



There are times in our lives when we feel tired and worn; when our heart is heavy from the work it takes just to keep on breathing; when our soul feels crushed by the weight of this world; when it even feels like God has shut us out and is treating us more like an enemy than a friend.

After the death of his wife, C.S. Lewis found writing in his journal was his only consolation. This became his private world of personal lament that kept him in touch with sanity. His thoughts were later recorded in a book called, *A Grief Observed*. Listen to what he recorded early in the book: *Meanwhile, where is God? This is one of the most disquieting symptoms. When you're happy, so happy that you're tempted to feel His claims upon you as an interruption, if you remember yourself and turn to Him with gratitude and praise, you'll be - or so it feels - welcomed with open arms. But go to Him when your need is desperate, when all other help is vain, and what do you find? A door slammed in your face, and a sound of bolting and double bolting on the inside. After that, silence. You may as well turn away. The longer you wait, the more emphatic the silence will become. There are no lights in the windows. It might be an empty house. Was it ever inhabited? It seemed so once. And that seeming was as strong as this. What can this mean? Why is He so present a commander in our time of prosperity and so very absent a help in time of trouble?*

I wonder if some of you might feel this way today? You're walking through a difficult, even devastating, time of life, and maybe you're asking, Where's God when life is such a struggle? It feels like he's shut you out. Today, we're going to look at a book in the Bible to help answer that question. It was written as a series of funeral songs by a writer who was lamenting the fall of the ancient city of Jerusalem after it had been captured by the Babylonians. The Babylonians just laid waste to the Holy City. Tradition says Jeremiah wrote these funeral songs, so I'll refer to him as that. It's called Lamentations, and we're looking at chapter 3.

In this chapter Jeremiah pours out his soul and describes his own emotional journey. It was a journey that started with pain and grief and hopelessness. Some of you might say, That's where I'm at right now. Others of you might say, I don't get this; I'm doing just fine. But I think we all know someday we'll all travel this road, and it's good to know what to expect and how to deal with it.

The Lament of an Afflicted Man

The first 20 verses record Jeremiah's lament. He uses the first person singular "I" throughout, but the individual who suffers in this chapter is representative of the whole nation and of all of us in times of sorrow. He starts out and says, ***"I am the man who has seen affliction by the rod of the Lord's wrath."*** Throughout this section he'll attribute his suffering to God. Here he calls it "the rod of the Lord's wrath." All of us know Psalm 23 where David sees the Lord as his shepherd and says, "your rod and staff comfort me." Here, the rod and staff of God aren't comforting him, but afflicting him. It's like the shepherd isn't guiding his sheep but beating them.

He goes on and says in verses 2–3, ***"He has driven me away and made me walk in darkness rather than light; indeed, he has turned his hand against me again and again all day long."*** This isn't just a one-time thing; he's like a worn down boxer at the end of a fight getting rocked by one punch after another. He goes on in v. 4, ***"He has made my skin and my flesh grow old and has broken my bones."*** That's strong language, isn't it? God has broken my bones. There's a physical aspect to his suffering. Then he says in verses 5–7, ***"He has besieged me and surrounded me with bitterness and hardship. He has made me dwell in darkness like those long dead. He has walled me in so I cannot escape; he has weighed me down with chains."*** Back then people lived in fortified cities with huge walls surrounding the borders. If the enemy attacked you, you could hold out for a while, if you had enough food and water. If an army laid siege to a city, they'd surround it and wait for surrender. It was awful. Sometimes as these sieges wore on the people resorted to cannibalism. If the surrounding army got impatient, they'd come up to the wall and start battering away. Jeremiah is under emotional siege; God has surrounded him with bitterness and hardship.

Then he says in verses 8–9, ***"Even when I cry out for help, he shuts out my prayer. He has barred my way with blocks of stone; he has made my paths crooked."*** He feels his prayers are being ignored. He feels trapped. Have you ever felt that way? It's like his path has been blocked and he's forced to take a trail that zig zags through backcountry, leaving him exposed. He says in verses 10–11, ***"Like a bear lying in wait, like a lion in hiding, he dragged me from the path and mangled me and left me without help."*** My father and I loved fishing for trout and salmon in Alaska. I remember as a 16-year-old boy looking down from a trail and

seeing grizzly bears hovering over the banks of the Moraine River, swiping at the waters with their massive claws and lifting up huge fish like they were minnows. Jeremiah feels like one of those fish being mangled by God.

But then it gets even worse. He says in verses 12–13, *“He drew his bow and made me the target for his arrows. He pierced my heart with arrows from his quiver.”* It’s like he’s being used as target practice and God has shot him in the heart. Have you ever felt like that? He says in verses 14–15, *“I became the laughingstock of all my people; they mock me in song all day long. He has filled me with bitter herbs and given me gall to drink. He has broken my teeth with gravel; he has trampled me in the dust.”* His own people laugh at him and mock him in song. He’s being force-fed with bitter herbs and gravel stuffed into his mouth.

And then he finally concludes this part of his lament in verses 17–20: *“I have been deprived of peace; I have forgotten what prosperity is. So I say, ‘My splendor is gone and all that I had hoped from the Lord.’ I remember my affliction and my wandering, the bitterness and the gall. I well remember them, and my soul is downcast within me.”* He’s so depressed he can’t even recall what the good times felt like. He’s lost hope. He’s at the bottom. It seems that God is his enemy; that God is against him.

I don’t know how you respond when you read this section. Maybe you think, Wow, this guy is a big whiner. Get a life! You have to understand, this guy is facing the worst possible thing he could face in his life. The city where he lived, where his family lived, where his hopes and dreams are, has just been destroyed by a ruthless enemy. He’s watching family members get hauled away into captivity into Babylon. If this is Jeremiah, everything he worked and prayed for the last 40 years has gone up in smoke. He’s devastated. I doubt there are very many of us who’ve experienced this level of devastation, but maybe as you read this you think, No, I can relate. I’ve been there. Maybe you’re thinking, This is where I’m at now.

Over the course of my life I’ve run into some people who could identify with these words. I have a friend who was pastoring a church when he came home one day and his wife was packing up her things. She left him with no warning; walking away from both him and the Lord. She took their two kids with her. A couple of years later, his 10-year-old son was riding his bike down the street when a drunk driver hit him and left him a paraplegic. A few years later that same boy received a letter in the mail from Stanford Hospital saying he should come in and get tested for HIV because the blood transfusion after his accident might have been tainted. He tested positive. I performed his memorial service about ten years later. I think about my friend, his father. I’m sure he can relate to these words.

It might be the devastation of a miscarriage, or infertility, or a divorce. It could be the pain of seeing a son or daughter wander

away from the Lord. I’ve known people who’ve suffered from depression and can identify with these words. It might be an illness. I received an email from a friend who is a university professor up in Spokane, Washington. We’ve been praying this year for his wife who’s been fighting breast cancer, but now they just discovered he may have a brain tumor. I’m sure he can relate to those words, “he has turned his hand against me, again and again...”

One of the things this teaches us is it’s okay to lament. It’s not a faithless thing to do. There’s something important and even healing about articulating and giving voice to our pain. How can we not think of Jesus as we read this lament? He became the laughingstock of all his people. He was filled with bitter herbs and gall. He cried out in lament, *“My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?”* Even if you’re not there right now, you can appreciate the fact that sometimes we get hit with things that make it hard to see God. How do we find God when we’re struggling like this?

The Hope of an Afflicted Man

What’s interesting is after 20 verses of pure lament, there’s a huge turn in verse 21. The writer says, *“Yet this I call to mind, and therefore I have hope.”* Even in this dark hour there’s something he calls to mind that gives him hope. Remember, this is a guy who just said in verse 18, *“All that I hope from the Lord is gone.”* His hope was gone, but now he grabs onto something. It’s like he’s falling down a cliff, but then he sees a shrub sticking out of the side and grabs hold of it just to stop the fall. He says, Wait a minute. I recall something. I call it to mind. There’s still hope.

God’s love never fails

What is it? Look at verses 22–24, *“Because of the Lord’s great love we are not consumed, for his compassions never fail. They are new every morning; great is your faithfulness. I say to myself, ‘The Lord is my portion; therefore I will wait for him.’”* He looks for something to grab hold of and he says, We’re not consumed. We’re still here. God’s people haven’t been wiped off the map. Why? Because of his great love and compassion.

There are two great words here: The first one is translated **great love**. It’s the Hebrew word *hesed*. It refers to God’s covenant, loyal love. It’s God making a promise or commitment, and then saying he’ll be loyal to that promise. The second word is **compassions**, and that expresses the emotional side of love. It was a word used to describe how an expectant mother felt about the child developing in her womb. This describes God’s feelings and affection for us. I love how he uses both words. You’ve got the loyalty part; God’s commitment that regardless of how he feels, he’ll keep his promises to us. But the other word says God isn’t only committed to us, he feels something for us. His compassions never fail; they’re new every morning. An expecting mom wakes up and what’s the first thing she thinks of? My baby. How’s my

baby? That all-encompassing love is what gives this writer hope. That's what causes him to burst out, Great is thy faithfulness! We love to sing that great hymn:

Great is Thy faithfulness!

Great is Thy faithfulness!

Morning by morning new mercies I see

All I have needed Thy hand hath provided

Great is Thy faithfulness, Lord unto me!

I've sung it so many times. What struck me this week is how I love to belt it out in those times when I've experienced his faithfulness in my life. I love to call to mind how good he's been and how he's answered prayer. But the writer of Lamentations, as we've seen, was in a very different place. He looked around and all he saw was devastation. He was sinking. The only sign of hope he could find was he and a few others weren't yet dead. But in the midst of that he says, Great is your faithfulness. The Lord is my portion. I'll wait for him. Back in the book of Numbers when the Israelites were dividing up the land among the 12 tribes, the tribe of Levi was denied an inheritance. Why? Because God said, I'm your portion. I'm your inheritance. I'm enough. That's what this writer came to see through his suffering. I may have lost everything but I still have Him; He's my portion and I'll wait for Him.

God sees and decrees

It's out of this great declaration he goes on and makes a three-fold reference to goodness in verses 25–27, *"The Lord is good to those whose hope is in him, to the one who seeks him; it is good to wait quietly for the salvation of the Lord. It is good for a man to bear the yoke while he is young."* It's beginning to dawn on him that God doesn't cause suffering just for the sake of suffering. God is always good to us. It can even be good to go through suffering because there's always a purpose in it.

That's why he can say to the one who suffers in the next few verses, *"Let him sit alone in silence, for the Lord has laid it on him. Let him bury his face in the dust—there may yet be hope. Let him offer his cheek to one who would strike him, and let him be filled with disgrace"* (verses 28–30). Because he knows God is good and has a good purpose, he's able to move from resistance to resignation and surrender.

John Powell tells a story of a woman who grew up poor but married a man who had money. They had children and had a great life together and then she got sick. She went to the hospital. Doctors ran tests. One night the doctor came into her room and said, "I'm sorry to tell you this. Your liver has stopped working. We've done everything we can." And he walked out. She says, "I knew I was dying. I was so weak I had to feel my way along the corridor down to the chapel of the hospital. I wanted to tell God off. I wanted to tell God, 'You're a shyster! You've been passing yourself off as a loving God for two thousand years, but every time anyone begins

to get happy you pull the rug out from under them.'" She wanted this to be a face-to-face telling off of God. And then she got to the center aisle of the chapel, and tripped and fell. When she looked up, there stenciled on the step leading to the altar, she saw the words: Lord, be merciful to me, a sinner. She says, "I know God spoke to me that night. God was saying, 'This is your moment of surrender. These doctors will do the best they can, but I'm the only one who can cure you.'" She says, "There with my head down on my folded arms in the center of the chapel, repeating, 'Lord, be merciful to me a sinner,' I surrendered to God. I found my way back to my hospital bed, weak as I was. The next morning, after the doctor ran more tests, he said, 'Your liver is working again. We don't know why. We don't know why it stopped, and we don't know why it started up again.' I said in my heart, But I know. Oh but I know. God has brought me to the brink of disaster, just to get me to turn my life over to him."

That's what this writer came to see: there's purpose in his suffering. He goes on, *"For no one is cast off by the Lord forever. Though he brings grief, he will show compassion, so great is his unfailing love. For he does not willingly bring affliction or grief to anyone"* (verses 31–33). There's a fresh breeze of hope blowing across the pages of his journal. It's a hope coming from an understanding that God is good and he has a purpose in what he's doing in our lives. Listen to what he says down in verses 37–40, *"Who can speak and have it happen if the Lord has not decreed it? Is it not from the mouth of the Most High that both calamities and good things come? Why should the living complain when punished for their sins? Let us examine our ways and test them, and let us return to the Lord."*

Let's face it, sometimes we suffer because of our own rebellion against God. That's what was going on with the people of Judah. That's why he says, "And let us return to the Lord." Sometimes our suffering is the natural result of our poor choices; sometimes it's the hand of God's loving discipline. But when bad things happen to us it doesn't always mean we've been bad. If you leave here today and get hit by a drunk driver and you're seriously injured, it doesn't mean God is paying you back for something. When bad things happen to us, it's not always because we've done something wrong. It could be because somebody else has done something wrong. That's just the world we live in. But, either way, God is sovereign over everything that happens to us and he uses it to refine us and draw us closer to him.

God hears and answers

This realization gives him a fresh new motivation to pray. He says in v. 41, *"Let us lift up our hearts and our hands to God in heaven."* Later in verses 55–57 he says, *"I called on your name, Lord, from the depths of the pit. You heard my plea: 'Do not close your ears to my cry for relief.' You came near when I called you, and you said, 'Do not fear.'" Earlier he'd said, "You covered*

yourself with a cloud so that no prayer could get through," but now he says, You heard my plea...You came near. God does hear; God does answer. Not always according to our timing, but he does!

So Jeremiah has shared with us this journey. It's a journey that started in despair but ended in hope. It didn't come easy. This isn't some kind of mental gymnastics where he talks himself into something. On the contrary, he spent 20 verses urging us to work through our grief and pain. Nothing has changed in his circumstances, but he's changed. His perspective has changed. He has hope. What's the basis for our hope when we're facing difficult times? Again, it's God's love and compassion. Even when we feel like God is against us, he still loves us; he's still working out his good purpose; he still hears our cries for help.

If things are going right in your life right now, let me encourage you to focus on God's love and to learn that God does love you, that his compassions never fail, that he has a purpose in all things and he hears your prayers, because the day is going to come when you're going to need to remember that. When you get that phone call with news that you dread, or you go into work one day and find out it's your last day, or you get some devastating news from a physician or from one of your kids, you're going to need that knowledge of God's love.

But maybe you're going through a tough time, and you need this reminder. God's love for you is great. His compassions never fail. We understand that even more today than Jeremiah did because of Jesus. Almost 600 years later Jesus wept over Jerusalem just as Jeremiah did. He said he longed to gather them like a mother hen gathers her chicks, but they were unwilling. Then he went

to the cross. He demonstrated his great love for you by dying for you, not when you were all about him, but when you wanted nothing to do with him; not when you were all cleaned up, but when you were a mess.

I have a \$100 bill here. Let me just ask, How many of you would like this \$100 bill? I'll tear in half. How many of you would still like this? Now let me throw it on the ground and stomp on it. How many of you would like it now? For many of you, this is what life has done to you. Maybe you've been mistreated or abused. Maybe you've been told you wouldn't amount to anything. Maybe you've done some stupid things. Your sin has gotten you into trouble. But here's the deal: You haven't lost one cent of your value to God.

The Apostle Paul asked: *"Who shall separate us from the love of Christ? Shall tribulation, or distress, or persecution, or famine, or nakedness, or danger, or sword?"* Jeremiah understood all those things, and Paul's answer was the same as his: *"No, in all these things we are more than conquerors through him who loved us. For I am sure that neither death nor life, nor angels nor rulers, nor things present nor things to come, nor powers, nor height nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord."*

In the hardest times knowing this will get us through. When darkness is your only companion, it's recalling God's love that will get you through and give you the hope you need to make it through another day.

This manuscript represents the bulk of what was preached at CPC. For further detail, please refer to the audio recording of this sermon.