

January 5, 2020

APPROACHING GOD IN OUR PAIN

Lamentations 3

(2 of 3 in a series through Lamentations)

A few years into her marriage, she really decided she was going to seek to honor the Lord. She knew she shouldn't have married an unbeliever, but she was turning her life around. She read all the right books, began praying for him, and she was certain he was going to change. Her marriage was going to be another glorious story to be told. But he didn't change. Instead he was unfaithful and abusive. They divorced shortly thereafter. Full of bitterness and anger against the Lord, she hasn't stepped foot inside a church since.

They did everything right. Found someone who seemed godly. Kept themselves pure. Remained virgins until their wedding night. And shortly, thereafter, got the glorious news that she was pregnant. They were going to be parents. But late in the pregnancy something went wrong. Something was wrong with their baby. Delivery was shortly followed by standing at a graveside, laying their child in the ground. Through their tears and confusion, they left the church—and the Lord.

These aren't made-up stories. I wish they were. They're people I know (or have known) well. And you and I both know that these stories—even if we limited ourselves to individuals we personally know—could be multiplied. We could fill the rest of the day telling them. And it's stories like these that draw me so deeply to a book like Lamentations. Because when we're in the midst of suffering, disappointment, and hardship (even if it is caused by our own sin), we are at a vulnerable place. And because so much of life is marked by suffering, disappointment, and hardship, we find ourselves at such vulnerable places often. But I also believe that these vulnerable moments are also points in our lives when we can know fellowship with our Lord at a level of great depth. There's a certain intimacy to be found before the Lord in suffering that is simply hard to duplicate in times of ease and blessing. There's a reason why Paul can speak in Philippians 3:10 of knowing Christ and sharing in his sufferings in the same verse. Hardship often becomes the means by which we find ourselves knowing God more deeply than we otherwise would.

So what marks the difference then between walking away from the Lord and growing in knowledge of him in those moments? I think one key is learning to come to the Lord in lament, as I noted last week. If you don't have a means of approaching the Lord in the midst of your pain, then you'll (at best) ignore the Lord in your pain or (at worst) run from him and grow bitter against him. And this is one reason why the Lord gave us the book of Lamentations. Written by the prophet Jeremiah (most likely) after the fall of Jerusalem in 587 BC, the prophet writes these poems as he's immersed in his pain, in the midst of hardship, and full of lament. But—and this is key—he runs toward (not away from) the Lord. We see, for example, in our text this morning how Jeremiah says to the Lord, "You have seen the wrong done to me, O LORD; judge my cause" (v. 59).

Therefore, I want us to look at this third chapter this morning and learn some important lessons about how to approach the Lord in the midst of our pain. And I'll add that I think this is the most important thing that the Lord wants us to see from Lamentations because (as you may remember from last week) this third poem is a triple acrostic, meaning that whereas chapters 1, 2, and 4 went A, B, C and so forth for each of the twenty-two verses (since there are twenty-two Hebrew letters), this one goes A, A, A, B, B, B, C, C, C and so forth. Therefore, it's as if the author wants us to focus especially on this central poem, and I don't think it's a mistake that this poem reflects the goodness and mercy of God most clearly. So, what do we then learn about approaching God in our pain as we look at this third chapter? First, we see that we should share all our pain with the Lord.

Share all your pain with the Lord

Sometimes we can convince ourselves that it is out of bounds to share specifically how you're hurt, disappointed, and even feel abandoned by the Lord, but in this third poem, Jeremiah holds back nothing of his pain and even expresses it to the Lord in vivid detail. In these first eighteen verses Jeremiah describes his own personal affliction in watching Jerusalem fall. He's not just talking about the city anymore but speaking for himself. And when he speaks of the one who has afflicted him, which he identifies in the third person ("he"), he is speaking about the Lord. He is saying in these verses, "This is what you have done to me, O Lord."

He pictures God as a shepherd, who would typically use his rod to fight off wild beasts that threaten the sheep but who is now using the "rod of his wrath" to break the prophet's bones (vv. 1-4). He feels that God is like a jailer who has enclosed him in walls with darkness so that he can't get out and no one can hear his prayer (vv. 5-9). He feels like the Lord is a bear or lion, who has torn him to pieces, a hunter who has shot him in his kidneys, and an abuser who has ground his teeth in gravel (vv.10-18).

These are not realities that can be captured with Precious Moments figurine sets or Thomas Kinkaid paintings. This is the raw emotion of how the prophet feels in the midst of his pain, hurt, and disappointment. He is holding nothing back from his Lord. He even declares that just as his ability to persevere has perished, so has his hope in the Lord perished (v. 18). He's got nothing left, he feels, that he can express toward God except a declaration of his pain and suffering.

And, brothers and sisters, this is instructive for us. Part of running toward the Lord in the midst of pain is done by sharing your pain with the Lord, opening your heart and unveiling how you feel. And it's not simply that we're saying, "It's okay to share how you're feeling in your pain because God already knows"—though that is certainly true! Rather it is God's Word that is instructing us to this end. It is God himself who is telling you in these verses to share your pain with him. This is a crucial dimension to walking with the Lord in a world on this side of Genesis 3.

And in case you're saying, "Well, that's what Jeremiah does in this chapter, but I'm not sure whether the rest of the Bible instructs us in this way," look at the Psalms. The largest category of

Psalms—when you break them down into the different kinds of psalms—is lament. And as you read the lament psalms, you hear the psalmist tell us that he is so troubled in his soul that he can't even talk or that when he remembers the Lord, he moans (Ps 77). You hear him ask God why he hides himself in times of trouble (Ps 10), why he has forsaken him (Ps 22), why God forgets his affliction (Ps 44), and why has God cast his soul away (Ps 88). It is the Lord who shows us that he wants us to come to him in the rawness of our pain and cast our burdens and sorrows on him. In Lamentations 3:1-18 Jeremiah is modeling for us what he meant when he exhorted the Lord's people in 2:19, saying, "Pour out your heart like water before the presence of the Lord!"

In verses 40-54, Jeremiah picks up with his pain again, saying to the Lord in vv. 43-44, "You have wrapped yourself with anger and pursued us, killing without pity; you have wrapped yourself with a cloud so that no prayer can pass through. You have made us scum and garbage among the peoples." These are words written by our God for us. Share your pain with the Lord.

But lament doesn't stop there as if sharing your pain is sufficient. We also see Jeremiah remembering what is true of God.

Remember what is true of God

There is a dramatic transition in verse 21. In verses 19-20 Jeremiah is asking the Lord to remember his afflictions, and he notes that for himself remembering these afflictions is involuntary. His soul continually dwells on his suffering and is downcast within him. Even if he wanted to ignore his suffering and pain, he can't. It's as if his soul will focus on nothing else. That's why he had noted that his hope in the Lord had perished (v. 18). But then Jeremiah chooses to do something that his soul isn't naturally prone to do in suffering. He says, "But this I call to mind, and therefore I have hope" (v. 21). He chooses to remember something that is true, even in the midst of his suffering. He chooses to remember what his God is like. And he proceeds in verses 22-36 to remind himself of these truths about his good God.

He reminds himself, for example that "the steadfast love of the Lord never ceases; his mercies never come to an end; they are new every morning" and that the Lord's faithfulness is great. Then he adds, "The LORD is my portion . . . therefore I will hope in him" (vv. 22-24). Do you see what he's doing with this? He's reminding himself of things that he's learned, that he knows to be true, even when he doesn't feel them. He *feels* like God is against him; he's *reminding himself* that God loves him, that God gives him the mercy and grace he needs for each day, and that if he has the Lord then that is enough.

He similarly reminds himself that God is good toward those who wait for him (vv. 25-27). He doesn't see God acting, but he waits, knowing that God is good. And he reminds himself that affliction in the believer's life is not God's last word to us. Let's look at this in more detail. He says in verses 31-33, "For the Lord will not cast off forever, but, though he cause grief, he will have compassion according to the abundance of his steadfast love; for he does not afflict from his heart or grieve the children of men."

So, first, he reminds himself that affliction isn't the last word. The Lord won't cast off forever but will have compassion. In other words, in the lives of his children, the Lord will not let our experience climax with pain and suffering—even if pain and suffering fills our entire life. Ultimately we will be raised from the dead, given glorified bodies, and will dwell with our Lord without any more suffering, tears, pain, or death. The Lord may well give us reprieve and blessing in this life, but even if he doesn't, we know that hardship and pain and affliction isn't the last word for a child of God.

Second, he reminds himself of God's heart toward him. He notes that the Lord is behind this grief, as he writes, "though he cause grief." In other words, he's not deluding himself into thinking that God is somehow on the sidelines, wringing his hands, and unable to do anything about the suffering in his life. No, he knows better than that. He's already acknowledged God as the one ultimately in control of all that's happened in his life in verses 1-18. So, how is he comforting himself as he reminds himself that the Lord is causing this grief? He continues, "though he cause grief . . . he does not afflict from his heart or grieve the children of men." In other words, though the Lord brings affliction into our lives, and some of it even feels crushing to us, making us identify with the words Jeremiah has expressed in verses 1-18 and 43-54, he knows that the Lord does not delight in his affliction *as an end in itself*. That is, when the Lord brings affliction into our lives, it is not as if he is saying, "Yes, I love that my child is in pain. I delight in her distress" or the like. No, his affliction and grieving of his children is not from his heart. What he delights in is all the good he's bringing about through the vehicle of affliction in our lives. He delights that his affliction humbles us, makes us more like Jesus, and moves us to rely on God more. Those things come with the full delight of God's heart. What a glorious reminder in our affliction!

And, finally, he reminds himself that the Lord is just. He does so with negative words, reminding himself in verses 34-36 that the Lord does not approve of one man denying another justice. But by noting this, he reminds himself that the Lord is just. He will do what is right. And Jeremiah knows that this is a foundation for him to rest as he considers the evil intent of the Babylonians. He rests in the hands of his just God.

Now, what is key in all of this is that there's not some dramatic change in Jeremiah's circumstances from verses 18-20 where his soul is bowed down within him and his hope in the Lord has perished to verse 24 where his soul says that he will hope in God. In between those few verses, the little children he watched grow up in Jerusalem who had been slaughtered at the hands of the Babylonians or carried off into exile didn't happen to rise from the dead or come back into the city. The smoldering ruins of Jerusalem didn't somehow transform back into the glorious city. Even after these verses, he still will note that his "eyes . . . flow without ceasing" (v. 49) as his tears continually run down his face. A change in circumstances isn't the cause of his change from hopelessness to hoping in God. No, what caused him to hope was his concerted effort to remind himself and rehearse to his heart, soul, and mind what he knew to be true about God.

One of the things that pain and affliction often bring with them is darkness. We can't always see clearly in these moments. What we feel in those moments doesn't necessarily correspond to what is true. Now, I'm not backtracking on what we saw in the first point. It is good to share your pain with the Lord, to cast your hurt and burdens on him. This is the model in scriptural laments. But it doesn't mean that what you feel and share with the Lord is true. This is why in lament we move from expressing our pain to reminding ourselves of what is true.

What prove to be some of the sweetest times with the Lord are those moments where you say to the Lord, "I feel like you've abandoned me. I feel like you've cast me off. I feel like I'm being punished by you. But I know that you love me. I know that you gave your Son for me. I know you're working everything to my good. I know that you will never leave me nor forsake me. Though you slay me, I will trust in you." There's something glorious about rehearsing to yourself and holding on to the Lord's goodness in moments of pain that allows us to press deeper into these truths than we otherwise would.

So, don't waste your pain. Lament. Share your affliction and hurt before the Lord. And then remind yourself of who God is. In the midst of darkness speak what you know to be true and what you'll hold to, even if your circumstances don't change. And let's add another element—confess your sins.

Confess your sins

Now, I include this element not because all suffering is brought about because of our sin or accompanied with sin from us. Certainly there is much suffering that isn't the direct cause of sin and much that isn't accompanied with sinful responses by us. However, lament is a good time to pause and confess our sin. That's what Jeremiah does. Immediately after reminding himself of why he can hope in the Lord, he notes, "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 have transgressed and rebelled'" (vv. 40-42).

Let me clear up something before speaking more about this element. When Jeremiah says, "We have transgressed and rebelled, and you have not forgiven" (v. 42), I think he's simply referring to the fact that the Lord brought judgment upon Jerusalem at the hands of the Babylonians. In other words, he's acknowledging that the Lord didn't simply pass over their sins but instead brought judgment.

But now Jeremiah, in the midst of this high point in Lamentations, encourages everyone to examine their hearts before the Lord and confess sin. And in one sense, it's remarkable, isn't it? I mean, look at how the Lord has responded to Judah's sins. He's destroyed Jerusalem, and now Jeremiah is saying that the people of Judah should point out their rebellion to him? But we need to see that he destroyed Jerusalem because there was no confession of sin, no repentance from sin. You see, in the midst of reminding ourselves of who the Lord is, we can remind ourselves that he is merciful to those who come to him in confession. He delights in lavishing grace and forgiveness on his children. For the believer, confession of sin before God is not terrifying but an

avenue to receive grace and mercy. Confessing your sins to others can at times be fearful, but confessing our sins to the Lord is always good. He is, after all, the one who forgives “iniquity and transgression and sin” as he told Moses in Exodus 34:7. And he is the one who has told us in 1 John 2:1 that if anyone sins we have an advocate with the Father, Jesus Christ the righteous one.

All too often our times of pain and suffering are accompanied by sin. That’s often been my position. Sometimes it’s exposed my self-reliance. Sometimes I’ve responded in pride, thinking that I’ve merited divine favor and desire better. I’ve often been filled with self-righteousness, embarrassingly. But at all times it is safe to examine your heart as you lament and confess any sin. Confession is a path—like reminding ourselves of the goodness of God—that leads to a greater depth as we walk with the Lord.

And let me add one more thing as we look at lament in this third chapter—hope in God.

Hope in God

After Jeremiah shares his pain, reminds himself of glorious truths about God, and examines his heart and confesses his sin, he expresses his hope in God. In verses 55-66 Jeremiah speaks confidently. It’s unclear whether he is remembering previous times when God delivered him or is simply speaking as if what God will do is so sure and certain that he can speak of it as if it is done in verses 55-63. But either way, this reflection on God’s consistent work of redemption leads him to hope in God. In verses 64-66 he speaks of what he believes God *will* do. He believes that the just God will balance the books in the end and judge his enemies. He believes God will vindicate and deliver him like he’s done so many times in the past. And so he ends his lament by expressing his hope in God.

This is a glorious place for lament to end. We resolve to trust and hope in God. As believers we can say, “Father, I know what you’ve done for me in Christ. I know that he lived, died, and was raised for me. I know you sent your Spirit to dwell in me so that I might know I am your child. And so I hope in you now. I’m not trusting in my own power to come through this well. I’m not trusting in changed circumstances because I don’t know what the future holds. But I know who you are. You’re my good, loving, forgiving, gracious and merciful Father, and so I trust in you. I hope in you.” That’s where we are heading in lament.

And so, I don’t know where you are right now. You may feel crushed by your circumstances. Maybe life is far from how you thought it would go. Don’t run *from* your Father in this moment. Run *toward* him. Run toward him in lament. Maybe even this afternoon, take some time to share your pain with him, remind yourself of who he is, confess your sin, and renew your trust and hope in your Father. And if you need a reminder of why you can hope in him, he’s graciously giving us this meal that we will share now, remembering that when we were at our weakest, God gave us his Son. Amen.