

Lamentations: Hope in Suffering

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I want to welcome you to the memorial service to an unfaithful bride. What makes this service so sad, as we think about her memory, is how great she started. She came from nothing, but her Husband made her great and gave her all of the privilege she could ever want, and she became glorious. We think about her memory and her in her glory. But now, as we visit her casket and see her in ashes and total devastation, it makes that memory of her glory even that much more of a tragedy. It is not only the unfaithfulness of her that we mourn, but in light of the faithfulness of her Husband, we see how great He was to her. He made her, He called her, and made her great. Then He redeemed her, but she continuously ran from Him. She continually cheated on Him. She continually ran after other lovers. And though He came after her again and again, her story was unfaithfulness. As we visit the funeral of this bride, Israel, we mourn her great loss in light of the faithfulness of her great Husband, the God who created her.

Lamentations is not a happy book. It is a book written with great agony and great sorrow. As you read it, the Prophet Jeremiah is weeping in the midst of utter destruction. He is seeing what happened when Jerusalem was completely disarrayed. This happened when Babylon invaded. In 586 BC, King Nebuchadnezzar went in and destroyed the entire city of

Jerusalem, the people of God. Now, as Jeremiah is lamenting, there are no walls left. There are no gates left, the temple is gone, and the houses are gone. Everything is in smoke and shambles and the people are reduced to utter starvation; so much that mothers are feasting on their own babies. That is what we see in the horrific picture of what has happened to this very unfaithful bride. You get the point; things are very bad.

The Lament of Israel

If you were a Hebrew and read it in the original language, you would have seen this come to life even more. I want to go over some of the things you would have noticed if you had read this book in the Hebrew. I want to start with a Hebrew poetry lesson. In Hebrew poetry, there is a 3+2 method. You would have three lines and then three more lines that were put together to form a unit. They would complement each other and you could sing them. We are familiar with a few of these. For instance, in Psalm 19:1, the heavens declare God's glory; the skies proclaim His work. There are three, and three, all declaring the same thing.

A lament is different. It has three line, then two lines. In our example above, it would say, the heavens declare God's glory; the skies proclaim, but the last line is left off. The idea is that something happened; something went wrong with the last line. It is a dying out method, a falling away. This is what Jewish people do at funerals; they sing a lament, a dirge. It's this falling away. The point as you sing it is you notice that someone has just died. It would be as if we sang a verse, a chorus, a verse, and then halfway through the last chorus, we just stopped. Everyone would know that something went wrong; something just happened. It would signal that we are at a funeral.

In the book of Lamentations, we have five poems. This is not just a book; it is a funeral service of Israel. The writer put it together in this way so it would form the 3+2 lament. There are three long poems that serve as the three lines. Then there are two poems, and the last one is very short; meaning there is not a third poem. The third one died away; a death has occurred. Another thing you didn't pick up in the English reading that you would have picked up in Hebrew is how the poems are arranged. The first

four are acrostic in nature. That means that each stanza started with a letter of the Hebrew alphabet. You started with **Alef**, and then ended with **Tav**. Each one would be progressive letters of the alphabet. If we wrote a poem that started with A, B, C, D, E, you would have recognized it starts with the alphabet. You would understand that it goes together. So all of these poems are easy to find, but the problem is the last one is shorter than rest and it has no acrostic. There is no order, no alphabet; it is in disarray, again proving the point that we are hearing a funeral message. It is a message of utter destruction that has happened to the people of Israel.

I also want you to see that there is another structure within this. In reading, you notice the pronouns. They shift and make up thirteen sections of the book. They build down and hit at seven, and then they build back up to thirteen. By this, the writer is showing you what the most important part of the book is; it is that seventh arrangement. That arrangement is chapter 3:21. It is the only verse you can smile at, the one that gives you a glimmer of hope. That is the point; it is the main section of the book. It is where we are supposed to camp out and preach from, so that is where our Scripture starts from in this lesson. Before we read, let's go through the different pronoun shifts. I want you to see the overall pattern of this book, as well as what is going on with Israel.

1. She- This is talking about Zion, the people of Israel. They are desolate and devastated. The opening lines are that Israel is in complete disarray. She is completely broken.
2. I- Zion, the people of Israel, is speaking about herself...We are betrayed and defeated with no one to comfort us. We are completely gone. She trusted in Babylon and now they are the ones who have destroyed her. Her lovers have deceived her.
3. He- This is talking about Yahweh. It is Yahweh who caused this great suffering in His anger.
4. They- This is talking about the princes, the priests, the kings, the mothers, the sons, the babies; everyone of Israel is in complete and utter destruction. They are suffering. Their faces are in the dirt and they are lamenting in ashes.

5. You- This is Zion. Zion, what should you do? Oh people of Israel, what should you do? You should cry out to the LORD, who you have abandoned.
6. He- This is Yahweh again. Yahweh has afflicted you; He has done this to you.
7. Climax: Then, we come to the climax of the book. This is where we see God's great love. You wonder how we can see God's love in disaster, sin, affliction from God, and God's punishment. We are thinking, what...God's great love...how is there love here? We will see how this plays out. And then, once it reaches its climax, it builds back up.
8. He- Yahweh; He afflicts people.
9. You- Yahweh; to You, Yahweh, I will cry. Notice that when it built down, this pronoun said, you should cry to Yahweh. Now it is, to You, we cry.
10. They- Israel is noticed with suffering again. It names all the groups and how they are suffering.
11. He- Yahweh caused this calamity. He is the One who did this.
12. We- It is a first person pronoun, but it is plural now, speaking about how Zion has been betrayed and defeated.
13. We- Zion is completely desolate and devastated. We are under absolute destruction.

It was David Dorsey in his literary structure of the Old Testament who came up with that outline. It just brings to life the big picture of the book, which is that Israel is in complete ruin. The reason she is in ruin is because of her sins, and what she is suffering is from the hand of God. The big point of the book is God's faithfulness. How do we see God's faithfulness in the midst of this great suffering?

Israel's Suffering and Hope

I want you to see the three main points of the book:

1. Israel is suffering for her sins.

I want to read of few lines of Lamentations to make this point. "*Jerusalem sinned grievously and became filthy.*" "*This is because of my*

transgressions." "We have transgressed and rebelled." "*Woe to us, for we have sinned.*" So Israel, and Jeremiah, recognizes that this calamity, this destruction, their suffering, is because of their sin. They are deserving of this, they are rightfully getting what they deserve because of their sin.

2. Israel's suffering is from Yahweh.

It is from the LORD. Their suffering is under the hand of God. It is God who brings their suffering upon them. Here a few verses on this point:

"...how the LORD in His anger has set the daughter of Zion under a cloud."

It is the idea that they are under a cloud of His wrath. They are in a storm of His destruction. "*The LORD is right, for I have rejected and rebelled against His Word.*" "*Is it not right that good and bad come; why should a*

man complain about the punishment of his sins?" It is God who brought suffering to the people. That sort of shocks us. We think God can only bless us and do good toward us; God can't curse and do bad toward us!

But Lamentations says, yes, we are in a bad situation and God has done this to us. What we see is God disciplining His children. We find that the discipline of God is not an act of being unloved; it is an act of love. In

Hebrews 12, the writer expands on this concept and says that God disciplines His sons, whom He loves. If God doesn't discipline His wayward children, it means He doesn't love them. He gives an earthly example when

he says, what earthly father doesn't discipline his sons. If he doesn't discipline, it shows he doesn't love them, but discipline shows love to sons. Not disciplining actually shows a son is unloved.

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When my boys get up, the first thing they want to do is drink chocolate milk and watch a show. A few mornings ago, the two older boys are drinking their milk and watching their show and the youngest came in. He is one and a half years old, and he hasn't really gotten to the stage of discipline yet. So he is running around carrying his sippy cup and he goes in and hits my oldest on the head with it as hard as he can. He just bangs him right on the head! My oldest immediately said, "Dad, Dad, look what he did!" Then he stood up and said, "Dad, you need to spank him! He needs discipline!" Here is my five year old son, basically indicting me with this: If you are a good dad, you need to discipline your son. He is wayward; he is doing what is wrong. If you are a good dad, he needs a

spanking; he needs discipline! Even my five year old gets the point that a good dad disciplines his sons who go wayward. When sons rebel, there must be discipline. It shows love, connection, and affection, because we want them to go right. This is what we see for Israel. We see God brings suffering to the people as an act of discipline, not to cast them off forever, but to restore them back to Himself.

3. Israel's only hope is the Lord.

In the midst of their sin and God's punishment, their hope is to trust in the God who wounded them to be the same God who will heal them. The God who broke them is the only God who can restore them. Their only hope in their situation of suffering under the hand of God is not to run away from Him, not to find a way out from under His hand, but to return to the Lord for restoration. That is one of the big things we will see throughout this lesson. Chapter 3:21-24 is where the highlight of the book is, where the exclamation point is in this book. This is the climax of the book. But I want to start with verse 1-20 to give a backdrop of what is going on.

Scripture

"I am the man who has seen affliction under the rod of his wrath; he has driven 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."

Jeremiah is suffering under the hand of God. He said, You have your bow and you are shooting me with Your arrows. You are like a lion who is devouring and ripping me apart. You are bringing suffering upon me. Notice that Jeremiah is a faithful prophet during this time. He is a faithful prophet suffering in the midst of a rebellious people. Perhaps you find yourself in a similar place. You feel walled in with no escape. It feels like the night is dark and there is no light. You are in a place of suffering and mourning. You are lamenting and your soul is so troubled about a situation, or something within you, that you have no idea what to do. Jeremiah has lost hope and happiness. He forgot what happiness was like. You may be like him. You have forgotten what happiness is like; forgotten the last time you even laughed or smiled. You have forgotten the last time that joy was a characteristic about yourself. So, what did Jeremiah do?

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

Now he has hope because he calls something to his mind. I love what Alistair Begg, from Truth for Life, said. He said that Jeremiah didn't get emotional here; he got theological. Jeremiah didn't look around at the situations and the arrows piercing him and think that things weren't so bad, and then just smile and think it was ok. He didn't think, just suck it up and everything would be ok, and he would just deal with the situation and act as if nothing happened and everything was fine. He doesn't try to call up some emotional response where he will just think positively and act like nothing is happening. This is real...He says I'm dying here, but something happened in my mind. I called something to my mind; I remembered something. In remembering something, I had hope in the midst of an

utterly hopeless situation. What does he remember? What does he have hope in?

Great is God's Faithfulness

Verses 22-24: ***"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."***

What has happened here? He was hopeless and everything was gone, but in his mind, he remembers that he has hope! That hope is God. God is his only hope in his situation. The God who brought this calamity is the only God in which he can have hope. The reason is because he knows the character and the nature of God. God's character and nature is that He is steadfast in love. God is love, and Jeremiah knows that; he remembers that. Perhaps he was remembering all the stories of how God continued to be faithful in the midst of unfaithfulness. He remembered His great love that He continually lavishes upon His people. Jeremiah knows the love of God firsthand because he has experienced it as a prophet of God. Even though the situation is terrible, he remembers God isn't terrible or evil; God is good. His love never ends, never ceasing, never abandoning; therefore, he has hope.

Not only that, but His mercies never end, they are new every morning. He will never cast us off. His mercies are always there, new every morning! I like the idea of being new every morning. It's as if Jeremiah is in the dead of night. It is midnight, it is pitch black, and he has no hope. But he remembers that after midnight comes the sunrise. Though he can't see the sunrise, he knows it's around the bend. Every single morning, the sun comes up, and the same is true with God's mercy. No matter how black the night is in your life, the sun always rises. His mercies are always new for those who trust in Him. Jeremiah knows he is in the midnight stage of his life, but he knows if he trusts in the Lord, there will be a morning. The sun will shine again.

Then, he said, *"Great is Your faithfulness."* God is shooting him with a bow and arrow, and Jeremiah said, *"Great is Your faithfulness."* The situation

wasn't good. It's not as if God gave him a big house and a nice life and he thought God was faithful. God has destroyed him, and his response is that God is faithful! Jeremiah said, You are my portion, God. In other words, God is all Jeremiah had. God is all he needed and all he wanted.

In verse 24, his soul said, "...*therefore I will hope in him.*" Verse 21 says, I called to mind and I have hope. Then he remembers God, and verse 24 says, therefore I will hope. So in the midst of suffering, you have hope, you choose, and then you will hope. The key to your suffering is that you have hope. You know God, you know He is faithful, and His mercies never end. He is always there for you, a wayward son who comes back. You have hope, therefore, you will hope. Having hope must move to engaging in hope and using hope.

Wait and Seek the Lord

I want you to notice Jeremiah's action steps. In verse 25, he said that he would wait and seek the Lord. Wait and seek the Lord seems like two different things to us. You are either waiting or you are seeking; you can't do both at the same time. But Jeremiah said, I will seek the Lord and I'm going to wait for Him. He is saying, I am going to seek after the Lord in my despair and suffering, and while I seek for Him, I will wait for Him. In other words, if He doesn't show up, if He doesn't alleviate my suffering, I am not going to turn to something else, or move on to some other fix, I am going to keep seeking Him until He shows up. It is seek God until I die! Either He shows up, or I die, that is the negotiating factor.

Restoration and Renewal

Notice Jeremiah's anticipation in his action. In verses 32-33, he said, *"...but, though he cause grief, he will have compassion according to the abundance of his steadfast love; for he does not willingly afflict or grieve the children of men."* Under this huge suffering, his anticipation is that it will not end in his destruction; it will end in his restoration. This will end in renewal. The people of God are going to be renewed because we are going to hope in the Lord. Though He has slain us, we will hope in Him. He is the only place we have to go.

Some of you find yourself in this exact situation. You are exactly where Jeremiah is, perhaps even innocent in whatever suffering you find yourself. Perhaps it is the group around you, or a family, or business situation. You might be innocent like Jeremiah, but you see this great suffering or calamity. What should be your response? You have hope, therefore, you will hope. Remember that God is good and His love never ceases. His mercies are new every morning and great is His faithfulness, so run to Him. That is what Jeremiah did.

Perhaps you are like Israel, and your suffering is directly related to your own personal sin. You have sinned repeatedly, you have gone wayward from the Lord, and now you are suffering. Your lies and deceit have led you into a situation that has spun out of control. You just keep lying and being deceptive trying to make it all right, but now you are caught in a situation where you are utterly hopeless. For some, your lust has turned from pleasure and excitement into utter misery. It has led you into the very blackness of the night. For some, your greed has brought you to a place where you are now overwhelmed. It might be payments or material things that have you so overwhelmed you can barely get out of bed in the morning because of the stress. It is your own greed that brought this upon you. Perhaps your own gossip has destroyed your reputation or the reputation of those you love. Perhaps your actions have absolutely gutted a relationship that you had, and now it is in utter destruction. For you, it might be a pursuit of pleasure that has led you to an addiction that you cannot shake. Perhaps being unwilling to forgive has been the theme of your life, and now it is eating you away and you don't know what to do. Whatever your 'idol,' it has left you empty rather than full. Whatever it is you find yourself suffering, you know you can trace it down to the fact that you didn't listen to the Lord. This is on you; this is your sin that has brought this destruction. There is a good chance it is from your Father, who is disciplining you through this. What in the world are you to do in that situation? Do you run from Him, try to avoid Him, or try to hide from Him? No, you do what verse 40 says: *"Let us test and examine our ways, and return to the LORD!"* That is the point of His discipline! He has you at the point of hopelessness so you will realize you are hopeless apart from

Him, so you will examine your ways and return to Him because you have hope and you will hope.

What is your hope? God's love never ceases! Though you have been wayward for years, His love doesn't cease. Though you think you have run your course and there isn't another chance for you; God says yes, there is another chance, because His mercy never ends. It is new every single morning. His faithfulness is not like your faithfulness; His faithfulness is great! In the midst of a dark moment of suffering, whether from your own sin, your surroundings, or unexplained suffering, you have to fight it in your mind. You have to get theological with it. You have to say, 'I have hope, therefore, I will hope.' It is not in how you will fix your situation; it is, 'I know God; therefore, I am going to hope in God.'

Jeremiah remembered who God was and how much He loved His people; therefore, he was hopeful. How much more do we know the love of God? We know it far greater than Jeremiah did because we have seen the cross of Jesus Christ. We see Jeremiah as an innocent prophet suffering among the people. But in Jesus, we see the God-man coming and suffering for His people, not among the people, but for the people. All of our wrongs were poured out on Him. God demonstrated His love in that while we were still sinners, Christ died for us. God took all of our waywardness and poured it on Christ, who was completely innocent of all sin! Jesus took the punishment that you and I deserve; that is how much He loves us. So when you are suffering your own waywardness, don't dare tell God this is not fair! No, what is not fair is Jesus suffering on a cross in your place for your sins. But He did it because He loves you and wants you to come back and redeem you. He wants you to examine your ways and return to the Lord. In Him, you find hope. You have hope, therefore, you will hope.

One of the ways that love is shown so greatly is through the table of the Lord's Supper. You see, in Lamentations, we have heard laments from an innocent prophet, but at the table, we remember the laments of an innocent Savior! In His blood and His body, He was broken for us. "My God, My God, why have You forsaken Me?" He was in anguish. He took the cup of our gall and drank it. He soaked up the wrath we deserved to say I love you, and I want you back. We have seen the love of God fully

displayed on the cross of Christ. So no matter what you are going through, you cannot say that God doesn't love you. He displayed His love upon you on a hill called Calvary. He has shown how much He loves us by taking our place for our sins. Examine your ways, and return to Him.