

Finding Joy When All Good Seems Lost

Lamentations 3:21-41

“Weeping may tarry for the night, but joy comes with the morning.”

Psalm 30:5

Introduction: Over the last 2 weeks I’ve had the privilege to sit and have focused, intentional, and honest conversation with both sides of our family. Last week it was sitting around a campfire with all the Bakker adults and going to breakfast with the Bakker men (and the brother-in-laws). These last few days it was sitting over coffee with individuals and in a living room with the entire Gammon family. We laughed, talked through future realities, and caught up on life over the last year. One thing stood out to me in the communication that came out from each individual and family: Each had testimony of a mixture difficult times, of loss, of wandering children, of revealed sin, of broken or tattered relationships, of unmet expectations, of frustrations, of pain, and overall affliction. This all transpired in our families, churches, work environment, or with others that they love. **Can you relate to any of these?** In fact, if we only focused on these circumstances or only listened to half of the conversations, you would think that this would be a broken, bitter, unhappy, frustrated group of people. But there was a distinctly different tone and conclusion in each discussion that can be summed up in a word: **HOPE**. Hope that is ground in God’s goodness and sovereignty, rather than in some nebulous belief that things would just work out, hope that was generated through the finished work of Christ rather than trust in our own ingenuity to fix and solve everything.

This morning I want to take a bit of a break from the book of Daniel and walk through a corollary passage written by Jeremiah the prophet who was there when it all fell apart, when Judah was taken into captivity, who watched a once great city of Jerusalem get ground down by a military force hell bent on its destruction. Daniel has been a deep dive into history and prophecy, and though it is relevant and applicable, it is good to step back and try to answer the question that is posed in the midst of God’s judgment on His people: where do we find hope in the midst of circumstances that would cause us to feel lost, hopeless, and even bitter? Jeremiah wrote a funeral dirge, a eulogy of loss and pain in a book called **Lamentations**, a book that literally means “loud cries”, a passionate expression of mourning from grief and sorrow. Laments are those things that come out of us when we can’t form the words enough to express how we feel, or the words that come out when happiness and even joy have seemingly slipped through our fingers, questioning where any form of joy can be found. This is exactly what the “weeping prophet” dealt with, and in the middle of his eulogy, he wrote one of the most **beautiful, profound, and focused** passages on hope in the midst of affliction.

Hope Born out of Remembering the Past (3:21)

“But this I call to mind, and therefore I have hope.”

Dwelling on Past Affliction Leads to Lament

We’ve looked at the circumstances of Judah’s fall by Babylonian hands: rampant idolatry and wickedness, worshipping foreign gods and forgetting God Himself, sacrificing children and adopting all the evil practices of those around lead to God’s righteous judgment. God is faithful to discipline us in our sin, and often what we feel in affliction is the consequence of sin and faithlessness to the Lord.

Here, Jeremiah felt things personally. Though he himself was not the source or cause of Jerusalem’s fall (he was the only one calling for repentance), but he felt the pain of rejection and the reality of God’s justice falling on his people. Doing a quick survey of Lamentations 3 we see and FEEL the angst Jeremiah felt.

He felt like he was driven into darkness and God's hand was against him (1-3). His bones felt broken and was enveloped in bitterness and tribulation (4-6). He felt imprisoned by grief and his prayers found no answer (7-9), like they were traveling down a road blocked and crooked path. His wounds went deep, found no consolation in others but only taunts as bitterness seeped deep in his soul (10-15). It was like eating gravel, forgetting what happiness felt like, where endurance waned and hope went away (16-18). He couldn't stop thinking about what had happened, and every time he did, it relentlessly filled him with sour bitterness. There was no solace in trying to make sense of what had happened, no silver lining, no thread of hope to tug on to redeem all that had transpired. Again, I ask you, have you been there? Have you felt that in terms of dealing with circumstances in your past, relationships that crushed, or sorrow from something done to you? Have you felt you cannot shake free from your past or cannot possibly have joy while carrying past realities with you? You are not alone.

Deciding to Remember God's Person and Work Leads to hope

It's admittedly hard to focus on the good and gracious things of our past when the painful are so glaring. It's difficult to remember the million gracious gifts God gave us when the one tragic thing is such an affront to our logic and affections. But notice that Jeremiah makes a **conscious decision**, a decided turn to recall something different than his pain alone. We can not forget our pain, but we can turn our focus from it onto something greater, more sure and firm. The key to finding hope is focusing on the right foundation, and verse 21 sets the tone for the rest of the section. **Forgetfulness is the enemy of faith. It is why remembering God and His promises is so important.** We have it built into corporate worship, with communion, singing, and preaching. *"I remember the deeds of the LORD; yes, I will remember your wonders of old. I will ponder all your work, and meditate on your mighty deeds."* (Psalm 77:11-12). Remembering is NOT PASSIVE but an active, ongoing choice that we can make. *"I have written to you very boldly by way of reminder, because of the grace given to me by God (Rom. 15:15)."* "I think it right, as long as I am in this body, **to stir you up by way of reminder.**" (2 Pet. 1:13). This is why we MUST put ourselves in positions to be stirred up, to be reminded of the grace of God through His Word and people. The Spirit brings to remembrance what Christ commanded (John 14:26), but works through the Word, so we must not neglect the means of Grace given to us to remember God's faithfulness, goodness, and kindness. **If forgetfulness leads bitterness, remembrance is the pathway to hope.** But remembering *what* is the question.

Hope Cultivated in Waiting in the Present (3:25-39)

*The steadfast love of the LORD never ceases, His mercies never come to an end; they are **new every morning**; great is your faithfulness. 'The Lord is my portion', says my soul, 'therefore **I will hope in Him.** The Lord is good to those who **wait for him**, to the soul who **seeks Him.** It is good that one should wait quietly for the salvation of the LORD. It is good for a man that he bear the yoke in his youth. Let him sit alone in silence when it is laid on him; let him put his mouth in dust — **there may yet be hope**; let him give his cheek to the one who strikes, and let him be filled with insults. 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 down not afflict from his heart, or grieve the children of men. To crush underfoot all the prisoners of the earth, to deny a man justice in the presence of the Most High, to subvert a man in his lawsuit, the LORD does not approve. Who has spoken and it came to pass, unless the Lord has commanded it? **Is it not from the mouth of the Most High that good and bad come?** Why should a living man complain, a man, about the punishment of his sins?*

Remembering the Promises and Character of God

One of the most profound thing I've heard recently was a man processing the death of his bride, trying to reconcile why God did not answer his prayer to heal her from her terminal disease. Through months of questioning, numbness, and frustration, he said, "I guess the answer is 'who am I, a puny person, question the God of the universe and presume upon him.'" This is really the marrow of faith, to trust God when nothing else makes sense, and to lean into His loving mercy when all rational thought that can be mustered up is found wanting. What are the promises and character of God we bank on everyday, but especially in time of grief and lament?

1. **God's unchanging love** – Human love can be fickle, so often based on feelings, circumstances, or mutuality. But unchanging love brings security, confidence, and clarity. Think about how your outlook changes in a day when someone you care about reminds you of their love for you, whether verbally or in text. No matter what you face, no matter the pressure or trial you are going through, knowing you are loved despite your failings is one of the greatest gifts we could ever receive. And because God's nature is that of unmovable and unchanging, perfect deity, His love never fails. Jesus is the same yesterday, today and forever (Heb. 13:8). The idea here of "never ceases" has the idea that we are not "cut off", like in **Malachi 3:6**, "For the Lord does not change; therefore you, O children of Jacob, are not consumed." His love is based on His character, not ours. So He loves us in our sin, but does not keep up in our sin, but gives us new hearts and minds to love Him, and that new love of Christ now controls us (2 Cor. 5:14). We are loved so we have the freedom to change, knowing He will not cut us off or consume us when we sin or when we face consequences or challenges, because He cannot go against His nature. This brings hope in the midst of pain, in the fight against sin, in the bearing up under trial.
2. **God's renewing mercy** – Second, we see that His mercies are not only **exhaustive**, never using them up, but they are renewed every morning. This brings hope to our heart in **two distinct ways: First**, it means that there is always enough mercy and grace to meet the challenges for that day. It means that we can continually fix our eyes on Jesus and cast our burdens on Him again and again, and we will never run out of access (1 Pet. 5:6-7). When we are discouraged, run down, or feel like we are barely holding on, we remember that God does not sleep nor slumber (Ps. 121:4), never runs out of energy (like even the best of parents do), and never is bothered by the casting of burdens from His people. **Second**, it means that each day has enough mercy for the day, and we cannot rely on past mercy for a new day. In other words, each day we have access to the fountain of mercy ready to be lavished on us, so each day we seek the Lord who gives it for the day. So often we rush off to a full day, with the pragmatic approach that we have enough stored up strength to handle everything, turning to God only when we've exhausted our own strength, treating God and His mercy like my battery pack (currently charging my iPad as I write on the plane) that is there when we've run out of juice, rather than a power source that continually charges throughout the day. Remember in the Lord's Prayer (Luke 11:3), Jesus taught us to pray "give us THIS day our daily bread", both trusting and thanking God for today and not presuming on tomorrow. Just like manna given in the Wilderness to Israel, they were told only store what could be eaten that day, trusting that God would provide more tomorrow. So when we say, "what about tomorrow", we remind ourselves that tomorrow there will be NEW mercies awaiting as we rest in the present mercies already given.
3. **God's great faithfulness** – Lastly, we bank on God's great faithfulness, the type that never lets down and always keeps promises. Again, we often try to fix and manage our own laments by trying to control outcomes, listing out the duties of the day and checking them off one by one, hoping anxiety and stress will go away if we accomplish it all. Now, there's nothing wrong with a

to-do list, but we cannot trust our own ability or faithfulness to be the ultimate answer. **“God is faithful”** is the type of promise we cling to each day, knowing He is faithful when we are not, He is faithful no matter the circumstance, and He is faithful so we can take hold of His promises:

“The Lord is at hand.; do not be anxious about anything, but in everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made known to God. And the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, will guard your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus.” Phil. 4:6-7

This powerful promise would be mere sentiment and even drivel if it were not backed by God’s faithfulness. This would sound like psychobabble and vain promises that are pandered to constituents hoping for votes if not for the bedrock faithfulness of God. When we believe and trust in God’s faithfulness, we can rest fully in these realities. This is what **Jeremiah recalled, and this is where He found HOPE.**

Waiting Patiently in the Timing and Character of God

In the midst of lament, pain, or trial, our/my knee jerk reaction is to want to DO SOMETHING. Most of us have a “fix it” gear in our minds, and when faced with something beyond us, we at least want to try to fix something. This is why waiting rooms are so hard for me. It’s just waiting around with nothing to do, nothing to contribute but our presence and prayer, and nothing to fix the situation. Often we lament in the realization that we are NOT IN CONTROL of life or outcomes, and we like the notion that we can control most or all parts of our lives, our kids, families, etc.

This is why the next section is so profound. Jeremiah reminds of the power of waiting, and frames it two ways:

- 1) **We wait by seeking** – First, note that Jeremiah says its good to wait. We are placed in waiting rooms by God NOT as a punishment or in retribution, but for our good. Waiting reminds us we are not ultimately in control and that it is not up to us to fix everything. But then he clarifies what he means by waiting by defining it by “seeking Him”. Not seek things from Him, but seeking Him. What a promise. The God of the universe WANTS us to seek after Him, and promises that when we do, He will be found (Heb. 11:6; Isa. 55:6). When we are in fix it mode and cannot control situations, instead of this being an opportunity for frustration and angst, they are tailor made to seek after God in Christ and rest in Him. In doing this, we may miss the point and the purpose by which we were put in the waiting room in the first place.
- 2) **We wait by understanding** – It is also good to wait **quietly** for the salvation of the Lord. (V. 26). How do we wait quietly in the midst of uncertainty, or loss, or pain? How do we still have hope? (V. 29). We understand exactly who God is and how He operates. 1) **He operates consistently as a faithful father** – Look again at vv. 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.” Did we read that right? God CAUSES grief? Isaiah 45:7 says “I from the light and create darkness; I make well-being and **create calamity**; I am the LORD who does all these things.” Or Amos 3:6, “Is a trumpet blown in a city and the people are not afraid? **Does disaster come to a city unless the LORD has done it?**” In other words, God does not cut Himself out of the bad things that happen to us, but takes ownership of them! Is that good news or simply make Him sadistic and untrustworthy? I would argue it’s the best news! The same God willing to inflict pain and wrath on His Son in order to offer us salvation is the same God who is in control of grief, calamity, and disaster, and who does it all for the great purpose of His will. Jeremiah goes on to say **“He does not afflict from His heart, or grieve the children of men.”** Like a good parent, He does not give

us more pain than is necessary, but only that which helps train and produce godliness in us. A good parent will protect their child, but not wrap them in bubble wrap. We know hurt knees, hurt pride, and hurt in relationships will be part of the growing up process. It pains us to see and wipe away the tears, but we do it so that maturation and growth will take root. **2) He works in circumstances and consequences** – Sometimes, like Job or Peter, we face trials we did not deserve, but God had other purposes in mind for seemingly harsh happenings. Other times, it is a result of our sin that has to be disciplined. Jeremiah reminded that God gives both good and bad, and that the living man should not complain about the punishment for his sin (38-39). But when He disciplines us, He does it out of love and proof of sonship (Heb. 12:7-8). *“For the moment all discipline seems painful rather than pleasant, but later it yields the peaceful fruit of righteousness to those who have been trained by it.”* (Heb. 12:11). Because salvation breeds change, and because God will do whatever He needs to do in order to conform us to the image of Christ, He will use all things to train us. This is why waiting and understanding God’s timing is so important if we are to see these things as hopeful rather than punitive or negative.

Hope Perpetuated in Continual Evaluation into the Future (3:40-41)

*“Let us **test and examine our ways, and return to the LORD! Let us life up our hearts and hands to God in heaven.**”*

Jeremiah gave three main ways that all of this can be secured: Evaluate, Repent, and Worship. We evaluate our life, delights, idols, and present circumstances to see if we are walking in hope, even in the midst of pain, making sure we are looking to Christ and seeing what God is teaching and training us. If there are areas that we we have been caught up in sin, we repent, since unbelief is the core of sin and sin steals our joy. Finally, we get back to a **Godward focus on worship**, remembering that life is not about us, that He is not there to serve us, but we are there to serve Him, make much of Him, and glorify Him. In doing this, we can join with King David as he wrote:

*“O LORD, you have brought up my soul from Sheol; you restored me to life from among those who go down to the pit. Sing praises to the LORD, O you his saints, and give things to His holy name. For His anger is but for a moment, and His favor is for a lifetime. Weeping may tarry for the night, but **joy comes with the morning...you have turned for me my mourning into dancing**, you have loosed my sackcloth and clothed me with gladness, that my glory may sing your praise and not be silent. O LORD my God, I will give thanks to you forever.” Psalm 30:3-5, 11-12*