

Our God, our Heavenly Father,
you are enthroned upon the praises of your people. We have gathered here this day hungering and thirsting after the knowledge of God. We pray that you will be pleased now to make yourself known that as your word is read, as it is preached, that your voice would sound deep within our hearts, that you would call us to faith and to trust in you and to the worship and praise of your name, for we ask it all through Christ our Savior. Amen. Our scripture lesson for the day is found in the book of Lamentations and in chapter 3. But the book of Lamentations is singularly inappropriate to take just a portion of it and preach from it. The reason being is that this is a united piece of poetry and it really needs to be read whole and entire to get the full benefit of it and to be able to see each of its parts in relationship to the whole. My guess is we don't have time this morning to read the whole book of Lamentations and to walk our way through it. So permit me to give you the Reader's Digest version of it in order to orient you properly to the portion that we will be reading. It is a masterpiece of literary art. It is five poems closely joined to one another. The first poem, chapter 1, has in your Bibles, and if you have it open you'll be helped, 22 verses. And the reason for that is there are 22 letters in the Hebrew alphabet. There are three lines in Hebrew that correspond to each of the verses, and each one of those groups of three begins with the successive letter of the Hebrew alphabet, Aleph, Beth, Gimel, Daleth, as we would, A, B, C, D. It is a treatment of its theme from A to Z. Its theme is suffering. And it's suffering due to sin. Not all suffering in this world is due to sin. You take the book of Job for example. There is a book of cataclysmic suffering. That has nothing to do with Job's sin. Job is declared up front by God himself, no less, to be blameless, upright, fearing God, and turning away from evil. And yet terrible things happened to that man. He would lose all his children in a single day. All his earthly wealth, all his flocks are taken away. Eventually his own health was taken away. And it would appear that even the comfort of his marriage was taken away because his wife comes to a point so broken by all that they've experienced and now seeing her husband racked with bodily pain with sores head to foot can only encourage him to curse God and die. but it had nothing to do with his sin. It was according to the purpose of God, but it had nothing to do with his sin. That is not the book of Lamentations. The suffering that is in the book of Lamentations had everything to do with the sin of the people. Across many centuries, God had sent prophets to Israel calling them away from their sins, pronouncing

his judgments that would be forthcoming. They hardened their hearts and did not heed him. And so the day came when the Babylonians assaulted the city. The walls were broken down. The city was burned with fire. The temple, the house of God, was knocked to the ground. Ezekiel the prophet had foreseen this day. He had seen a vision of God's holy Shekinah glory lifting up from the holy of holies because God dwelt in Jerusalem. He was found in that temple. And that glorious presence of God rose up from his dwelling place and moved to the door of the temple, then to the gate of the city, and then to the mountains beyond. God left the city. And when God left the city, the Babylonians met with no resistance when they came. And the judgment that had been foretold across centuries came at last. The book of Lamentations comes

to us from a voice that survived it all. The Babylonians came in to the city the way Hamas went into Israel, killing, massacring, taking captives. But this was citywide. This was the whole nation, not just its southern regions, not just a portion of the land. The whole thing fell to the Babylonians. But the voice of the reporter

in Lamentations, tradition says it's Jeremiah, the book doesn't say that. Maybe it was Jeremiah, he survived it. But this voice reports on the suffering that came in the aftermath, how that beautiful city that had been so glorious that the Queen of Sheba had come up out of Africa, to be able to gaze upon all that she had heard about and would go back saying the half of it had not been told to her. That beautiful city was now in ruins. And the book of Lamentations in its poetry portrays that. As I said, the first chapter is a perfect acrostic poem going A to Z through the letters of the Hebrew alphabet and describing the suffering of the place. And the next chapter is likewise an acrostic poem going A but there's two letters that are switched around about two thirds of the way down. It's just a little less than perfect. And the same pattern is repeated in chapter three and in chapter four. But in chapter five, the acrostic is gone. Nothing of the poetic masterpiece remains except for the fact that there's 22 lines. It's now in total disorder. The poem has moved. from perfection of order to chaos. And that's the experience of the people. But there's another pattern that's going on in the book of Lamentations. Near the end of chapter one, the last few verses, the voice turns to prayer and God is called upon. And the second chapter will end with prayer. And the third chapter will end with prayer. The fourth chapter does not. The fourth chapter actually stands out in another way because it's not three lines per letter, it's just two. It's as if the poet is running out of gas by this time. And so he's got less of a poem in chapter four and no prayer. Chapter 5 shrinks even further. It's now just 22

lines, just one line per verse, but it's all prayer. So chapter 4 and chapter 5 put together are just as long as the other prayers, just as long as the other poems, but the whole of chapter 5 is prayer to God. So although the poem in its poetry describes a movement from perfection of order to chaos, the movement of prayer is to increase under the suffering, under the affliction, while the smoke is still rising from the broken down buildings. Prayer is rising up to God and it comes to a full expression in the final poem. Now we expect grand conclusions to arrive at the end. Most literary works do move from beginning to end. But if you're doing Hebrew, you've got to expect every now and again they throw a wrench into the works and they put the meat in the middle. They draw your attention to it so that you won't miss it. As I said, the early poems begin with the first letter of every three lines beginning with a letter. But when you get to chapter three, all three lines begin with the letter. It's writing chapter three all in capital letters. It's the poet's way of saying, now hear this. And it drives home the message. And tucked away in the middle of chapter three, is a glorious vision of hope in a forgiving God. The word hope is only found in that section of the book. Everything else is destruction and affliction, but right at the heart of the book, right at the heart of the suffering, there is hope. because God is a gracious God whose steadfast love endures forever. And so the takeaway from the book is found in the beginning, but it lets you know that the takeaway is for you in your life while your suffering continues. There will come a day when God will wipe away all the suffering. There will come a day when there is no longer any death, neither mourning, nor crying, nor pain anymore. But that doesn't happen in this world. That happens at the end of this world when the Lord Jesus comes back. Along the way, there will be many smaller crises along the way where God will come and deliver us and we will sing the Psalms of praise and thanksgiving that are peppered through the book of Psalms and elsewhere in the scriptures. But until Jesus comes back, we will face tribulation in this world. And we need to know that in the midst of our tribulations, even when the problems are not solved and the pains are not taken away and the sufferings are not relieved, that the steadfast love of the Lord endures forever. Now with that introduction, let's read Lamentations 3 down to its middle part. Lamentations chapter 3, beginning at verse 1. I am the man who has seen affliction under the rod of his wrath. He has driven me and brought me into darkness without any light. Surely against me he turns his hand again and again the whole day long. He has made my flesh and my skin waste away. He has broken my bones. He has besieged and enveloped me with bitterness and tribulation. He has made me dwell in darkness like the dead of long ago. He has walled me about so

that

I cannot escape. He has made my chains heavy.

Though I call and cry for help, he shuts out my prayer. He has blocked my ways with blocks of stones. He has made my paths crooked. He is a bear lying in wait for me, a lion in hiding. He turned aside my steps and tore me to pieces. He has made me desolate. He bent his bow and set me as a target for his arrow. He drove into my kidneys the arrows of his quiver. I have become the laughingstock of all peoples, the object of their taunts all day long. He has filled me with bitterness. He has sated me with wormwood. He has made my teeth grind on

gravel and made me cower in ashes. My soul is bereft of peace. I have forgotten what happiness

is. So I say, my endurance has perished. So has my hope from the Lord. Remember my affliction and my

wanderings, the wormwood and the gall. My soul continually remembers it and is bowed down within me. But this I call to mind, and therefore I have hope. The steadfast love of the Lord never ceases. His mercies never come to an

end. They are new every morning. Great

is your faithfulness. The Lord is my portion, says

my soul, therefore I will hope in him. The Lord is good to those who wait for him, to the soul who seeks him. It is good that one should wait quietly for the salvation of the Lord. It is good for a man that he bear the yoke in his youth. Let him sit alone in silence when it is laid on him. Let him put his mouth in the dust. There may yet be hope. Let him

give his cheek to the one who strikes. Let him be filled with insults. For the Lord will not cast off

forever. But though he cause grief, He

will have compassion according to the abundance of his steadfast love, for he does not afflict from his heart or grieve the children of men. Here ends our reading for the

day. I mentioned that not all suffering

is due to sin, and I gave Job as an example of suffering which is not. But I want you to know a similarity between Job and the author of Lamentations 3. They do not indulge in the fancy that many people, including many Christians, have bought into.

The idea that God does not have anything to do with your suffering. Job knew it was the Lord who

gave and the Lord who took away. Oh yes, it was the Sabeans and the Chaldeans, the Babylonians, who came and took away his sheep and his cattle. It was the devil himself who

had been stirred up against Job and brought all this chaos into his life, brought the roof down on top of his children, and took them all away in a single day. Oh yes, there were many secondary causes. There was no mystery to Job as

to why the Sabaeans and the Chaldeans would have taken his cattle.

There was no mystery to Job as to why the devil would be stirred

up against him. What was a mystery to Job is why God would take it away. He didn't just allow it. The Lord gave, the Lord had taken away. And so the author of Lamentations begins, I am the man who has seen affliction under the rod of his wrath. Just as Isaiah says in chapter 10 that the Assyrians, when they came in to take away the northern kingdom, were the rod of God's wrath, so it is that the Babylonians have come as the rod of God's wrath. Years ago, and as far as I know it's still a bestseller, A rabbi wrote a book concerning why bad things happen to good people, when bad things happen to good people, but in the book he says he's answering the question why bad things happen to good people. Well, it's not that long a book, but let me give you an even shorter version of it. Why? Well, they just do. God can't do anything about it. God doesn't have complete power. He can't stop all these things. He has made a world in which people have free will. They can do as they please. If God didn't allow for that, yes, he could have made all robots and so on, but he didn't make that world, and that means he can't control everything. Don't you feel better? Isn't it a comfort to know that the Lord God omnipotent who reigns really isn't the Lord God omnipotent who reigns? That there are things outside of his control. But he can't really do anything about it. He feels just as bad as you do. He wish it were not so. But he can't do anything about it. The alternative is to face it the way Job does and to face it the way the book of Lamentations does. It was the rod of his wrath. whatever secondary causes may have been involved, and whatever blame they may have had in it. The Assyrians were not without fault for what they did to the Northern Kingdom, and the Babylonians were not without fault for what they did to the Jews. But God had his purpose for what he brought about through the Assyrians and the Babylonians, and it was the punishment of Israel's sins. If our God is not sovereign, his promises are worthless because he can't control all the factors that will be necessary to accomplish his purposes. So neither Job or the author of Lamentations indulges in the fancy in which many people have taken comfort, but there is no comfort there, my friends. You may be left without answers as to why you suffer as you do. You may be left without answers as to why you suffer as long as you do. But if there is a God in heaven who is good as he has made himself known to be, there is a good purpose for it, even if you can't comprehend it. And that is far more comfort than the idea that he feels bad about it just the way you do. It's just that he can't do anything about it. Now the great comfort that we have here is regardless of where our suffering comes from, whether it's due to sin or not, The God who demonstrated his love for us in that while we were yet sinners, as Paul says in Romans 5.8, the God who demonstrates his love for us in that while

we were yet sinners and Christ died for us, that God can be depended on even when we suffer for our sins. If he is a God who will hear our prayer and receive us even when we have sinned, then my friends we can have comfort from that God whatever our suffering may be. Somehow or other, the whole tone of the poem changes as we move past verse 18, where it seems like he has lost all hope. Prayer breaks out, asking God to remember his affliction and his wandering, and then at verse 21, it suddenly seems like the storm has broken. But this I call to mind, and therefore I have hope. What is this? Well, it comes in verse 22 and following. It's this, the steadfast love of the Lord never ceases. His mercies never come to an end. Steadfast love here is actually in the plural. It's the steadfast loves of the Lord. You see, it doesn't just come one at a time. It's broken out into all the pieces you need it. He keeps you, whatever the circumstance or the difficulty may be. He may not remove the difficulty until Christ comes again. But just as the whole of that suffering is in his hand, you are in his hand, and his steadfast love never ceases. His mercies never come to an end. They are new every morning, for great is his faithfulness. You may not have known that the hymn we were singing had come from Lamentations 3. There's nothing in that hymn that would particularly remind you of the swirl of destruction and affliction that is all around that verse in the book of Lamentations. But it's a truth that can be held on to whatever the circumstances of life. Lamentations is like a hurricane. suffering coming around but at the eye of that hurricane in the middle of the poem in the middle of our chapter there is peace and you're able to look up through the hurricane if you get into its eye and you can see the Sun and the blue sky above when all around there is suffering and destruction and that's where we find him now but how did he get there Did he just wake up one day and he felt better about the whole thing? You know, there was a time when I was really, really very sick, had a high fever, just aches and pains throughout my body, the kind of thing you're just wondering for a while if you're going to die, and then you wonder, maybe I won't die, and I'll just have to live in this for a while. And then, all of a sudden, one day, I could actually feel it. It was as if the fever broke, and it just permeated my body. Suddenly, the pain began to subside. It started to get better. Is that what it was? Did he just wake up one morning and he felt better about it? No, actually, he had to work at this. Verse 21 doesn't just report on something that happened. It expresses a determination that he made. This I call to mind. The verb is the same verb that is used for repentance. It means to turn, to bring back,

to restore. And it's a verb, and this will mean a lot to you, that's in the hyphil of the Hebrew, see? I knew it would mean a lot to you. What's the hyphil form of the verb? The hyphil form of the verb expresses causation. He's not just reporting on something. He's talking about a choice that he made. I am bringing this back to my mind. I am recalling this. indeed it's well it's not the word for mind that we might ordinarily have expect this is the Hebrew word labe for heart he's not just remembering something in his head he's embracing it in his heart he's bringing it back into his soul it's a determination he's made to bring back what has been forgotten what has been lost what has been lost sight of when the storm came How do you bring it back? Well, you bring back only what you had there to begin with. If you don't have it there, you better get it there. How do you get it there? You read the word. You read it over and over and over again. because it's this Word that is giving him confidence. Let me give you just a couple of examples. Where do we see this steadfast love of God? How could he be sure that in the midst of suffering due to sin that he could count on the steadfast love of the Lord? Well, it belongs to the covenant that God made. You go back to Exodus 32, 33, 34. That's the sin of the golden calf. There couldn't have been a worse sin. They had just been brought out of Egypt by God's strong hand. They had been there 400 years. They had been oppressed. They were the subjects of genocide by the Pharaoh, and God had delivered them from it. And he carried them through the wilderness, and when they had no water, he brought water out of a rock. When they had no food, he laid it down on the ground. Every morning he had been faithful, and he brought them to the mountain of Sinai, and he married them. And Moses then goes back up on the mountain to talk with God some more, and while he's gone, they get in bed with another god. They make a golden calf, and they worship it and say, these are your gods, O Israel, who brought you out of the land of Egypt. There couldn't have been a worse sin. If that had happened in an earthly marriage, adultery on the honeymoon, that marriage would have ended. Night gods. Oh, his wrath burst forth. He asked me to let alone that he might consume them. But the mediator that Israel had desired, the mediator that God desired that Israel would desire, Moses faithfully interceded as Christ does for us. And Moses begged God on the basis of his name, on the basis of his covenant, don't destroy them. These are your people. You brought them up out of Egypt. They're not my people, they're your people. And God said, this very thing that you have asked, I will do. And Moses says, show me your glory. And when God passes by him, revealing his glory, he pronounces his name, the Lord, the Lord God, merciful and gracious, slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love and faithfulness,

who keeps steadfast love for thousands, who forgives iniquity, transgression, and sin, but who will by no means clear the guilty, visiting the iniquity of the fathers to the children and to the children's children of the third and fourth generations. What a great mystery bound up in the name of God, in the glory of God. His mercy seemingly unending, His justice without any diminution. He will not clear the guilty. Well, how can He be a God, merciful and gracious, forgiving iniquity, transgression, and sin, but who will by no means clear the guilty? Well, it is only through Jesus Christ, my friends. He fulfills his justice. He doesn't clear the guilty. He punishes Christ for them. Christ voluntarily bears upon himself your sin so that you would not be destroyed. And then he can be merciful and gracious, slow to anger, abounding in steadfast love and faithfulness, keeping steadfast love for thousands, forgiving iniquity, transgression, and sin. The author of Lamentations recalls this. And maybe he thought of Hosea. Hosea had been called to marry a woman who had become an adulteress. He married her, they had a child, and then she went off to other lovers. And she had children with the other lovers, and the marriage fell apart. And God said to Hosea, now you go again and you take that woman and you love that woman and her children, you make your children because that's what I'm doing to the Northern Kingdom of Israel. I will marry that adulterous woman again and I will take her children as my own. I am a God of steadfast love. There's stories like that across the whole Old Testament. You read the book from beginning to end. You soak your life in it. You listen to beautiful music like we had with the choir when they were here, bringing home the truth of God with a tune that you can remember, with a song that is soothing it into your hearts. It helps to restore the memory. when you otherwise might forget. Moses had been commanded to write a song at the end of the book of Deuteronomy, summarizing all that had come. And why was he commanded to write a song? Because God said, you know, the day is going to come when your children are going to be taken out of this land because they're not going to keep my covenant. And they will be cast out of this land. But the song that you write and the song that you teach them, the words will live unforgotten in the mouths of their youth. And so in the time of their suffering, the Word will come back because the songs kept it there. What do we call that, an earwig or something like that? You get a song in your ear, you just can't get rid of it? The Word of God is intended for that. And that's what the author of Lamentations has found. Yes, God may chasten us severely for our sins. God may come in judgment for our sins. But that's not the end of his steadfast love. His promise is still clear and

true to us. Whoever calls upon the name of the Lord will be saved. Ah, but you say, mine are too great. My sins have been too far gone. I've been in them a long time, just as Israel says later in the book of Isaiah. Now, here's the trump card on that. 1 Timothy chapter 1, the Apostle Paul says, it is a trustworthy statement, worthy of full acceptance that Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners, among whom I am foremost. Paul, the greatest sinner? That's what he said. He said, well, maybe that's just how he felt. I felt that way too. Yeah, maybe he did feel that way. He certainly felt that way, but he was right about it. How do we know he's right about it? Because he said it under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit. And it's not so far-fetched an idea. Look across the Gospels. With whom did Jesus have the most trouble? Who received his sharpest words of condemnation? It was the Pharisees. Who was Paul? A Pharisee of the Pharisees. He was indeed the chief of sinners, and yet Paul goes on to say, and yet it was for this reason that I found mercy, so that in me as the foremost, Christ Jesus might demonstrate his perfect patience as an example for all those who would believe in him for eternal life. This I call to mind. This I return to my heart. The steadfast love of the Lord never ceases. His mercies never come to an end. They are new every morning, for great is his faithfulness. Thanks be to God. Let's pray together. Our Lord God, our Heavenly Father, how we thank you for the revelation of your love supremely given to us in our Lord Jesus Christ, but trumpeted to us throughout the pages of Holy Scripture time and time again. O Lord our God, help us to soak our hearts in these truths, that we may indeed have hope, whatever the circumstances of our life may be, whatever the judgments may be, that come to us for our sins, May we yet know that You are a prayer-hearing God, a sin-forgiving God, and a Savior who will be with us to the very end. We ask it all in Jesus' name and for His sake. Amen.