

Waiting with Hope

Lamentations 3:21-26

Turn with me to Lamentations this morning. Many of you may be uncertain as to where you can find this small Old Testament book. It is right after Jeremiah and right before Ezekiel.

“Lamentation” is an uncommon word in our culture. One definition of the term is: **“the passionate expression of grief or sorrow; weeping.”** In our culture being seen with tears in your eyes is embarrassing. “Being strong” at a funeral is the goal – don’t show tears, if you can help it.

It goes beyond funerals. There is little social benefit in telling a “sob story.” We keep our suffering and our heartaches bottled up and closed in. When we’re around others, even at church, we want them to think that we have everything together. That everything is fine with us and our family.

For evangelical Christians, we almost promise this as a right for those who would believe. “Trust Jesus” and He will fulfill your dreams. Find your true self, have abundant life, if you just trust Jesus. Once you know you’re going to Heaven, the rest of life is a cake-walk. Some people get sucked into this way of thinking, and honestly think that the Bible promises a life with all roses and no thorns. Have your cake and eat it too – for free and with no trouble.

This is actually not what the Bible teaches however. And sadly, when some people experience heart-ache and sorrow, when life seems to fall to pieces around them – they look at the empty promises of many church songs and walk away. Their Christianity is not big enough and deep enough to weather life’s storms. They weren’t rooted in the true Gospel.

No, the Bible promises troubles and trials for every believer:

1 Pet. 4:12 “Beloved, do not be surprised at the fiery trial when it comes upon you to test you, as though something strange were happening to you.”

2 Tim. 3:12 “Indeed, all who desire to live a godly life in Christ Jesus will be persecuted.”

James 1:2 “Count it all joy, my brothers, when you meet trials of various kinds.”

Acts 14:22 “Strengthening the souls of the disciples, encouraging them to continue in the faith, and saying that through many tribulations we must enter the kingdom of God.”

1 Thess. 3:3 “That no one be moved by these afflictions. For you yourselves know that we are destined for this.”

John 16:33 “...In the world you will have tribulation...”

Luke 21:16b-17 “Some of you they will put to death. You will be hated by all for my name’s sake.”

I say this to bring us back to Lamentations. Giving vent to our sorrow and grief through passionate expression and even weeping is one of God’s ways for us to endure the trials of life.

One author described lamentations this way:

“These are times when you may feel tremendously perplexed or utterly forsaken or paralyzed by fear or overwhelmed with anger or lost in despair. These are times when you cry out, “My God, my God, why have you forsaken me? Why are you so far from saving me, so far from the words of my groaning?” (Ps. 22:1) or “How long, O LORD? Will you forget me forever? How long will you hide your face from me? How long must I wrestle with my thoughts and every day have sorrow in my heart? How long will my enemy triumph over me? (Ps. 13:1-2) or “You have taken my companions and loved ones from me; the darkness is my closest friend” (Ps. 88:18).

The laments are the psalms composed for what some have called “the dark night of the soul,” for times when “weeping may last through the night” (Ps. 30:5), perhaps even night after night after night (Ps. 6:6). [These psalms] give us permission, and show us how, to let the tears flow.

(Interpreting the Psalms: An Exegetical Handbook, by Mark Futato, Kregel, 2007, 150-151)

In short, lamentations are a good thing. They are helpful and wholesome. But still, they are strange sounding, so let’s look more closely to Scripture.

Before we read, let me **pray**.

Our text is Lamentations 3:21-26, but we need a little context before we get there. So let me set the stage and then we will begin reading in chapter 2.

The context of what happens in Lamentations starts all the way back when David became the King. He realized the ideal that had been hoped for – one of the tribe of Judah is the godly King over God’s people in God’s land. David united the tribes of Israel and set aside materials and a heavenly plan for the building of a special Temple where God would live with His people forever.

Unfortunately, the good thing David started wouldn’t last forever. Solomon didn’t follow God wholeheartedly but allowed his heart to be turned to false gods by the women he accumulated around him. And when he died, the kingdom was split. Prophets were sent repeatedly to warn the nation to follow God or else to face judgment. And first the northern kingdom was conquered and exiled. Then in 586 BC, Jerusalem, the site of God’s Temple, was destroyed just as the prophets had warned. God’s people were exiled to Babylon and the Promised Land was ruined and empty.

The prophet Jeremiah, it would seem, is the author of Lamentations and he carefully constructs this book lamenting the terrible tragedy of Jerusalem’s destruction. The book is written completely with carefully constructed Hebrew poetry. The first four chapters are all Hebrew acrostics, with each stanza or line starting with a different Hebrew letter of the alphabet. This is no haphazard and careless expression of grief, but a thought-out lamentation of sorrow – and hope.

We pick up now, with Jeremiah in Lamentations chapter 2.

Read chapter 2 – 3:20. Then cherry pick from vs. 27 – vs. 66.

I. FEEL the Darkness

A. The weight of tragedy and loss

1. It is okay to be “blown away” by loss and grief.
2. It is okay to cry: Lam. 3:48-49, 2:11a
3. Have you ever been here?
4. Natural disaster, the ravages of war (Hiroshima and Nanking), horrific accidents, terminal illness, the betrayal of a friend, the loss of a job, the loss of marriage, the waywardness of a child.

B. The “why” is not always clear

1. For Jeremiah, it is clear that the sin of Israel brought this punishment.
2. As believers in Jesus, He took our punishment for our sins, so God doesn’t pour out wrath on us.
3. Sometimes God does chasten/discipline us Heb. 12
4. Sometimes we reap the consequences of poor choices
5. It is wrong to assume the “why” for someone else

C. Comfort those who weep

1. Rom. 12:15 “Rejoice with those who rejoice, weep with those who weep.”
2. Eccl. 3:4, 5b [there is] “s time to weep, and a time to laugh; a time to mourn, and a time to dance... a time to embrace, and a time to refrain from embracing;”
3. Lam. 1:12, 16-17

II. Learn to Wait

A. Wrestle with God / pray

- Ps. 13:1-2 “How long, O LORD? Will you forget me forever? How long will you hide your face from me? How long must I take counsel in my soul and have sorrow in my heart all the day? How long shall my enemy be exalted over me?”
- Lam. 1:11c “Look, O Lord, and see, for I am despised.”
- Lam. 1:20a “Look, O Lord, for I am in distress; my stomach churns; my heart is wrung within me,”
- Lam. 2:20a “Look, O Lord, and see! With whom have you dealt thus?”
- Lam. 5:20 “Why do you forget us forever, why do you forsake us for so many days?”
- Know that the wrestling and the questioning are:
 - Natural
 - Okay
 - Spiritual (if directed to God)
 - Circular (you will question/wonder – trust/hope, then question/wonder again – 3:17-21, 22-26, but then back to 42-48 then 55-57)

- Learn to use Lamentations, and the Psalms of Lament (12, 22, 44, 88 – in fact as much as 70% of the psalter includes lament)
- Sing the Psalms of Lament as well
 - We don’t often sing psalms today but that is what they were used for by the OT “church”
 - Many church traditions today still use psalters and sing the psalms of David
 - Outside of singing the psalms there are a few songs that include lament – look for them and use them in your worship and wrestling times with God.

B. Remember God’s Mercy – Lam 3:21-24

1. Remind yourself of God’s character and His promises
 - a. Compassion, Love, Faithfulness
 - b. 3:22-33
 - c. This section is at the key center point of the book – emphasizing this is what is most important in this poem
2. Remember past mercies and past deliverances

C. Listen to God’s message

- CS Lewis:

“God whispers to us in our pleasures, speaks in our conscience, but shouts in our pains – it is his megaphone to rouse a deaf world.”
- Mark Dever:

“Your sufferings are a message to you. Do not despise them or waste them. Take them as a refining and chastening opportunity, and begin by confessing your sins to God.”
(The Message of the OT, Crossway, 2006, p. 618)

D. Explore How God may be Using this in your life

God is at work shaping us and turning us into something better.

- Job teaches us that dark times are not always due to personal sin – but sometimes they are
- But it is wright to be challenged to confess sin and look for a cause within when looking for our “why” – Lam. 3:40-41 “Let us test and examine our ways, and return to the Lord! Let us lift up our hearts and hands to God in heaven...”
- We are not promised to discover the “why”
- Trials and dark times are “gifts” from God for our good – not an impossible situation/setup to fail – James 1
- C.S. Lewis has an excellent illustration that may help here: “We are... a Divine work of art, something that God is making, and therefore something with which He will not be satisfied until it has a certain character. Over a sketch made idly to amuse a child, an artist may not take much trouble: he may be content to let it go even though it is not exactly as he meant it to be. But over the great picture of his life—the work which he loves... he will take endless trouble—and would, doubtless, thereby give endless trouble to the picture... One can imagine a picture, after being rubbed and scraped and recommenced for the tenth time, wishing that it were only a thumbnail sketch whose making was over in a minute. In the same way, it is natural for us to wish that God had designed for us a less glorious and less arduous destiny; but then we are wishing not for more love but for less.”

(The Problem of Pain, quoted in Finding God in the Hard Times, Matt & Beth Redman, Bethany House, 2016, p. 60)

III. Hope in Jesus

A. Ultimately our hope is in Jesus

1. Jesus joins us in mourning/lamenting the problems of this sin-cursed world.
 - He cried out “My God, My God, Why have you forsaken me?” – Ps. 22:1 on the Cross (Mt. 27:46)
 - Heb. 5:7 “In the days of his flesh, Jesus offered up prayers and supplications, with loud cries and tears, to him who was able to save him from death, and he was heard because of his reverence.”
2. He not only mourns for the people, in their stead (like Jeremiah, taking the group lament in the other chapters and personifying it in chapter 3).
3. Jesus also experienced the ravaging that Jerusalem in his own betrayal, torture and murder.
 - He Gave his cheek to the smiters (3:30)
 - He received the wrath of God and the punishment for sins – 52-54 parallels Ps. 22 and the words Jesus said on the Cross.
 - He drank gall (3:19) and was taunted (3:14)
 - God ignored his prayer for salvation from the trouble (3:8)
 - God caused him grief (3:32 and Is. 55:10)
 - He was betrayed by his enemies without cause (3:52)
4. Jesus received joy and Resurrection – and promises that for us – even if our trial ends in death we can have what Jesus promises.

B. Realize that Hope only benefits those who have to wait

1. If we don't have burdens and trials, then why would we need to hope for anything to come?
2. Too often, our songs and our church services are too happy go lucky, and "unreal" and "not true to life."
3. The Jesus in the Bible was not happy go lucky, but he got down and dirty healing the sick and dealing with the afflicted of this world.
4. The words to the well-known hymn: "Great is Thy Faithfulness" are taken from the best verses in Lamentation 3. But as we have seen, these verses don't live on an island. They are connected to a very deep and troublesome sea. Their great comfort flows from the context of grief and sorrow.
5. The songs we sing about love and faith and hope – all need to be tied in our minds to the reality of dark nights of the soul, and fiery trials that are sure to come.
6. Is our Gospel big enough to navigate us through dark waters? Is our Hope secure enough to help those who are hanging on and patiently enduring life's problems?
7. Will we cast a lifeline to others and open up about our own problems and heartaches, and care for those around us – comforting the grieving, in a sorrowful yet always rejoicing way.

Closing: