

## Dark Clouds, Deep Mercy

The Hope: God's Steadfast Love

Lamentations 3

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<sup>19</sup> Remember my affliction and my wanderings, the wormwood and the gall! <sup>20</sup> My soul continually remembers it and is bowed down within me. <sup>21</sup> But this I call to mind, and therefore I have hope: <sup>22</sup> The steadfast love of the LORD never ceases; his mercies never come to an end; <sup>23</sup> they are new every morning; great is your faithfulness. <sup>24</sup> "The LORD is my portion," says my soul, "therefore I will hope in him." <sup>25</sup> The LORD is good to those who wait for him, to the soul who seeks him. <sup>26</sup> It is good that one should wait quietly for the salvation of the LORD. <sup>27</sup> It is good for a man that he bear the yoke in his youth. <sup>28</sup> Let him sit alone in silence when it is laid on him; <sup>29</sup> let him put his mouth in the dust— there may yet be hope; <sup>30</sup> let him give his cheek to the one who strikes, and let him be filled with insults. <sup>31</sup> For the Lord will not cast off forever, <sup>32</sup> but, though he cause grief, he will have compassion according to the abundance of his steadfast love; <sup>33</sup> for he does not afflict from his heart or grieve the children of men. Lamentations 3:19–33 (ESV)

Tim Keller, in his book *Walking with God Through Pain and Suffering*, suggests that suffering requires self-communion and disciplined thinking:

*We must be disciplined in our thinking. You must meditate on the truth and gain the perspective that comes from remembering all God has done for you and is going to do. You should also do "self-communion." This is both listening to your heart and also reasoning and talking to your heart. It means saying, "Why are you cast down, O my soul? Forget not his benefits, his salvation" (Ps. 42; Ps. 103). This is not forcing yourself to feel in a certain way, but rather directing your thoughts until your heart, sooner or later, is engaged. Much of the thinking and self-communing that we must do has to do with Christian hope. Heaven and the resurrection and the future-perfect world are particularly important to meditate on if you are dealing with death--your own or someone else's. But it is crucial in all suffering.<sup>1</sup>*

What is Keller driving at? He is expressing something that I have found to be very practical and helpful when dealing with my own suffering or the suffering of others. Keller is pointing to the importance of our thinking and also our theology in the midst of suffering, whether innocent or deserved. Here is how I would say it: **Hope springs from truth rehearsed.**

How do you survive or even spiritually thrive in the midst of suffering? What are the thoughts that you should have as you walk through a season of wide-spread destruction? What theological truths should guide your thinking when you live in what feels like a wasteland? How do you fight the daily battle to be able to interpret life through a biblical lens?

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<sup>1</sup> Timothy Keller, *Walking with God through Pain and Suffering*, (New York, New York: Riverhead, 2013), 321.

These questions are not theoretical or academic. When suffering, hardship, or judgment comes, these questions will be a part of the dynamic in one way or another. In other words, pain of any kind causes us to ask really important questions, and it tests what we really believe. That is why suffering is both traumatic and clarifying. Suffering, whether innocent or guilty suffering, is very revealing. It shows you who you really are, it surfaces what you believe about God, and it tests you at very deep levels. And for this reason, suffering is hard, but it is not bad.

Laments are one of the most theologically-rich things that a Christian can do because suffering – for any reason – is one of the most theologically-informed moments of our lives. A lament helps us to give voice to the pain and to anchor our lives to the truths we believe.

Chapter three contains probably the most familiar verse in the book thanks to the hymn “Great is Thy Faithfulness”:

*<sup>22</sup> The steadfast love of the LORD never ceases; his mercies never come to an end;<sup>23</sup> they are new every morning; great is your faithfulness. (Lamentations 3:22–23)*

Most people sing this song with a view toward a reflective gratitude for what God has done. It is typically sung to give thanks for the Lord’s care or for his provision (“All I have needed thy hand hath provided . . .”). But in Lamentations 3, “Great is Thy Faithfulness” is said as Jeremiah looks at a smoldering, destroyed, and over-run city. In other words, Jeremiah is not just reflecting in his heart; he is pushing his heart toward what is true despite what he sees with his eyes. He is rehearsing what is true so that hope will rise.

### **The Summit of Lamentations 3**

This chapter is the summit of the book of Lamentations. In verses 21-33 we have a very clear message being delivered about who God is and what Jeremiah is trusting in. Everything builds to this point in the book, and chapters 4-5 turn back to the devastating scene but with a different mindset. Something is supposed to happen to you in verses 21-33.

Lamentations 3 is structurally unique from the first two chapters. Chapters 1-2 contained twenty-two verses, with each verse beginning with the subsequent letter of the Hebrew alphabet. The intent seems to have been to communicate that God’s judgment is complete, total, and from A to Z. The third chapter is organized differently. Instead of each verse starting with the subsequent letter, three verses in a row use the same letter. So, rather than sounding like A-B-C-D, the structure is A-A-A, B-B-B, C-C-C, D-D-D, etc. It seems to increase the intensity of what is being said.

The other unique thing about this chapter is the flow of the poem. While verses 21-33 serve as the theological center of both the chapter and the book, the sections that precede and follow verses 21-33 have very different perspectives.

## Two Different Perspectives on Hardship

The difference between how the destruction of Jerusalem is viewed could not be any more different in the beginning of Lamentations 3 as opposed to the end. Let me illustrate this with two verses:

- *“My endurance has perished, so has my hope from the Lord” (Lamentations 3:18)*
- *“You have taken up by cause, O Lord; you have redeemed my life” (Lamentations 3:58)*

In verses 1-20 there is yet another amplification of the pain that Jeremiah feels, and he is particularly struggling with God’s actions. We don’t have time to review all his struggles with God’s actions, so let’s just use the first five verses as sampling:

*<sup>1</sup> I am the man who has seen affliction under the rod of his wrath; <sup>2</sup> he has driven and brought me into darkness without any light; <sup>3</sup> surely against me he turns his hand again and again the whole day long. <sup>4</sup> He has made my flesh and my skin waste away; he has broken my bones; <sup>5</sup> he has besieged and enveloped me with bitterness and tribulation . . . Lamentations 3:1–5 (ESV)*

The judgment of God has become personal and overwhelming, such that there seems to be no peace or happiness (v 17), no endurance or hope (v 18), and the grief of the moment is relentless – “My soul continually remembers it {the affliction} and is bowed down within me” (3:20). That is the first perspective.

We hear the other perspective in verses 33-66. The city is still destroyed. They are still in pain, but something has changed – at least for the moment. Notice the following verses:

*<sup>38</sup> Is it not from the mouth of the Most High that good and bad come? <sup>39</sup> Why should a living man complain, a man, about the punishment of his sins? <sup>40</sup> Let us test and examine our ways, and return to the LORD! <sup>41</sup> Let us lift up our hearts and hands to God in heaven . . . (Lamentations 3:38–41)*

*<sup>55</sup> “I called on your name, O LORD, from the depths of the pit; <sup>56</sup> you heard my plea, ‘Do not close your ear to my cry for help!’ <sup>57</sup> You came near when I called on you; you said, ‘Do not fear!’ <sup>58</sup> “You have taken up my cause, O Lord; you have redeemed my life . . . Lamentations 3:55–58 (ESV)*

*<sup>61</sup> “You have heard their taunts, O LORD, all their plots against me . . . <sup>64</sup> “You will repay them, O LORD, according to the work of their hands. <sup>65</sup> You will give them dullness of heart; your curse will be on them. (Lamentations 3:61, 64–65)*

Do you hear the difference between these two sections? There is still pain and struggle in verses 33-66, but the tone is not what we find in verses 1-20. There is a different and notable difference in perspective at the end of Lamentations 3 versus the beginning. And that leads us to a very important question, one that is central to the beauty of the spiritual value of lament.

## What Changed?

I think verse 21 is a game-changer in this lament. It is a theological pivot point that is very instructive. In fact, I think once you see this, you will embrace the value of lament even more. I hope that you'll see that biblical lament not only expresses your heart, but it also serves to shape your heart.

*<sup>21</sup> But this I call to mind, and therefore I have hope: (Lamentations 3:21)*

Notice a few things in this verse:

- The word "but" indicates a turning of some kind. The word is a marker that there is contrast between two things, and this is the most substantial pivot in the entire book.
- The phrase "to call to mind" uses the Hebrew words for "to return" or "to remember" and the word for the center of one's being or the heart. In other words, verse 21 is advocating for a rehearsing of what one really believes. The New Living Translation picks this up with an edge of risk in the translation: "Yet I still dare to hope when I remember this." The circumstances have a narrative to them, but there is another narrative underneath. The destruction of Jerusalem sends a message, but it is not the entire story.
- The calling to mind creates hope. This is only the second time that the word hope is used in Lamentations, and it is the first time that it has a positive context. There is nothing in the circumstances themselves that would create optimism, and yet the calling to mind becomes the basis for hope to return.

Now in a moment we are going to dig into what exactly was called to mind. But for now I simply want you to realize the significance of this frame of mind. Lamentations is leading us toward a very important and practical step when life becomes difficult and challenging. It is showing us that hope does not come from circumstances. Rather, hope comes from what you know to be true despite the circumstances around you. In other words, you live through suffering by what you believe, not by what you see or feel.

This is why lament is helpful and uniquely Christian. Lament mourns the "thing" that has happened, but it anchors that grief in the bedrock of God's character and the promise of future restoration. Therefore, lamenting can be one of the most faith-filled things that Christians do. We "call to mind" what we really believe about God. We lament with faith, not just by sight.

This is not the only place in the Bible where we see this perspective of trusting "Who" is behind the "What." Let me give you a few other examples:

*<sup>21</sup> And he said, "Naked I came from my mother's womb, and naked shall I return. The LORD gave, and the LORD has taken away; blessed be the name of the LORD." Job 1:21 (ESV)*

<sup>17</sup> *Though the fig tree should not blossom, nor fruit be on the vines, the produce of the olive fail and the fields yield no food, the flock be cut off from the fold and there be no herd in the stalls, <sup>18</sup> yet I will rejoice in the LORD; I will take joy in the God of my salvation. Habakkuk 3:17–18 (ESV)*

<sup>12</sup> *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. <sup>13</sup> But rejoice insofar as you share Christ's sufferings, that you may also rejoice and be glad when his glory is revealed. 1 Peter 4:12–13 (ESV)*

These texts point us to the “what” or “who” behind the suffering. They call us to put our trust in God over and over when the circumstances of life are painful. Hard is hard, but hard is not bad. Why? Because God is good. That belief and trust matters the most when the circumstances of your life or family or city or nation might cause you to think that God isn't good. That is why I have said so often: “The “who” question is far more satisfying than the “why” question.”

So if today you are suffering because of your own sin, because of the sin in the world, or because of someone else's sin, there is great hope here. Even in the midst of the relentless battering of difficulty after difficulty or calamity after calamity, you can still “call to mind” what you know to be true about God. You can fight for hope today by anchoring your life on what you know about God and on what He is like.

It also may be that you are suffering but you do not have a framework for who God is because you are not yet a Christian. Perhaps God is using the pain in your life to surface some nagging questions about who you are, what life is all about, and the trajectory of your life. Pain and suffering do not make sense apart from an understanding about sin and the sacrifice of Jesus on the cross. How wonderful would it be for God to use your pain to draw you to Himself – even today.

The beautiful hope of verse 21 is that by “calling to mind” important theological truths, you can have hope in the midst of very difficult moments. We are able to stop listening to the circumstances around us and even the noise inside of our heads. It is possible to lead your heart and your head toward hope by rehearsing the truths that you believe.

Again, here is how Keller puts some handles on this for us:

*We may hear our hearts say, "It's hopeless!" but we should argue back. We should say, "Well, that depends what you were hoping in. Was that the right thing to put so much hope in?" Notice how the psalmist {in Psalm 42} analyzes his own hopes--"Why are you so cast down, O my soul?" Notice that he admonishes himself. "Put your hope in God, for I will yet praise him." The psalmist is talking to his heart telling it to go to God, looking to God.<sup>2</sup>*

We need to preach to our own hearts. We need to use lament to express the sorrow that we feel, but we also need to use lament to rehearse the truths that we believe. We need to interpret pain and judgment through the lens of God's character and ultimate mercy. Hope springs when the truth about God is rehearsed.

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<sup>2</sup> Keller, 289-290.

## Four Heart-Changing Truths

One of the reasons you need to know your Bible and listen when the Bible is taught is so that you have an arsenal that you are able to call to mind. If you don't know the Bible or the truth of God's word, you'll not be able to use God's word the way it was intended. So, listen carefully to what I'm about to review with you, because this is the kind of truth that you may need today or someday in the future.

### 1. God's mercy never ends (vv 22-24)

The first heart-changing truth relates to the unending nature of God's mercy. This issue is raised because suffering of any kind, and especially judgment, understandably causes us to wonder if God is no longer going to be merciful to us. The circumstances of life might cause us to be tempted to conclude that we are permanently on God's "bad side."

Verse 22 says the same thing in two different ways. The first phrase uses a very important Hebrew word: *hesed*. Other translations render this as "lovingkindness" (NASB), "great love" (NIV), or "faithful love" (NLT). The ESV uses two words, "steadfast love," to capture the depth of meaning. *Hesed* is God's covenant love for His people, and it is rooted in the very character of God.

The word is used by God after the failure of the Israelites with the golden calf in Exodus 34. God was willing to restore His people and renew His covenant with them because He is "abounding in steadfast love and faithfulness" (Ex. 34:6). In Deuteronomy 30, God tells His people that even after they sin, He will have compassion on them when they turn to Him (Deut. 30:3). In other words, the ultimate hope for the people of God is not their ability to keep God's commands, but on God's ability to keep being God.

Verse 23 says, "they are new every morning; great is your faithfulness." Having just connected us to this enormously important word *hesed*, Jeremiah now makes it very personal and daily. God's faithfulness and mercy affect every single day. By "new" Jeremiah does not mean that these mercies never existed in the past. Rather he means that in each new day, we see evidence of God's grace and that there is a possibility of renewal and repentance.<sup>3</sup>

Finally, in verse 24, we get to the foundation of everything. "The Lord is my portion . . . therefore I hope in him." In other words, Jeremiah is saying "The Lord is all I have" or "I'm living on God's grace." I love how Psalm 73 says it: <sup>26</sup> *My flesh and my heart may fail, but God is the strength of my heart and my portion forever. Psalm 73:26 (ESV).*

Suffering and hardship show us that there is a floor of mercy and grace to everything we experience. Not our sin, nor the sin of the world, nor the devil himself, is greater than the *hesed* of God. In the midst of judgment or pain, we must remind ourselves that God's mercy never ceases. His faithfulness is greater than my faithlessness; His forgiveness is greater than my trespasses; and His mercy is greater than what we really deserve. Therefore, our hope in the midst of judgment is not a change of circumstances, but the mercy of a God who rules over all.

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<sup>3</sup> Duane Garrett, *Song of Songs/Lamentations*, (Dallas, TX: Word, 2004), 414–415.

## **2. Waiting is not a waste (vv 25-30)**

The second truth has become a personal favorite of mine over the last ten years because waiting for anything feels like a complete waste of time. Waiting for God to move or answer seems even worse. Verses 25-30 show us the value of the time between judgment and restoration. And lament serves us well during this time period as we mourn and wait.

What you cannot see in your English translation is the fact that verses 25-27 all begin with the Hebrew word "good." It could read, "Good is the Lord to those who wait for him," "Good it is that one should wait quietly for the salvation of the Lord," and "Good it is for young man to bear the yoke in his youth." So there is obviously something good here. What is it?

To wait on the Lord means to place one's hope in God. It means that you are trusting that God is the one who can deliver you or that the situation is so difficult that your entire confidence is resting on Him. Psalm 62:1 says, "For God alone my soul waits in silence; from him comes my salvation." We wait upon the Lord because He is God and we are not. And isn't it reality which makes waiting so difficult? Waiting feels as if you are doing nothing. But you are actually doing one of the greatest things that a Christian can do – to put your trust, hope and confidence in God.

Verses 28-30 reflect a progressing severity. First, there is merely accepting the burden (v 28). Second, there is being laid prostrate before the Lord in brokenness (v 29). And then there is accepting abuse and insults (v 30). In each case, the person must look to the Lord for answers, vindication, and justice. And in each of the three, waiting is a part of the equation.

One of the painful realities of suffering or judgment is the waiting that comes along with it. If God's providence requires you to wait, remind your heart that there is much good that can come out of waiting for the Lord. There are many lessons that the Lord desires to teach us, and often those lessons come slowly, after we have stopped trying on our own, and even to the point we are broken and ready for Him to lead us. In the midst of suffering, preach to your heart that waiting upon the Lord is not a waste!

## **3. The final word has not been spoken (vv 31-32)**

The third truth that needs to be rehearsed relates to what we believe about the future. Lament not only interprets what is underneath, but also what is to come. Part of the grief of suffering and judgment is the fear that it will never end or that it has no real and lasting purpose. And that is why the Bible is so explicitly clear about the judgment or suffering not being the final word.

Verses 31-32 are filled with great hope and encouragement:

*<sup>31</sup> For the Lord will not cast off forever, <sup>32</sup> but, though he cause grief, he will have compassion according to the abundance of his steadfast love; (Lamentations 3:31–32)*

This verse is telling us that all suffering has a purpose and it is not without limits. It reminds us that God has a plan for us and for His people and that it is full of compassion and an abundance of

steadfast love. It means that for the believer, everything is working out in accordance with God's loving plan for our lives. Years ago I memorized this truth, and it has helped me countless times:

*He is not poor or much enticed  
Who loses everything but Christ.  
It won't be long before the rod  
Becomes the tender kiss of God.<sup>4</sup>*

#### **4. God is always good (v 33)**

The final truth that needs to be rehearsed is found in verse 33: *"for he does not afflict from his heart or grieve the children of men."* This text tells us that all of the destruction – the leveling of Jerusalem and the temple – does not come from a heart that enjoys the hardship that is brought upon His people. God is not in heaven taking delight in the disciplining of His children. Rather, He is doing so because of loving purposes that are behind the hardship.

God cannot allow Israel to continue in their rebellion. He must stop them. And in order to stop them, He must destroy them – at least for now. But the ultimate aim of God flows from a gracious and loving heart. He wants what is best for His children, and that is why Jerusalem is leveled.

God intends to save His people, but before that happens, He needs for their hearts to be ready to listen to Him again. And pain has a way of peeling back the callouses of a hardened and deceitful heart. So rest assured that if you are a follower of Jesus, everything in your life somehow, and in some way, is part of God's plan for His good purposes in you. He does not enjoy your struggle or your tears. But it is producing something good in you, and it all comes from the good heart of a God who loves you.

Hope springs from truth rehearsed. Has suffering or judgment gotten the best of you today? Have you spent the last week listening to and rehearsing the wrong narrative in your head and heart? Can you make the turn from very hard circumstances to trusting in God's goodness? Can you preach to your own heart this morning and remind your soul what is real and true and right?

Can you remind your heart that 1) God's mercy never ends, 2) Waiting is never a waste, 3) The final word has not been spoken, and 4) God is always good? Hope springs from rehearsing the truth about who God is and what He has done.

*"The steadfast love of the Lord never ceases; his mercies never come to an end; they are new every morning; great is your faithfulness" (Lamentations 3:22).*

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<sup>4</sup> John Piper, *The Misery of Job and the Mercy of God*, (Wheaton, Illinois: Crossway, 2002).