

PM Lamentations 3:1-24 God's Enduring Faithfulness

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[0 : 00] 24 and verses 10 to 17. 2nd Kings 24 at verse 10. And this is a story of Jerusalem captured.

And of course this is what happened before the exile that we've mentioned already. 2nd Kings 24 at verse 10. At that time the servants of Nebuchadnezzar king of Babylon came up to Jerusalem and the city was besieged.

And Nebuchadnezzar king of Babylon came to the city while his servants were besieging it. 3rd Kings 24 and Jehoiachin the king of Judah gave himself up to the king of Babylon himself and his mother and his servants and his officials and his palace officials.

4th Kings 24 the king of Babylon took him prisoner in the eighth year of his reign and carried off all the treasures of the house of the Lord and the treasures of the king's house.

5th Kings 24 and cut in pieces all the vessels of gold in the temple of the Lord which Solomon king of Israel had made as the Lord had foretold.

[1 : 18] 6th Kings 24 he carried away all Jerusalem and all the officials and all the mighty men of valor 10,000 captives and all the craftsmen and the smiths. 7th Kings 24 none remained except the poorest people of the land and he carried away Jehoiachin to Babylon.

7th Kings 24 the king of Babylon the king of Babylon the king of Babylon brought captive to Babylon all the men of valor 7,000 and the craftsmen and the metal workers 1,000 all of them strong and fit for war.

8th Kings 24 and the king of Babylon made Mataniah Jehoiachin's uncle king in his place and changed his name to Zedekiah. 9th Kings 24 we'll just read to there.

10th Kings 24 may God bless to us chapter 3. 10th Kings 24 now this is a book that again tends to get hidden away. 11th Kings 24 it's squashed in between Jeremiah and Ezekiel. 11th Kings 24 Isaiah Jeremiah Lamentations Ezekiel Daniel.

11th Kings 24.

[2 : 54] 12th Kings 24.

12th Kings 24.

12th Kings 24.

12th Kings 24. 12th Kings 24. 12th Kings 24. 12th Kings 24. 13th Kings 24. 13th Kings 24.

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[4 : 50] 15thalf■■■ has been lu~? 16th mildly 23rd ■■■us 2X inmuciängs 26th meng Freddie Strachis nation. 16th earth 6th gebracht isbn Patrick Sir Gary Ser solves Fritz Aaron 24. 32nd David who's■■■ in advisors 50th pancakes upon Christian langs 25thigma 26th inccarat for the first sin. 18th ■■■■ Typical Hagg Kentico 25thbt!!! 180 Andy will consequently Alephprogram 36th We're going to look at Lamentations chapter 3 and verses 19 to 24.

Lamentations chapter 3 at verse 19. Remember my affliction and my 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.

And so on. We'll look at the rest of it as we go on. Now this morning we looked at what was passing and what was permanent.

And you'll recall that what was passing was human life. Human life in this world. There's a frailty about it. There's a set time span.

[6 : 10] But often people don't live out their time span. And not only is human life passing, which isn't too strange when we look at the environment.

But nature itself is passing. The natural world is passing as well. It's like a cloak that is going to be put aside and changed because it's worn out. That's passing too.

But we also look to the other side. There are things that are permanent. God's permanent. He's from everlasting to everlasting. And this purpose of grace is permanent.

The children of his servants will not be moved. They will be established before him forever. Well, that's what we took in this morning, I hope. And I do think that that's something that we can easily reflect on and bear in mind because it's fairly simple.

There are things that are passing. There are things that are permanent. And what we've got to say is that although our flesh and heart may faint and fail, yet God will fail us never.

[7 : 19] It's easy to embrace that with our minds. But not so easy to embrace it with our hearts. It's easy to say that we believe that. But not so easy to put it into practice.

And that's why I've chosen this passage this evening. Because here we have what we might call a worked example of what it means to turn away from what's passing and put your heart on what is permanent.

Here's somebody who could say, my heart and flesh doth faint and fail. And he's also somebody that could say, but God shall fail me never. And I just want to look at this passage and develop it along these lines.

And see how he's actually putting into practice and giving concrete expression to the ideas that we were thinking about this morning. And I hope in that way we'll be encouraged to do the same sort of thing.

We start with Jeremiah's sufferings and then we go on to speak about God's mercies. Jeremiah's sufferings are described in verses 19 to 21.

[8 : 36] Now the background to this passage is the sort of thing that we mentioned in connection with the psalm that we sang and the passage that we read in 2 Kings.

Jeremiah is living in the time of the exile, not of the exile, but in the lead up to the exile. He's the prophet of God in the midst of this terrible turmoil that is going on in the nation.

The Babylonians have come and they've destroyed the fortified cities and they've cut down the trees to use as siege works or as firewood.

And they've taken the crops and used them for themselves. And they've got the livestock and eaten it and used it for their own food and so on. And they've devastated the land.

And people are appalled at what's happening. And many of them have fled to surrounding countries as refugees. And then finally they come against Jerusalem. And in two stages they defeat Jerusalem.

[9 : 39] It rebels. And then they defeat it again. And the final outcome is a terrible time of slaughter and of hardship and famine and pestilence.

And then of exile to the land of Babylon for many of them that were in Jerusalem when the Babylonians took over. And Jeremiah is caught up in all this. He's living through it.

He's prophesying about what's going to happen. He's God's messenger in the midst of this time of distress. And he's caught up in these sufferings. And that's what they're described here.

I don't want to make a hard and fast distinction here. But broadly speaking he's affected in body, mind and spirit. But that's only a general broad classification that hasn't to be pushed too hard.

There's different aspects of his suffering. Remember my affliction. Poor Jeremiah was really afflicted. His life of course was threatened like everybody else.

[10 : 45] With the approaching Babylonian soldiers. Affected by the famine and the pestilence. And his life was endangered in the way that everybody else's was.

But Jeremiah also was God's servant. And because of what he said in his prophecies. He was hated by many people. And despised by some.

And mocked and scorned as a result. As we'll see in a moment. And the reason for that is that he said this is God's judgment. As indeed it was. This is God's judgment on you.

Because of your idolatry. Because of your social irresponsibility. Your social injustice. And because of your outward religion. These were the things that the prophets seemed to have in mind.

Especially in these days. And the best thing you have to do is to surrender to the Babylonians. And make yourself happy in the land of Babylon if you're taken there.

[11 : 42] And to Jewish people that was just a horrific message. And so he is up against their hate. And their hatred because of that.

And he's put in a cistern. They take him and threaten his life. And they put him in a cistern that is dried out. But there's still very muddy in the bottom. And he's kept there.

And he's in danger of his life. Not from his foes but from his friends. As it were. And that's the sort of thing that he's speaking about. He's known hardship of danger.

And of severe suffering in the bottom of the cistern. Where he can't get comfortable. And he can't sleep well at nights. And that sort of thing. And that's the sort of thing we've got to bear in mind here.

A fairly severe form of physical suffering. But then there's also, he says, my wandering. And that apparently refers to his mind.

[12 : 44] There's a restlessness in his mind. He's disturbed inwardly we might say. He's upset by these problems. The pressing problems of keeping alive in the midst of that situation.

Of facing the hostility of his own people. They take their toll on him. And he's distracted by these things. That seems to be what's in mind here. So that he has difficulty concentrating and seeing things straight.

And there's that inward aspect to his afflictions and difficulties too. And then so much so that he speaks of the wormwood and the gall.

And surely that's, his spirit has become, or tends to be embittered by this. He's got these feelings within him. That this is a very, very bitter experience.

That God's people should turn against him. Those that were God's people. Outwardly at least. That they should turn against him. He can't bear with that very easily.

[13 : 48] And when they mock him and taunt him as a traitor or unfaithful to God or something of that nature. He feels these things bitterly. And so he speaks of the wormwood and the gall.

And that's the situation that he's talking about here. And you can imagine that that's a pretty severe situation to be in. If we see some refugees.

Or if we see some people caught in Afghanistan. Or hear of atrocities committed here or there or wherever. You know, we feel for these people. This is a situation where if you don't feel for poor Jeremiah.

There's something wrong with you. His afflictions are intense. At bodily level. In his mind and in his spirit we might say. He's taken up with these sufferings.

And here's a man you see. That could quite easily sympathize with what we said this morning. About what is passing. What is human life? He's not going to. It seems as if he's not going to live out his natural span.

[14 : 52] It seems as if everything's against him. So they'd be cut off in mid time of his years. As the psalm that we were looking at said. So here's a man that would be able to identify.

Or exemplifies the sort of thing that we were speaking about this morning. He knows the frailty of human existence. In the midst of this terrible suffering that he's undergoing. Now for ourselves today.

You know, we've all got our difficulties and problems. Some of these are not known to others.

They're in our hearts and minds. Others are in our outward circumstances.

And other people can sympathize with us because they know them. But people have got difficulties. Some have got extreme difficulties in other parts of the world. Even in our own country some have extreme difficulties.

I suspect that most of us don't have anything like as extreme as this. But nonetheless there is this problem. That sometimes we have problems. And they make us doubt.

[15 : 52] And they put our mind into a whirl. And we can't concentrate on what's right. Or what's new from God. And it distresses us. And sometimes we can feel a bit bitter about it.

And sometimes we have problems with our inner life in that way. And to that extent we may be able to sympathize with Jeremiah. And say, oh it's not nearly as bad for me.

But I know what he's talking about. When he speaks of affliction and distractions and distress of spirit. Well if so, let's say yes, these things are passing.

Human life is uncertain. It's passing. It's full of trouble in many respects. At least from time to time. But if we do that, then let's learn from his lesson.

What he learned. Because that's the other side of the question that we've got here. Not just Jeremiah's sufferings. But God's mercies. And he goes on to that.

[16:54] Do you see? He speaks about my soul. Continually remembers it. And is bowed down within me. There's a continuation of the sort of thing that we've spoken about. It's fairly constant this.

It's not just down again that happens. But it's fairly constant. And it's a habit with him. That he's remembering these difficulties. And it weighs them down.

But you see? There's the other side of this too. But this I call to mind. And therefore I have hope. And what is his hope? God's mercy. And as I say, that's the second part.

Contained in verses 22 to 24. And that's what we're going to look at now. So let's remember to look away from what is passing to what is permanent.

To say, my soul, my heart and flesh may faint and fail. And then go on to say, but God shall fail me never. Because that is what Jeremiah experienced.

[17:53] So let's see what he says here in verses 22 to 24. I don't want to think of these as three specific stages. But there's three stages.

We might call them loosely about his experience here that we can notice. And the first stage that we can notice is that he acknowledges the good in his life.

The steadfast love of the Lord never ceases. In the midst of this situation, there is good at work. In the midst of this, God's hand can be discerned in a kind and gracious way.

And we'll look at the grace and the mercy of this in a moment. But it's that perception that in the midst of difficulties, there is some trace of God's good hand at work that lends positive features to him in the midst of his distress and suffering.

He acknowledged the good in life. He began to find hope because he saw that in his own life. And he says, oh it doesn't say that in this translation.

[19:07] This is the problem of making up a sermon from one translation and then discovering it doesn't work in another. It says in well-known words, we are not consumed. And this is translated here.

I don't know how it's translated here. But that's the way that I understood this. And that's the gist of the passage. We are not consumed. Well, you know, that's quite an impressive thing.

He's threatened with danger. But it never touches him so that he's killed off by the Babylonians. He's threatened with danger from his fellow countrymen who hate his message and think he's a traitor.

But he's spared and he comes through it. He's going through the fire of affliction. But he's not consumed by that fire.

He's put down into the pit, into the cistern. But he's taken out in due course. And not only so, but he's taken out in a very gentle fashion.

[20:11] And that's what he can say. Your mercies are renewed every morning. Meaning, here I am in this pit. But I'm still alive. Another night passed.

And I'm still in this world of the living. Despite all the difficulties that he faces, he can see that they could have been worse. And that they haven't reached their climax.

And they haven't touched him as deeply as they might have done. And it's that sort of awareness that enables him to see the hand of God. He's able to trace some measure of goodness in the terrible circumstances that he's living through.

I do think that this does echo the same, or Paul echoes the same sentiments as Jeremiah when he speaks in 2 Corinthians. We are hard pressed on every side.

But then he adds, but not crushed. We are perplexed, but not in despair. We are persecuted, but not abandoned.

[21:16] We are struck down, but not destroyed. Paul was saying, we're going through the fire of affliction, but we're not consumed. And Jeremiah and Paul are saying the very same thing.

Things could be worse. There's an element of goodness in it. There's something positive to be seen in the adversity. And that, it seems to me, is where the hope comes from.

And let's look at that in our own lives. I know it's trite to say there's always somebody worse than you are. I know it's trite at one level. But on the other hand, it does indicate that there is a measure of goodness in our circumstances.

However, they seem to be at the moment. If every cloud is a silver lining, then every adversity has a positive feature in it for God's children.

And they should identify that and recognize that there is goodness there. Now, I do think we've got to keep this in balance. Jeremiah is not forgetting about his tribulations and saying, really, it was all good that time.

[22 : 28] He's not saying that at all. He's quite prepared to say, I'm in a terrible situation. My bodily afflictions weigh me down. I'm feeling it in my heart and in my mind.

He's willing to say that. But he's also willing to say, your love never ceases. We're not consumed. And it's the balance there that matters. We're not trying to say, oh, Christians must deny that they're in difficulties.

We're not trying to say, Christians must always say that they're perfect peace. We're not saying that at all. All that we're saying is that there must be a balance about the situation.

So that in the midst of whatever troubles are ours, we can never really see. But God's hand was at work. We were not consumed by our difficulty. We're not lastingly overcome by them.

And I hope that you can look at past experience and recognize that that's the case. Have you fallen? Yes. But you recovered, didn't you? Or you wouldn't be here. You've come short of what you ought to be?

[23 : 29] Yes. But God's brought you back and you're still pursuing, however imperfectly. There's something positive in every feature of life, in every adverse feature of life.

And that's the thing that he recognizes here. And that's what we must do as well. In the midst of bad times, there's always a good element. And I think this would come out in the way, how would Jeremiah tell the story?

It's what I think of. And there's a wee touch that I just passed over. But it interests me, actually, the way this little detail is brought in.

Here he is in the cistern. It's in the story that we haven't read, but I'll tell you it. He's in the cistern, as I mentioned. And there's mud in the bottom. And he must have a terrible time stuck down there.

But they bring him out eventually. And the man that does so brings ropes. And he brings rags and old clothes. And he puts all them down in the cistern.

[24 : 29] And that is so that Jeremiah can wrap the rags around the places where the rope is going to go. So that they don't chafe as he's lifted out of the cistern.

And in my mind, it was an act of kindness and sympathy and concern that was shown to him. And it was in a very gentle way that he was taken out of the cistern.

And I just imagine Jeremiah telling the story. And okay, he says it was pretty difficult down there in the pit. I felt terrible often enough. But you know, I was really touched by the fact that it was an Ebed-Milch.

Anyway, this guy that took him out of the pit provided these ropes. Not just the ropes for me. But the cloths, the rags and the old clothes that stopped my limbs being chafed by the ropes.

As they dragged me out of the mud. And therefore he's putting a positive gloss on it. He's not denying the negatives. But he is putting a positive gloss on it. And I suggest that that's the way for us to cultivate the positive gloss.

[25 : 31] That comes from an awareness that however bad our circumstances might be. And however much suffering we may have had. There has been this positive input of God that we can positively identify.

That makes us say his love never ceases. We are not consumed. That's the first stage. But it's not unconnected with the second stage. This is a matter of grace.

The steadfast love of God he speaks about. The mercies he speaks about. And the faithfulness there in verses 22 and 23.

And all of these are different ways of speaking about the fact that this came from a gracious and merciful God. Who was faithful to his promises. The steadfast love of the Lord is of course a general phrase that is generally used in the Old Testament about covenant blessings.

It's a reminder that God had made his covenant with Abraham and his children after him. And he had given promises. And the steadfast love of God is the love that makes these promises active.

[26 : 43] Especially in difficult times. So that's what he attributes it to. He didn't say, oh I was a faithful prophet and God honoured me. He said he was merciful with covenant mercies.

And then this word translated here, mercies, is sometimes translated compassion. And that's a word that I always associate in particular with Jesus' ministry. How often did he see a situation and he was moved with compassion. There's something gentle about it. There's something very sympathetic and personal about it. This is not a great God saying, oh I will be merciful in a cold and indifferent fashion. It's not like some sovereign signing a decree that a prisoner should be pardoned with cold indifference. It's something personal and sympathetic. And that's an aspect of God's grace in the Old Testament too. And as for his faithfulness, well we know what that means. [27 : 44] That God has said certain things and he's faithful to what he's promised. And it's because of that that the goodness of God is manifested. It's an account of the grace and mercy and covenant faithfulness of God himself.

Now you may think, oh well, that's obviously the case. But you know, I was just thinking of that. It's not at all obvious in this situation that that should be so. Because the message that Jeremiah has been proclaiming is that the people have been unfaithful.

And he's going to rescind for a time the effective outworking of his covenant promises. And he's going to put them out of their own land and put them away in a foreign land. People to whom he had said, this is the promised land. He's going to drive them out of it. And he's going to do it because of their sins. The covenant promises are in abeyance. The covenant faithfulness is not operative because God's judgment is on them.

That's the situation that Jeremiah has himself been speaking about. And that's clearly the situation if you read the history of this in the scriptures. God hides his face from them.

[28 : 53] God withdraws from them in his wrath. That's the sort of way of looking at this. And in the midst of that, here is this man in the pit, in the cistern, surrounded by his enemies, both from the Babylonians and the people of God, so called.

And he says, God's mercies are still renewed to me every morning. And his covenant faithfulness is still there. Where other people are under his wrath and curse, and where other people are being driven out of the land because of their disobedience, and the covenant promises are in effect in abeyance, Jeremiah sees them to be true in his own experience.

And that, to my mind, is a remarkable thing that he says here, given his circumstances. The goodness that he receives is a token that although God may have withdrawn from others, he has not withdrawn from Jeremiah.

And he sees there the faithfulness of the unchanging God. He looks from what is the frailty of human nature, the frailty of human experience, and he looks to what is permanent, the unchanging faithfulness of God, and the certainty that he will fulfil what he has promised.

And that, to my mind, is a remarkable thing. And obviously, that's what we should look at as well. Whatever goodness we find is an evidence of God's covenant faithfulness.

[30 : 16] The third stage is in verse 24. The Lord is my portion, says my soul, therefore I will hope in him.

We lead this sort of language from time to time in the Old Testament. And perhaps we just read it without thinking too much about it. But I think, you know, that it is really quite significant from a historical point of view.

Because this is bound up with their experience of coming into the promised land, and of inheriting the promised land. You know that the land was divided out amongst the tribes.

Amongst twelve of the tribes. And the land was surveyed, and it was divided into portions, and then there were drawn lots, and each tribe received its portion.

And that was an important part of their history. That was their portion from God. That was what he had given them to possess. That was their portion, their allotment.

[31 : 26] It came from God, and it was theirs. But the Levites had no such allotment given to them. They lived amongst the people of the other tribes, and served God in that capacity.

And so there was no portion given to them. In regard to territory, God was their portion. And it seems to me that Jeremiah, and other people that speak in a similar way as the psalmist does from time to time, that Jeremiah here is linking people's minds with that way of thinking.

He's saying, in effect, you remember how each tribe was allotted its portion, and each tribe entered into its portion, and they possessed it as theirs.

They drew water from its wells. They drew the fruit from its trees. They sowed the ground. Their flocks fed upon the ground, and the pasture lands of their territory.

That was their portion from God, which was theirs to use and enjoy to the full. And Jeremiah is saying, God is my portion. God's the one that I look to in that way.

[32 : 36] He supplies my needs. I draw water from the wells of salvation, if you like. I experienced the fruit of his Holy Spirit, to put it into New Testament terms. I enjoy the fruit of a good relationship with him.

That sort of thing is what he's saying. As people have a territory, a piece of land for their portion, I have God for my portion. And that, it seems to me, is a key way of looking at things.

In the midst of all his difficulties, stuck there in the cistern, surrounded by Babylonian troops, surrounded by enemies. He says, God is my portion.

He's the one on whom I feed. From him I draw all the resources necessary. And that is a practical expression of how he saw God as God's covenant faithfulness.

And that, it seems to me, is something that we have difficulty in laying hold of. But it's important that this is the way that finally we should express our idea of looking to the unchanging God and to the fact that the purpose of his grace never fails.

[33 : 48] We can say, God is my portion. I feed upon Christ, who is the bread of life. I draw water from the wells of his salvation. I find the fruit of the Spirit growing in my life.

And so on. We can say, we draw our sustenance from him. We draw our strength from him. We draw our wisdom from him. We draw everything we need from him. And therefore, he is my portion.

Just as the tribes inherited their portion, we have inherited God. And we have known him as our portion. So that we say, he is our portion. It isn't meaningful to us in our culture and history, but it taps into this Old Testament way of looking at things and that enriches its meaning for us.

So, there's the passage then. Here is Jeremiah in the midst of these terrible sufferings that undoubtedly remind us of the frailty of human life.

And here he is looking away from what is passing to what is permanent and putting his trust in the unfailing covenant promises of God and claiming them his own to such a degree that he says, God is my portion.

[34 : 59] And that's the way in which we can deal with any difficulties that arise. Identify the good in these difficult circumstances. Recognize that it's the expression of God's covenant, mercy and kindness.

And then lay hold upon God as our portion. and in that way we will indeed be able to see my flesh and heart will be faint and feel, but God will feel me never.

May God bless to us his word.