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# Sermon Manuscript

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## The Wounds of God: Studies in the Book of Lamentations

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No. 3: "Hope When Life is Darkest" (Lam. 3)  
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### **Introduction: Life's Most Necessary Ingredient**

We are engaged in a study of the book of Lamentations, which is a song of a suffering believer. It was written by the prophet Jeremiah at the very lowest point in the history of his people. Jerusalem was overrun and sacked by the pagan Babylonians, and the holiest place on earth had been reduced to rubble and robbed of its treasures. All this had happened because of the disloyalty of the people of God and their faithlessness. The people, through their faithlessness and disloyalty, managed to make a complete wreck of their lives. It was a dark time indeed. Those thousands who managed to survive the long march into captivity in Babylon must have felt that their lives were over and it was just a matter of waiting for time to pass to die.

The purpose of this great book, written in such a desperate situation, was and is to give hope. The Bible speaks a great deal about hope. Someone has observed that human beings can live a couple of months without food, just a few days without water, and about twenty minutes without hope. One recent historian described the experience of a man who had acquired a claim in a western gold field. The claim was in a lonely spot in the mountains. When the man started to dig for gold, he found evidence that much work had been done on the claim a long while before. Far into the excavation he found an old rusted pick, its handle rotted off but its point sticking firmly into the rocky soil. He went to work and, to his amazement, just three feet beyond the pick he came upon a rich vein of gold.

Later he would learn that another man had worked that claim. The first man had invested many years of his life searching for gold. He also had begun with high hopes and great dreams. But those hopes dissipated into bitter disappointment when he labored and was not rewarded. It became harder day by day to sustain his dream, to swing the pick and lift the shovel, without evidence of progress. And so he quit—just three feet from striking it rich. What caused the original miner to give up three feet too soon was the absence of hope.

Progress —what the Bible calls spiritual growth—depends on hope. “Everything that is done in the world is done by hope,” said Martin Luther. That is no exaggeration.

A man who lived in Maine told about his little home town named Flagstaff, which was flooded as part of a large lake for which the Corps of Engineers had built a sizable dam. The man said the most painful part of that experience—besides relocation—was watching his hometown die. He said all improvements and repairs ceased. What was the use of painting a house which would be covered with water? Why repair a building when the whole village would be wiped out? Why worry about rubbish and potholes in the streets or graffiti on the walls? So week after week, as the day came nearer when the dam would be plugged up, the whole town became more and more bedraggled and woebegone. It is not stretching a point to say that when there is no faith in the future there is no power to change in the present. 1

What is true on a physical level of a community is certainly true on a personal level as well. I want to read portions of Lamentations 3 this morning to place before us how hope can be regained in the darkest of hours.

**Scripture: Lamentations 3:1-66 (selected)**

1 I am the man who has seen affliction by the rod of His wrath. 2 He has led me and made me walk in darkness and not in light. 3 Surely He has turned His hand against me time and time again throughout the day. . . . .

17 You have moved my soul far from peace; I have forgotten prosperity. 18 And I said, “My strength and my hope have perished from the Lord.” 19 Remember my affliction and roaming, the wormwood and the gall. 20 My soul still remembers and sinks within me. 21 This I recall to my mind, therefore I have hope. 22 Through the Lord’s mercies we are not consumed, because His compassions fail not. 23 They are new every morning; great is Your faithfulness. 24 “The Lord is my portion,” says my soul, “Therefore I hope in Him!” 25 The Lord is good to those who wait for Him, to the soul who seeks Him. 26 It is good that one should hope and wait quietly for the salvation of the Lord. 27 It is good for a man to bear the yoke in his youth. 28 Let him sit alone and keep silent, because God has laid it on him; 29 Let him put his mouth in the dust—there may yet be hope. 30 Let him give his cheek to the one who strikes him, and be full of reproach. 31 For the Lord will not cast off forever. 32 Though He causes grief, yet He will show compassion according to the multitude of His mercies. 33 For He does not afflict willingly, nor grieve the children of men. . . . .

40 Let us search out and examine our ways, and turn back to the Lord; 41 let us lift our hearts and hands to God in heaven. 42 We have transgressed and rebelled; You have not pardoned. 43 You have covered Yourself with anger and pursued us; You have slain and not pitied. 44 You have covered Yourself with a cloud, that prayer should not pass

through. 45 You have made us an offscouring and refuse in the midst of the peoples. 46 All our enemies have opened their mouths against us. 47 Fear and a snare have come upon us, desolation and destruction. 48 My eyes overflow with rivers of water for the destruction of the daughter of my people. 49 My eyes flow and do not cease, without interruption, 50 till the Lord from heaven looks down and sees. 51 my eyes bring suffering to my soul because of all the daughters of my city. 52 My enemies without cause hunted me down like a bird. 53 They silenced my life in the pit and threw stones at me. 54 The waters flowed over my head; I said, "I am cut off!" 55 I called on Your name, O Lord, from the lowest pit. 56 You have heard my voice: "Do not hide Your ear from my sighing, from my cry for help." 57 You drew near on the day I called on You, and said, "Do not fear!" 58 O Lord, You have pleaded the case for my soul; You have redeemed my life.

### **Reasons for Hope When Life Is Its Darkest**

Jeremiah gives us three reasons for hope when life is at its darkest. The first of them is this:

#### ***God's love and mercy to His people are unending 1-24***

We find this in the first 24 verses of this chapter, which begins with a long list of sorrowful reflections on just how desperate the situation really is. But the prophet knew God well enough to know that the ruins of Jerusalem were not the end of the story. There were two encouraging facts that he could lay hold of. First...

*As long as I have life, I can do something about the future (21-22)*

This lies behind the dramatic statements beginning in verse 21, "This I recall to my mind, therefore I have hope." Now my Bible punctuates this with a period, but I think we are driven to the conclusion that there should be a colon at the end of verse 21. "This I recall to my mind, therefore I have hope:" Thus it introduces the wonderful statement of verse 22. What gives Jeremiah hope? The knowledge that "Through the Lord's mercies we are not consumed, because His compassions fail not."

"He could have taken our lives altogether," says the prophet. "He didn't do that. He is not washing His hands of us."

The older you are, the more likely you are to realize that you missed a lot of turns in life. Most people, if they are honest with themselves, have a lot of regrets. But there is never a reason to say, "God has washed His hands of me, because I've made too many mistakes." Not so. As long as you have the prospect of another sunrise, you can do something about making the right choices tomorrow. Additionally, it is important to remember that...

*My circumstances may change, but God does not (23-24)*

Jeremiah puts it this way in verse 23: "[God's compassions] are new every morning; great is Your faithfulness. 'The Lord is my portion,' says my soul, 'Therefore I hope in Him!'" He's always the same. His mercies are new every day. It is unreasonable to hope in my own best efforts, but eminently reasonable to hope in Him.

There was once a young Polish girl named Marie Skłodowska who sat in a classroom and heard her professor say, "Some of you have stars at your fingertips." Those words made a deep impression on young Marie. She went on to study science at the Sorbonne in Paris where she fell in love with one of her teachers, Pierre Curie.

They decided to get married and to reach for the stars together. The way was long and rugged. They were laughed at and almost starved. On the verge of admitting failure, they walked into their laboratory one night to see their evaporation dishes aglow in the darkness. They had discovered a new element: radium, which has become so useful in our world today. God's mercies are always there in the morning.

What makes this story significant is that one day before they noticed the glow in their evaporation dishes, it would have been easy to conclude that there was no reason to continue with the work, since it obviously was going nowhere. That would have been a mistake—just like abandoning hope the day before God acts in mercy.

A second reason for hope when life is at its darkest is that...

### **God's goodness and control of our lives is reassuring 25-39**

Now this is important: God's goodness and God's control of our lives are the very things that people tend to deny when life pinches. Somehow, they feel that they have to move God away from what is happening to them. Maybe this is based on the notion that "If what is happening to me is from God, what is the point of asking Him to remove it?"

But that creates more problems than it solves. If we can cling to two fundamentals in the middle of our pain, we will be a long way toward dealing with our difficulties. First...

#### *God is good even when necessary suffering comes our way*

That was what kept Jeremiah going. In verse 25, he says, "The Lord is good to those who wait for Him, to the soul who seeks Him. It is good that one should hope and wait quietly for the salvation of the Lord." Remember, now, this is being written by the man who has just witnessed a series of horrors. He knows suffering first hand, but he also knows God. When you are in pain, the moment the pain lifts an inch and you are able to reflect at all, this is where to come. This is what to reflect on: God is good. He hasn't changed because I am suffering. Losing sight of this fundamental pillar of the faith leads you into bitterness and hopelessness.

Then again...

#### *God is in control even when necessary suffering comes our way*

That is behind the hopeful statement beginning in verse 31: "For the Lord will not cast off forever. Though He causes grief, yet He will show compassion according to the multitude of His mercies. For He does not afflict willingly, nor grieve the children of men." I said a minute ago that one of the ways we think is, "God isn't in control of this horrible mess. If He is, then what is the point of coming to him in prayer? He's the very one who put me behind this eight ball."

But that is precisely what this verse denies, encouraging us instead to bring our requests to the very one who caused the difficulty: "Though He causes grief, yet He will show compassion according to the multitude of His mercies. For He does not afflict willingly, nor grieve the children of men."

There is a third reason to have hope when the day is darkest...

### **God's forgiveness and answers to prayer are encouraging 40-66**

#### *Hope comes from right relations with God*

Look at verse 43: "You have covered Yourself with anger and pursued us; You have slain

and not pitied. You have covered Yourself with a cloud, that prayer should not pass through. You have made us an offscouring and refuse in the midst of the peoples. All our enemies have opened their mouths against us.” Why does Jeremiah mention this series of things now? Because it is so uncharacteristic of God to permit events like this! He is bound to change soon.

Jeremiah was able to look past the immediate pain and realize that what he was seeing was an exception to God’s ordinary behavior. He could see past the hurt to the grace that was always there. He knew that there were benefits waiting if he was patient and kept his head. I read recently about an example of keeping one’s head in the aftermath of trouble.

Many of you are familiar with the airlines’ Frequent Flyer programs. The various bonus mileage programs that airlines devised in the 1980s to foster customer loyalty have had some strange fallout. Many companies have denied their employees private benefits from such programs, after discovering that they were sometimes flying the most roundabout routes in order to get more mileage. A rather extreme example of going out of one’s way to qualify for bonus coupons came when TWA Flight 847 was hijacked in June, 1985, and was flown four times between Algiers and Beirut. Larry Hilliard, regional director of corporate communications for TWA, revealed that Deborah Toga, wife of one of the hostages, had inquired whether these hostage trips qualified under the airline’s Frequent Flyer program. Interestingly enough, they did.<sup>2</sup>

Jeremiah knew that God’s forgiveness would be available for those who would look for it. That’s why he says in verse 40, “Let us search out and examine our ways, and turn back to the Lord; let us lift our hearts and hands to God in heaven.”

*Right relations with God cannot be had apart from convictions*

You have to hold fast to what you know if you would be in a right relationship with God. Being accusatory and hostile toward God because of hardship makes no sense at all. Jeremiah knew something about God. He knew that His compassions so far outweighed his judgment that it was a merely a matter of God seeing exactly what was going on. Look at this amazing conviction in verse 48: “My eyes overflow with rivers of water for the destruction of the daughter of my people. My eyes flow and do not cease, without interruption, till the Lord from heaven looks down and sees.”

Jeremiah knew that God’s mercies would make it difficult for Him to leave Israel very far from His heart.

Even when you have made a wreck of your life, if you are interested in having a relationship with God, and Jesus Christ is in your life, it can happen. The pains of the moment will pass, and your convictions about what God is truly like will see you through, if you have them. But they have to be convictions, not merely opinions.

The name Robert Chesebrough may not be familiar to many of us, but his invention is. He was a man who believed in his product. He’s the fellow who invented Vaseline, a petroleum jelly refined from rod wax, the ooze that forms on shafts of oil rigs. He so believed in the healing properties of his product that he became his own guinea pig: he burned himself with acid and flame; he cut and scratched himself so often and so deeply that he bore the scars of his tests the rest of his life. But he proved his product worked. People had only to look at his wounds, now healed, to see the value of his work and the

extent of his convictions.<sup>2</sup>

That is what the believer who has made a wreck of things needs: a conviction that, when God sees the extent of your pain, He will pay attention to it and be gracious. He will bring healing when you are convinced that He is there and wants you to seek him.

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Notes:

1. Timothy C. Walker, *The Stained-Glass Gospel*.
2. Peter Hay, *The Book of Business Anecdotes* (New York: Facts on File Publications, 1988).