

**Reading the Bible in Times of Sorrow and Suffering**  
**February 5, 2012 - Lamentations 3:1-33**

Imagine with me that you came to church one Sunday and you were not doing well. Maybe you didn't feel great or you had a tough week or something troubling happened in your life. How do you answer the question "how are you" from someone at church on Sunday morning when you're not doing well? Of course, it depends on who asks it and how comfortable you are in sharing with them. Some of you may have answered honestly and said a tough week but glad it's over. Some of you might have just avoided the question and pretended not to hear or see. Some of you may lie and say you're fine when you're actually not. When people ask me that question these days, I answer with the phrase "do you want the grocery store clerk answer or the real answer?" The real answer for me during this season of grief is some days are good; some days are hard but overall I think I'm okay. But what do you do when you're not doing well? What about spiritually? What if you don't feel like talking to God? Where do you turn when you're spiritually dry? How can you pray when you've been slammed by some really bad news or difficult situation?

There once was a man who faced great difficulties. He survived a terrible siege of his capital city. But the city finally fell. And now the conquerors wreaked havoc on what remained of it. He witnessed the devastation of his home, land and people. He suffered personally with physical illness and emotional pain. And he felt like God had abandoned him. Yet, he went on a journey that reconnected him to God. This journey did not involve repeating the phrase "don't worry, be happy." In fact, this suffering man journeys through something called lament to reconnect with God.

He survived the siege and fall of Jerusalem in 587 BC. He witnessed its ongoing destruction as the Babylonians tore down all the major buildings and burned the remains to the ground. He witnessed the destruction of Solomon's temple and the death of many. He suffered a lot. Yet in the end, he was able to reconnect with God through this thing called lament. We're not certain of his identity. It could have been Jeremiah the Prophet, his scribe Baruch or someone else. But whoever it was preserved his thoughts for us in today's Bible passage.

To travel through it, we're going to answer the following questions to unpack his journey. What is a lament? Why is it so foreign to us? What does the writer say in his lament? Why does He have reason to hope in the end? If you're struggling today, this is directly relevant to you. If you're doing great, save this for the next time you go through some difficulty. To look at his lament, we're going to go the Bible book with the word "lament" in the title.

Lamentations 3.

## Lamentations 3:1-33 (New Living Translation)

### Hope in the LORD's Faithfulness

- <sup>1</sup> I am the one who has seen the afflictions  
that come from the rod of the LORD's anger.
- <sup>2</sup> He has led me into darkness,  
shutting out all light.
- <sup>3</sup> He has turned his hand against me  
again and again, all day long.
- <sup>4</sup> He has made my skin and flesh grow old.  
He has broken my bones.
- <sup>5</sup> He has besieged and surrounded me  
with anguish and distress.
- <sup>6</sup> He has buried me in a dark place,  
like those long dead.
- <sup>7</sup> He has walled me in, and I cannot escape.  
He has bound me in heavy chains.
- <sup>8</sup> And though I cry and shout,  
he has shut out my prayers.
- <sup>9</sup> He has blocked my way with a high stone wall;  
he has made my road crooked.
- <sup>10</sup> He has hidden like a bear or a lion,  
waiting to attack me.
- <sup>11</sup> He has dragged me off the path and torn me in pieces,  
leaving me helpless and devastated.
- <sup>12</sup> He has drawn his bow  
and made me the target for his arrows.
- <sup>13</sup> He shot his arrows  
deep into my heart.
- <sup>14</sup> My own people laugh at me.  
All day long they sing their mocking songs.
- <sup>15</sup> He has filled me with bitterness  
and given me a bitter cup of sorrow to drink.
- <sup>16</sup> He has made me chew on gravel.  
He has rolled me in the dust.
- <sup>17</sup> Peace has been stripped away,  
and I have forgotten what prosperity is.
- <sup>18</sup> I cry out, "My splendor is gone!  
Everything I had hoped for from the LORD is lost!"
- <sup>19</sup> The thought of my suffering and homelessness  
is bitter beyond words.<sup>[a]</sup>
- <sup>20</sup> I will never forget this awful time,  
as I grieve over my loss.
- <sup>21</sup> Yet I still dare to hope  
when I remember this:

- <sup>22</sup> The faithful love of the LORD never ends!<sup>[b]</sup>  
His mercies never cease.
- <sup>23</sup> Great is his faithfulness;  
his mercies begin afresh each morning.
- <sup>24</sup> I say to myself, "The LORD is my inheritance;  
therefore, I will hope in him!"
- <sup>25</sup> The LORD is good to those who depend on him,  
to those who search for him.
- <sup>26</sup> So it is good to wait quietly  
for salvation from the LORD.
- <sup>27</sup> And it is good for people to submit at an early age  
to the yoke of his discipline:
- <sup>28</sup> Let them sit alone in silence  
beneath the LORD's demands.
- <sup>29</sup> Let them lie face down in the dust,  
for there may be hope at last.
- <sup>30</sup> Let them turn the other cheek to those who strike them  
and accept the insults of their enemies.
- <sup>31</sup> For no one is abandoned  
by the Lord forever.
- <sup>32</sup> Though he brings grief, he also shows compassion  
because of the greatness of his unfailing love.
- <sup>33</sup> For he does not enjoy hurting people  
or causing them sorrow.

**What is lament?** - "A difficult conversation we have with God that has to do with disappointment, suffering, anger and even bitterness." Christian songwriter Michael Card states "If you're going to have healthy relationship with your wife, for instance, you have to be willing to be honest about all aspects of the relationship. Especially the hard parts. If we want to have a healthy relationship with God, we need to be honest with Him about our lives.

### **Why is lament so foreign to us?**

Card states "We allow ourselves to be shaped by this culture – this 'I'm OK, you're OK' culture. We may be struggling deeply, but we don't feel the freedom to be honest about it. The laments involve brutal honesty.

Chuck De Groat, Pastor, City Church, San Francisco. In our North American Context, failure and struggle are often viewed as problems, jagged detours on what is supposed to be the smooth straight road of life. It's a distinctly western phenomenon, but one that subtly impacts our Christian perceptions.

John Ortberg - Every Christian wants a "normal" reading on their spiritual thermometer. We all want to feel spiritually vigorous, and we hurt when we don't. This pain is intensified for people who lead church ministries. You ask yourself the question: "How am I able to lead people to life when I feel dead inside? Is it even safe to try?"

On top of that we tend to compare our “insides” with other people’s “outsides.” Nowhere is truer than in ministry (and the church). We see other ducks floating serenely on their pond, but the only furiously churning legs are my own.”

George Guthrie – author of *Read the Bible for Life* says “In modern church life we place a lot of emphasis on praise, as we should. But lament seems to add a voice to the dark side of our experiences, experiences that might push us away from God.” And yet, as I think about the laments of the Bible, which are there to help us come to God in the midst of our sufferings, they seem to play virtually no role in modern worship. And it’s understandable. You wouldn’t want to go to a church where all we sang was lament. But sometimes a church can portray this image that true Christians are always praising God, always happy and if you’re not there’s something wrong with your faith. But that’s not Biblical as we see in this poem.

#### **What does the writer say in his lament?**

The writer begins his lament by declaring **It’s dark – Life’s NOT good – LnG**. He’s not really talking about literal darkness. He’s in darkness because of his circumstances. The trouble and devastation he’s seen destroys his sense of well-being and peace. He struggles especially because the Lord allowed the affliction. Do you see that in verse 1? “I am the one who has seen the afflictions that come from the rod of the Lord’s anger. The southern kingdom of Israel named Judah and people suffered because they were under God’s judgment. He experienced personal suffering because of this. So it feels like everything has gone dark, verse 2 – He has led me into darkness, shutting out all light. He’s talking about God. The writer won’t be cheered by someone saying, “Don’t worry, be happy”.

In fact, he concludes, God’s hand seems to be against him all the time. Vs. 3 “He has turned his hand against me, again and again all day long.” So wherever he turns, he sees this devastation. Whatever he tries to do, he feels opposed. Wherever he turns, he sees the magnitude of the disaster. It’s like the citizens of Haiti today. It’s been two years since that devastating earthquake. Yet the presidential palace still stands in ruins. Many still live in tents. Or if you got the Schuster update this week, you read about their return to an earthquake devastated region.

*Our first return to the city where Michelle and I did search and rescue work after the earthquake 3 years ago was somber and brought back many emotions. For the first time our kids got a chance to see the destroyed city. It is not being rebuilt and has been left in it’s crumbled, hollow entirety as a graveyard memorial to the 89,000 who lost their lives that*

day. *Walking past crushed cars and homes once again made us keenly aware of the fleetingness of this life, and the need to make the hope for the next available to all.* The writer of Lamentations witnessed something similar and it felt like there was no escape from it.

In verses 4-6, the writer paints the picture of a siege. He seems to describe the effect the siege of Jerusalem had on his body. His flesh and skin waste away – like one enduring a long time of hardship. The citizens who endured the long siege by the Babylonians suffered immensely. But then the writer turns the siege image around and makes God the besieger. “He has besieged and surrounded me.” And sometimes, citizens of a siege would be buried under the rubble of collapsing buildings still alive yet in darkness. So he feels like God has buried him in a dark place. This writer has a dark perspective.

Then he goes in verses 7-9 to declare another set of his feelings. **I’m trapped.** He sees no way out of his state. In fact, he’s becoming more and more restricted. Verse 7 – “He has walled me in and I cannot escape. He has bound me with heavy chains.” He feels like a prisoner in a cell in chains. These chains are not little ones. They are heavy so that should he somehow break them, the heaviness would hinder any escape. Yet the trapped feeling just gets worse. He cries out and shouts out to God but feels like God has shut out his prayers. On top of that He feels like God blocks his way with “blocks of stones” or “cut stones.” So he feels like God not only dumped some stones on a path to block his way. He deliberately constructed a wall of stones to hinder his escape.

Then in verses 10-12 he expresses another feeling. **I’m hunted.** Here it’s like he has somehow escaped from prison or sees some hope of getting away from his circumstances. But the Lord waits to strike him down. He describes the Lord as a bear lying in wait or lion hiding and waiting to pounce. Then the animal strikes, grabs him and forces him off the path to tear him to pieces. He continues this hunting image through verses 12-13 where he pictures the Lord as an expert archer. He pulls the bow and a target awaits on the writer’s back. Then the Lord strikes in verse 13. His arrow penetrates deep into the writer’s kidneys; a vital organ.

This is all bad enough. But then people mock him. All peoples mock him. Those who conquered Jerusalem mock him simply by being there and demonstrating their authority over the conquered people. Some of his own people mock him, maybe for keeping faith in God through this all. So he declares **“It’s bitter.”** God has filled me with

bitterness. He has fed me wormwood, a disgusting tasting herb. It was sometimes used for the bitter herb they ate at Passover to remember the bitterness of slavery in Egypt. It's like God forced him to drink Buckley's every half hour.

So he concludes his lament in verses 17-19. It's like I have to eat dirt. I have no peace. I don't think I'll ever laugh again. I'm at the end of my endurance and hope in the Lord. **There is no hope.** That's the conclusion of this lament. This unloading has allowed him to state what he's really feeling. He has come to the bottom of his fears and frustrations. He has unmasked what he really feels.

But then it seems like this gives him some clarity. Now that he's gotten this out, it's like he can stop wallowing in it. So in verse 19 he cries out in prayer to the Lord. "Remember my affliction and my wanderings, the wormwood and the gall! My soul remembers it and is bowed down within me. But, the turning point, the contrary view, the moment when he says "no" to the conclusion that there is no hope. "But this I call to mind, and therefore I have hope."

### **Why can the writer hope?**

**Reason 1 -The Lord NEVER stops steadfastly loving us.** God demonstrated again and again in the Old Testament that He still loved His people, even when they rebelled against them. Even when He allowed enemies to conquer them, that was not the end of His love. He would preserve a remnant. He would restore them again and again. He made a commitment to this people. He would not break His word. So even though this very difficult tragedy struck the nation and this writer's life, he was still alive. He had not been consumed. He still had days to live and purposes to fulfill. He could keep going because God's steadfast love NEVER ceases.

So this writer testifies that the worst moments in life do not build evidence that God has ceased loving. He is there in the midst of the worst. Christian songwriter Michael Card says this: *"Why do we think God wants us only on our good days? He's paid a price to live in relationship with us on our worst days; in the worst moments of your life God loves you so much He wants to be there.*

Why can this writer still have hope? **Reason 2 – The Lord's mercies NEVER come to an end.** Think about that. Mercy – undeserved favor from God, never comes to an end. So one morning we get up and charge into our day depending solely on our own resources, strength and personality and go through the day steam rolling people until someone finally tells us to stop. Then we confess forgetting the Lord and He mercifully receives our confession and says "Let's try again tomorrow." Or we go back to that habit or sin that we know is destructive and we know hinders our

fellowship with God. Then we're struck with guilt and earnestly confess. He meets us with mercy and forgiveness and says "Let's move forward and leave that behind." The Lord's mercies never come to an end. We sin every day. We don't see the magnitude of our sin and how ingrained it is into our motives and attitudes and conclusions. If the Lord kept track of our sins on a ledger like we might keep track of someone else's failings, we'd be toast. Yet His mercies NEVER come to an end. In fact, they are new every morning – not that it's a new thing that we get mercy today. But it's a new start to every day. That's the amazing thing about sleep and God creating us to need a conscious break every night. Can you imagine trying to live life with no sleep for years? There would be no conscious breaks from yesterday's sins and mistakes. Yet God designed us so that we need sleep and get that fresh start every morning.

This writer has hope because: **Reason 3 – The Lord's faithfulness is Great.** You may have heard that phrase from verse 23 before – Great is your faithfulness. It describes God's character in relationship with us. This faithfulness is seen in God's consistency, stability, truth and permanence. God's faithfulness and integrity remain intact no matter how bad things seem.

Did you notice the change that occurred in verse 23? It's like the change we saw last week in Psalm 23. Remember, David starts by describing the Lord in the third person – The Lord is my shepherd. He makes me lie down in green pastures. But then when David gets to the dark valley he changes to the second person – you. "Even though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, you are with me." Well what happens here in verse 23? Great is God's faithfulness? No. Great is your faithfulness, O God." He's moved from describing God as the prison warden and hunter to God the Faithful One.

This leads to more reasons to hope. **Reason 4 – The Lord is my portion, therefore I will hope in him.** Now why is that a reason to hope? Well, the word translated portion is most often used in the Old Testament to describe a piece of land. What had just happened? Israel lost her land. The Babylonians came in and conquered the land. So Israel and the Israelites had no more land. They had no portion. They lost their homes, their city, their vineyards, their fields, their independence, their freedom, their country and many of their friends and family. Thousands would be deported to Babylon. They'd lost everything.

Except the Lord. The Lord is my portion. This is nothing new to the Israelites. God taught them this reality through the priests. They received no land inheritance when Israel first went into the Promised Land. Numbers 18:20

tells us “And the Lord said to Aaron, ‘You shall have no inheritance in their land, neither shall you have any portion among them. I am your portion and your inheritance among the people of Israel.’ *The people would be sustained in the normal way by the produce of their land, while the priests owed their survival directly to God Himself, who provided for them from the offerings received.*

So when the narrator states that God is his portion, he affirms where his commitment ultimately lies (in the spiritual rather than merely the physical realm: this is where he “lives”). And he recognizes that ultimately, he depends entirely on the Lord for his survival. Remember we talked about this a few weeks ago when we were looking at the temptations of Jesus. He answered the devil’s invitation to turn stones into bread with “Man does not live by bread alone but by every word that comes from the mouth of God.” Ultimately, our lives depend on God’s Word, not whether we get enough bread. This writer faced incredible calamity in the earthly realm and probably lost his land. Yet the belief that God represents his “real dwelling place” comforts Him and provides hope.

You can lose your job, your house, your bank savings, your car and even loved ones – all difficult losses, but if you know Christ, you still have Him.

This is one of those strange blessings that come in times of loss. Loss strips away things we put too much hope in and reveal that God is worthy of our ultimate hope. I really want to be careful here. Sometimes, well-meaning Christians will try to comfort bereaved Christians with statements like “you loved your child more than God. So God took the child so you could find out the sufficiency of His love.” I’m not saying that nor does that conclusion have Biblical foundation. I am saying that in times when we experience loss or darkness, we find out who’s trustworthy and who or what we can really lean on during those times. We discover who can handle the discomfort of our illness. We discover people who don’t let their discomfort with our suffering stop them from just being there. We discover God is always there. God uses suffering. God accomplishes much.

In fact, what was going on when God accomplished the most important work in salvation history? Jesus was suffering. Jesus was lamenting. Jesus was dying. Through that, God accomplished salvation Through Jesus’ suffering and substitution – going to the cross instead of us – God’s wrath was satisfied. We can be saved and experience that salvation today.

There is so much more in this chapter that this writer reveals about God and the reasons we have to trust in Him. But my time is almost gone. So let's review. Lament leads us through a process to God Himself. Lament teaches us that it's okay to deal with our suffering before God. Don't just stuff your feelings down and put a good face on it, like lots of us tend to do. Go through the process of pouring your heart out to God. And if you don't have the language for it, the Bible will give you the language. I've listed for you the laments found in the Psalms. There are community laments and individual laments. So when you're disappointed, suffering or darkness – enter into the journey of lament and rekindling hope.

- Admit “you're not okay” at this time.
- Pour out your heart and frustration to God. (If you don't have the language for it, use the Bible's laments).
- Then turn your heart to God.
- Go forward from there. There's no guarantee that you'll be in a good mood. Nor that anything will really have changed. But your perspective of God is renewed.

If you don't know Christ, know that because of His suffering and lament, you can be at peace with God. An ultimate day of the Lord is coming. But it's not too late to receive the Lord's protection. Maybe God is shouting at you through your pain. Please don't ignore His call.

So now, I want to give you the opportunity to lament before God – and offer up any frustration, disappointments, bitterness, suffering, illness. Then after a time of prayer, we will sing the hope of this text together.

(Quiet time of Prayer)

(Closing Prayer)