

Hope in Affliction

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Date: 20 September 2026

Preacher: Joe DeHaan

[0:00] Taking a short break from Pastor Keith's series on Exodus and take a detour to the book of Lamentations. Although the book of Exodus will make an appearance this morning. The scripture for today's sermon is Lamentations 3. You can find it on page 816 of the Maroon Pew Bibles or on page 616 of the Brown Pew Bibles.

It's between the books of Jeremiah and Ezekiel. I'll read the entire chapter, but the focus of the sermon will be on verses 15 through 33. Before reading it, though, a little context might help. In the book of Lamentations, we find five laments for the fall of Jerusalem and the destruction of the temple. The book was written shortly after these events occurred, early in the 6th century B.C. Lamentations 3. I am the man who has seen affliction under the rod of his wrath. He has driven and brought me into darkness without any light.

Surely against me he turns his hand again and again the whole day long. He has made my flesh and my skin waste away. He has broken my bones.

[1:08] He has besieged and enveloped me with bitterness and tribulation. He has made me dwell in darkness like the dead of long ago. He has walled me about so that I cannot escape.

He has made my chains heavy. Though I call and cry for help, he shuts out my prayer. He has blocked my ways with blocks of stone. He has made my paths crooked.

He is a bear lying in wait for me, a lion in hiding. He turns aside my steps and tore me to pieces. He has made me desolate. He bent his bow and set me as a target for his arrows.

He drove into my kidneys the arrows of his quiver. I have become the laughingstock of all of my people, the object of their taunts all the day long.

He has filled me with bitterness. He has sated me with wormwood. He has made my teeth grind on the gravel and made me cower in ashes. He has made me with bitterness.

[2:09] My soul is bereft of peace. I have forgotten what happiness is. So I say, my endurance has perished. So has my hope in the Lord.

Remember my affliction and their wanderings, the wormwood and the gall. My soul continually remembers it and is bowed down within me. But this I call to mind, and therefore I have hope.

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.

[3:12] Let him put his mouth in the 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.

For 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.

Crush underfoot all of 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 has come 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? Let us examine our ways and return to the Lord. Let us lift up our hearts and our hands to God in heaven. We have transgressed and rebelled, and you have not forgiven. You have wrapped yourself with anger and pursued us, killing without pity.

[4:16] You have wrapped yourself with a cloud so that no prayer can pass through. You have made us scum and garbage among the peoples. All our enemies open their mouths against us.

Panic and footfall come upon us, devastation and destruction. My eyes flow with rivers of tears because of the destruction of the daughter of my people.

My eyes will flow without ceasing, without respite, until the Lord from heaven looks down and sees my eyes. My eyes cause me grief at the fate of the daughters of my city.

I have been hunted like a bird by those who are my enemies without cause. They flung me alive into a pit and cast stones on me. Water closed over my set head. I said, I am lost.

I called on your name, O Lord, in the depths of the pit. You heard my plea. Do not close your ear to my cry for help. You came near when I called you. You said, do not fear.

[5 : 17] You have taken up my cause, O Lord. You have redeemed my life. You have seen the wrong done to me, O Lord. Judge my cause. You have seen all of the vengeance, all of the plots against me.

You have heard their taunts, O Lord, all of their plots against me. The lips and thoughts of my assailants are against me all the day long. Behold, they're sitting and they're rising.

I am the object of their taunts. You will repay them, O Lord, according to the work of their hands. You will give them dullness of heart and your curse will be on them.

You will pursue them in anger and destroy them from under the heavens, O Lord. The word of the Lord. In a personal letter, Thomas Chrysselm wrote that there was no circumstantial background for the hymn, Great is Thy Faithfulness.

Instead, it was the result of his morning-by-morning realization of God's personal faithfulness. Since it was penned, it's been used for innumerable baptisms, dedications, weddings, and funerals.

[6 : 25] And though there may have been no specific event that led to its offering, I'm sure that you can think of a specific event when you've sung it in the past. For many, this hymn evokes memories, and it's memories that the lamenter in Lamentations 3 is calling to mind.

Transitioning from recent memories of affliction and woe, the lamenter recalls something firmer than the circumstances of his life. He remembers the steadfast love of the Lord, his only true source of hope.

In doing so, the lamenter works to guide the community to which he is speaking, from grief to hope. The lamenter reminds the community of God's true character, that he is a God of steadfast love, a God that we can hope in.

We often face trials in our own lives, and though they may not be the same trials the Judeans faced 2,600 years ago at the hand of God through disobedience, we can follow along with the lamenter and be reminded of God's true character.

In the midst of trials, we must remember who God is, that the steadfast love of the Lord never ceases, that he will not cast off forever, that his mercies are new every morning, great is his faithfulness.

[7 : 43] In the midst of trials, knowing who God is helps us trust in his promises and gives us strength to wait patiently and wait hopefully for him.

Greek translations of the original Hebrew book of Lamentations include an introduction that associates the first lament, if not the entire book, with the prophet Jeremiah. Jeremiah lived and prophesied during the years of the final kings of Judah, Josiah, Jehoahaz, Jehoiachin, Jehoiachin, and Zedekiah.

His prophetic ministry covered the last 30 years of the kingdom of Judah and into the Babylonian exile. During this time, he saw the final decline of the kingdom, the destruction of the temple, and the exile of all but the poorest people of the land.

Indeed, the prophet had a hard ministry and much to lament. The book of Lamentations takes the form of five poems, all with a common theme of lament.

We hear three primary voices lamenting over the state that Babylon has left Jerusalem and the temple in. The first voice we hear is that of the prophet.

[8 : 52] The prophet is the primary voice guiding the community through and to their final lament. The prophet opens the first poem describing the suffering of the city and the community within it.

At multiple points in the first two poems, we hear a second voice, the personified city, Lady Zion, chiming in, sharing her own depiction of the suffering and pain that's been caused to her.

The prophet and the city go back and forth throughout the first two poems, describing the destruction and suffering and occasionally calling on the Lord to look at the devastation of the city and the people within it.

As we move through the first two poems, the prophet becomes more emotionally engaged and then, in the third poem, shares a testimony of his own suffering at the hand of God. About two-thirds of the way through, the third voice, that of the community, makes its first appearance, chiming in, confessing their guilt, describing God's root of punishment and the response to it.

In the fourth poem, as if emotionally exhausted from giving his testimony, the prophet pulls back. He speaks from a more emotionally detached point of view.

[10:02] And near the end, after the community chimes in once more, the prophet's perspective changes, looking forward to the salvation of Zion and the punishment of Israel's enemies, enemies who had overreached in their destruction of Jerusalem.

This glimpse of hope accomplishes the prophet's goal, and in the final poem, the community raises their voice in prayer to God, asking him to look, to see, to remember his people, crying out in distress at the state of devastation God has set upon them and challenging him to restore them. Throughout the book of Lamentations, we hear a repeated question, how? Or rather, an explanation, how? Three of the five poems in Lamentations begin with this question.

How lonely sits the city that was once full of people. How the Lord, in his anger, has set the daughter of Zion under a cloud. How the gold has grown dim. How the pure gold has changed. How? How could God let his holy city fall to the Babylonians? How could he let his temple see such devastation and destruction? How could he let it be plundered?

[11:15] How could God abandon them? How do we recover from such calamity? How? It might have been that the people of Judah had grown overconfident.

They may have believed that God wouldn't let the nations overthrow the place that he chose for his name to dwell. They might have felt cocky after a near miss with the Assyrians during the time of Hezekiah.

They might have misunderstood God's everlasting covenant with David, thinking that he wouldn't allow David's line to be removed completely from the throne in Jerusalem. But that's what happened after Zedekiah's rebellion and the Babylonian destruction of Jerusalem.

The throne of David was left vacant. The people of Jerusalem were left devastated. They were left mourning, lamenting. All of these hows lead to the final question that closes the final poem of the book.

Why? Why do you forget us forever? Why do you forsake us for so many days? Restore us to yourself, O Lord, that we may be restored.

[12:16] Renew our days as of old, unless you have utterly rejected us and you remain exceedingly angry with us. These questions deserve an answer.

And there are points in our lives where we might ask similarly challenging questions. Why did my relationship with a loved one fall apart? Why is my health failing? Why is there such evil and conflict in the world?

The question at the end of Lamentations appears to be one that's left open. And oftentimes, it feels like our questions to God are left open. Several commentators have noted the open nature of the book of Lamentations.

We are left with that question, that cliffhanger, at the end of the fifth poem that leaves us on the edge of our seats. Commentators go on to say that the book doesn't provide answers, and while this is technically true, the community isn't left empty-handed.

Sure, the book of Lamentations ends with a question. Sure, we don't see the promise of restoration in the book. There isn't a roadmap to a restored community, but what there is, is hope.

[13:34] The prophet takes the community on a journey, recognizing the devastation and destruction that they've lived through, recognizing their state of mind, and sharing his own story when he faced God's wrath, that we read in Lamentations 3.

Lamentations 3 is the personal testimony of the prophet, sharing a time when he too faced the judgment of God. The prophet opens, I am the man who has seen affliction under the rod of his wrath.

He has driven and brought me into darkness without any light. Surely against me, he turns his hand again and again the whole day long. The prophet has felt the same rod of wrath that the community recently felt.

Rod only occurs a handful of times in the Old Testament, the most memorable of which is probably on the lips of the psalmist in Psalm 23. Your rod and your staff, they comfort me. The rod that the

prophet faced and that Israel faced was not that rod of comfort, but the rod of the Lord's discipline. A rod repeatedly brought up in Proverbs. The rod that God had warned David about when he covenanted with him in 2 Samuel 7. When your days are fulfilled and you lie down with your fathers, I will raise up your offspring after you, who shall come from your body, and I will establish his kingdom.

[14 : 53] He shall build a house for my name, and I will establish the throne of his kingdom forever. I will be to him a father, and he shall be to me a son. When he commits iniquity, I will discipline him with a rod of men, with the stripes of the sons of men, but my steadfast love will not depart from him.

2 Samuel 7 shows us God's commitment to the line of David, and by extension, the people of Israel. But we also see the promise of discipline when his descendants go astray, something that the Israelites felt acutely after the fall of Jerusalem.

Judah had steadily turned away from God. Kings grew worse and worse until finally God passed his judgment on his people. At the hand of the Babylonians, God punished Israel, destroying Jerusalem, destroying the temple, and sending his people into exile.

The people were left in desolation, and this desolation was something the prophet could relate to. Through the first 20 verses of the Lamentations 3, the prophet shares his own trials, how he has been besieged, enveloped, walled, chained, and turned aside.

He's been made a laughingstock. The prophet's woes culminate in verses 16 through 20, where he says, He has made my teeth grind on gravel and made me cower in ashes.

[16 : 16] My soul is bereft of peace. I have forgotten what happiness is. So I say, my endurance has perished. So has my hope in the Lord. Remember my affliction and my wanderings, the wormwood and the gall.

My soul continually remembers it and is bowed down within me. The prophet is left without hope, utterly isolated, feeling unheard, in the dark, like the dead of long ago.

He remembers his affliction. He remembers it, and his soul is bowed down within him. His hope has perished. But then, he remembers something else.

Looking back, before his affliction, before his isolation, he calls to mind something that restores his hope. The steadfast love of the Lord never ceases.

His mercies never come to an end. They are new of the Lord. Great is your faithfulness. This isn't a generic hope for well-wishing.

[17 : 23] This is a well-founded hope. A hope not in something, but in someone. The Lord is my portion, says my soul. Therefore, I will hope.

Amen. Psalm 89 echoes the themes of God's covenant faithfulness and steadfast love that we see in Lamentations 3 and earlier in God's covenant with David in 2 Samuel 7.

Verses 28-34 say, My steadfast love, I will keep with him forever, and my covenant will stand firm for him. I will establish his offspring forever and his throne as the days of the heavens.

If his children forsake my law and do not walk according to my rules, if they violate my statutes and do not keep my commandments, then I will punish their transgressions with a rod and their iniquity with stripes.

But, I will not remove from him my steadfast love or be false to my faithfulness. I will not violate my covenant or alter the words that went in my lips.

[18 : 26] God promises not to remove his steadfast love from his covenant people. This is what the prophet calls to mind. This is what gives him hope. Yes, the people will face the rod for violating his statutes and not keeping his commandments, but a rod is not the finest story.

God's steadfast love is. This is who God is.

This is who he's always been. When God revealed himself to Moses on Mount Sinai in Exodus 3, before he told Moses who he was, the Lord, a God merciful and gracious, slow to end, anger and abandon his steadfast love and faithfulness, keeping steadfast love for thousands for the iniquity and transgression and sin.

Indeed, the Lord had been slow to anger and punishing his people, but they had faced the rod of his wrath and so, what was next for the community? They were still in the midst of devastation.

Their temple was of ruins, their city wall was breached, and their leaders were carried off to Babylon. The prophet gave them an answer, remember, remember the character of their covenant God.

[19 : 48] Remember his faithfulness, even in the midst of devastation through this of their God. They needed to remember who he was, and this jogging of their memory led to a hope, a hope of future restoration.

And so there was one thing for them to do, to wait, but not a sitting-on-your-hands kind of waiting, not some bored bench-surfing. This was waiting with every expectation.

As John Hartley put it, this type of waiting was enduring patiently, confident hope, that God will decisively act for the salvation of his people. Isaiah says it confidently in Isaiah 49-23, when the people of God are restored, then you will know that I am the Lord.

Those who wait for me shall not be put to shame. This doesn't always make the waiting easier, but it gives us something that we can hold on to in the midst of devastation when it seems like we have nothing left.

Those who have faith in God, his special people, will not be put to shame when they hope in the Lord, trust in his steadfast love, and wait patiently for him.

[21 : 08] As Christians today, we share that community's hope, but for a better reason. Though the line of David was dethroned when Jerusalem fell to the Babylonians, it did not disappear.

In poetic language, Isaiah speaks about a shoot sprouting forth from the stump of Jesse and a branch from his root during fruit. At the end of the letter to the Romans, quoting Isaiah, Paul shares this hope with his readers.

Jesus is the fulfillment of God's promises. In him, this descendant of Abraham, this descendant of David, through which all the families of the earth are blessed. Paul writes, for I tell you that Christ became a servant to the circumcised to show God's truthfulness in order to confirm the promises given to the patriarchs and in order that the Gentiles might glorify God and his mercy.

As it is written, therefore, I will praise you among the Gentiles and sing your name. And again, it says, rejoice, O Gentiles, with his people. And again, praise the Lord, all you Gentiles, and let the people extol him.

And again, Isaiah says, the root of Jesse will come, even he who arises to rule the Gentiles, in him, the Gentiles, hope. One of God's names throughout the Old Testament is the hope of Israel.

[22 : 29] But he's not just the hope of Israel. He's the hope of all mankind, all those who trust, all those who have faith in him. After the fall of Jerusalem, the people of Israel were devastated.

They were in a dark place, feeling isolated, feeling like God was turning a deaf ear to them. What they needed to do was remember. They needed to remember who God was.

They needed to remember his true character. They needed to remember that he was a God of steadfast love, faithful to his covenant, faithful to his covenant people.

In his ultimate act of covenant faithfulness, the most supreme act of steadfast love, God sent his son to face the punishment that we deserved. Jesus felt the ride that was meant for us.

We faced the darkness and felt the utter rejection of God so that we wouldn't have to, so that we can be restored to a right relationship with our Heavenly Father, so that we can share the hope of the renewed creation.

[23 : 34] Yes, we will still face trials, but in the midst of trials, knowing who God is helps us trust in his promises and gives us strength to wait patiently, to wait hopefully for him.

Let's pray. Father God, we know that you are merciful and gracious, slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love and faithfulness.

We pray that when we find ourselves in times of darkness, in times where it feels as though we are abandoned and alone, that you would remind us of your presence and give us the hope for restoration and of a life to come with you.

We pray these things in Jesus' name. Amen.