am I and best, a man whom God in his wrath has abased.

Abused by his rod and broken, I am driven into the darkness.

Against me he turned his hand, and again and again.

Bones broken, wasted, I am besieged and battered.

Bitterness is my portion and tribulation.

Banished, I dwell in in the darkest darkness like those long dead.

Chained so I cannot escape and walled in, I am a captive.

Crying for help, I call out, but he will not hear my prayer.

Crooked are all my paths, which he has blocked with boulders.” (Slavitt in Wright, 30).

This is a very orderly way to tell a very disorderly story!

The language of Lamentations 3 here at the beginning of the poem
reminds us of Job’s lament in Job 3,

where he asks why God gives life to those who are greatly afflicted.

Also think of Psalm 23 –

“The LORD is my shepherd, I shall not want.

He makes me to lie down in green pastures, he leads me beside still waters.

He restores my soul.

He leads me in paths of righteousness for his name’s sake.

Even though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil,
for you are with me;

Your rod and your staff, they comfort me.

You prepare a table before me in the presence of my enemies;

You anoint my head with oil; my cup overflows.

Surely goodness and mercy shall follow me all the days of my life,
and I shall dwell in the house of the LORD forever.”

Now look back at the first six stanzas of Lamentations 3.

Your rod and your staff bring me *no comfort* –

“I am the man who has seen affliction under the rod of his wrath.” (v1)

I do not dwell in the house of the LORD,

“he has made me dwell in darkness like the dead of long ago.” (v6)

He does not lead me beside still waters –

“he has walled me about so that I cannot escape.” (v7)

“he has blocked my ways with blocks of stone.” (v8)

He does not lead me in paths of righteousness,

“he has made my paths crooked.” (v9)

This shepherd does not protect me from my enemies,

“he is a bear lying in wait for me, a lion in hiding” (v10)

So that “I have become a laughingstock of all peoples” (v14)

Rather than prepare a table before me,

“he has filled me with bitterness; he has sated me with wormwood” (v15)

And no, goodness and mercy have not followed me all the days of my life.

“I have forgotten what *goodness* is.” (v17)

(The ESV’s translation, “happiness” blurs the point here!)

In other words, Lamentations 3:1-18 opens by raising the question,

is Psalm 23 true?

The reason why I am so convinced that Psalm 23 is actually at the root of this,

is because the two words at the conclusion of Psalm 23 (*tov* and *hesed*) –
goodness and mercy (or goodness and steadfast love).

Are the two words at the center of verses 22-27

(the answer to verses 1-18).

Is the LORD a good shepherd?

It’s okay to ask that question!

God himself inspired a poet to ask it!

In the middle of the story, it often looks like God is out to get us!

⁴ *He has made my flesh and my skin waste away;*

he has broken my bones;
⁵ *he has besieged and enveloped me*
with bitterness and tribulation;
⁶ *he has made me dwell in darkness*
like the dead of long ago.

Ezekiel 34 speaks of the failed shepherds of Israel –
how they had destroyed the sheep – and failed to protect the sheep!
But what *God* has done is even worse!

⁷ *He has walled me about so that I cannot escape;*
he has made my chains heavy;
⁸ *though I call and cry for help,*
he shuts out my prayer;
⁹ *he has blocked my ways with blocks of stones;*
he has made my paths crooked.

Because God has walled me up and shut me in –
so that my prayers cannot rise to him.
The temple lies in ruins.
There is no access to God.
There is no way for the prayers of the saints to ascend to God!
There is no incense being offered –
no sweet aroma rising up to heaven.

And the chains of the Babylonians have divided the people of God from one another –
with many in Babylon – others in Egypt – and only a few left in the land of promise.

¹⁰ *He is a bear lying in wait for me,*
a lion in hiding;
¹¹ *he turned aside my steps and tore me to pieces;*
he has made me desolate;
¹² *he bent his bow and set me*
as a target for his arrow.

I have been torn in pieces.
God himself is shooting arrows into me.
God himself has ground me into the dust.

¹³ *He drove into my kidneys*
the arrows of his quiver;
¹⁴ *I have become the laughingstock of all peoples,*
the object of their taunts all day long.
¹⁵ *He has filled me with bitterness;*
he has sated me with wormwood.

And therefore the peoples mock me – they taunt me all day long.
God has filled me with bitterness –

he has stuffed me with wormwood.
He has ground my face into the dust.

¹⁶ *He has made my teeth grind on gravel,
and made me cower in ashes;*
¹⁷ *my soul is bereft of peace;
I have forgotten what happiness^[a] is;*
¹⁸ *so I say, “My endurance has perished;
so has my hope from the LORD.”*

Verse 17 makes clear that peace and goodness are gone.
My soul is bereft of *shalom*.
I have forgotten what *goodness* is.

And without peace – without goodness – there is no hope – there is no future.
If all there is is unremitting suffering and tribulation,
then there is no future – there is no hope,

“so I say, ‘My endurance has perished; so has my hope from the LORD.’”

Why does God do this to us?

Why does God afflict us so grievously in this life?
Ambrose of Milan wrote at the end of the 4th century that he does this to teach us to lament.
“He waits for our lamentations here, that is, in time,
that he may spare us those that shall be eternal.
He waits for our tears that he may pour forth his goodness” (290).

While Psalm 23 is likely in the background here,
so is Psalm 88 –
a song of the exile which uses themes of darkness and death
ending in loneliness and abandonment.

But even as he reaches the depths of despair,
he finally utters the one word that can change everything:

“Yahweh.”

So far, through the first 17 verses of the poem,
God has never been named!
“He” has done all this – but what noun goes with this pronoun?!!

The very last word of verse 18 is the turning point of the poem.
Even as he declares the end of all his hopes –
he names *Yahweh* – and thereby all his hopes begin to return!

2. “Great Is Thy Faithfulness”: Hope Returns in the Eighth Stanza (v19-24)
Though in one sense, the seventh stanza – verses 19-21 – does not seem very hopeful:

¹⁹ *Remember my affliction and my wanderings,
the wormwood and the gall!*

He starts by calling himself to remember all the misery and devastation.

Grief – lament – sorrow –
these things cannot be solved by denial.

You cannot just “think happy thoughts” or take a happy pill
in order to make sorrow and grief go away.
There is a process to grieving –
a process that requires us to deal forthrightly with the pain and suffering.
And our poet does that in verses 19-21.

²⁰ *My soul continually remembers it
and is bowed down within me.*

Remembering the horror and the grief brings back all the feelings.
My soul is bowed down within me!

²¹ *But this I call to mind,
and therefore I have hope:*

I like how Christopher Wright says this.

“Israel lived by memory and hope...
They looked back to what God had done in the past,
and they looked forward to what God would do
in fulfillment of the promises that had driven their past
and guaranteed their future.
Memory and hope dominate verses 18-39,
but wildly oscillating between negative and positive.
To start of with, as we have seen, all hope is gone (18)
and the only memories are bad ones (19-20)...
That kind of memory arises unbidden.
It is the natural emotional and psychological reaction to great trauma,
especially the shattering violence of war –
the well-attested phenomenon of unwanted flashbacks and nightmares....
‘I vividly, frequently, painfully, wretchedly, continually remember...’
until my soul sinks down into misery and depression.
To have lived through, and witnessed, the final choking fires of Jerusalem
and the blood-soaked slaughter or capture of its starved inhabitants
must have been an ineradicable and soul-destroying memory.
But there is another kind of memory.
It is the deliberate, determined, teeth-gritting decision to call something to mind.
It is an action of the will, not a reaction of the emotions.
It is a conscious and deliberate choice.” (Wright, 110)

And that is what happens in verse 21.

He does not simply “remember” something.

He calls it back into his mind.

“He *makes it come back* into his conscious thinking, so as to change his whole perspective...
Sometimes it takes a very emphatic act of will to remember what we already know,
when everything in our present experience threatens to deny it
and overwhelm us.” (Wright, 111).

As you work through the pain of those memories –
as you remember the awful things that happened to you –
there is one thing that you must *call to mind*:

²² *The steadfast love of the LORD never ceases;*^[b]

his mercies never come to an end;

²³ *they are new every morning;*

great is your faithfulness.

The same God who brought all these things into your life
is the same God who promises to be faithful –
who promises to renew and refresh those who repent and turn to him in faith.

There *will* be an end to suffering and grief and pain.
But the steadfast love of the LORD never ceases.

And so *for the first time*, the poet addresses the LORD directly:
“Great is thy faithfulness.”

One line.

That’s all he can muster for now!

Then he goes back to the third person in verse 24:

²⁴ “*The LORD is my portion,*” *says my soul,*
“therefore I will hope in him.”

There are times, yes, where all you can do is cry out in pain!
My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?!

Jesus did!

But even as you say these words,
you are confessing “*my God, my God*”!

In the same way, Lamentations 3 –
even as the poet is saying over and over again –
God has done this to me!

He also confesses, “the LORD is *my portion*, therefore I will hope in him.”

The language of the *portion* – or inheritance – is central to the OT.

The priests had no “portion” with their brothers – no inheritance of land –
because the *LORD* was their portion (Numbers 18:20).

What did that mean practically?

It meant that their brothers – the rest of Israel –
needed to give food to the priests,
so that the priests could live!

That is why God specified the various portions of the grain offerings and peace offerings
that were for the priests.

To say that the LORD is my portion
is to say that provision and sustenance comes from him.

Another way of saying this is what Jesus taught us to pray:
“Give us this day our daily bread.”

It takes faith to pray this.

Especially when God has been stuffing your face with wormwood and gall.

Especially when, as C. S. Lewis put it,

“He hurts us beyond our worst fears and beyond all we can imagine.” (in Allen 92)

“Great is thy faithfulness” is not a trite phrase designed to make all the hurt disappear.

“Great is thy faithfulness” is the confession of those who have no other hope.

The same God who is smiting you in the face

is the God who is fully worthy of your hope and confidence,
because he is faithful to his promises!

Yea, though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil,
for you are with me – your rod and your staff, they comfort me.

Why?

Well, for the same reason that we heard in Exodus 17,

where God told Moses to take in his hand the *staff* with which he struck the Egyptians
and use it to strike the *rock* –

the rock where God himself would stand.

Strike *me*.

I will take the wrath upon myself.

It is for that reason – because Jesus has sung Lamentations 3 before us –
that we also can sing this song to our lips.