

Finding hope in the midst of grief

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Preacher: Nick Hallett

[0 : 00] 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. 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 stones. He has made my paths crooked. He is a bear lying in wait for me, a lion in hiding. He turned 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 arrow. He drove into my kidneys the arrows of his quiver. I have become the laughing stock of all peoples, the object of their taunts all day long.

[1 : 14] He has filled me with bitterness. He has sated me with wormwood. He has made my teeth grind on gravel and made me cower in ashes. My soul is bereft of peace.

I have forgotten what happiness is. So I say my endurance has perished. So has my hope from the Lord. 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.

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.

[2 : 18] 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 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.

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.

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. He was spoken and it came to pass unless the Lord has commanded it. It is not from the mouth of the Most High that good and bad come.

[3 : 18] Why should a living man complain, a man about the punishment of his sins? 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 and you have not forgiven. 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. All our enemies open their mouths against us. Panic and pitfall have come upon us. Devastation and destruction.

My eyes flow with rivers of tears because of the destruction of the people, the daughter of my people. My eyes will flow without ceasing, without respite, until the Lord from heaven looks down and sees my eyes cause me grief at the fate of all the daughters of my city.

I have been hunted like a bird by those who were my enemies without cause. They flung me alive into the pit and cast stones on me.

[4 : 24] Water closed over my head. I said, I am lost. I called on your name, O Lord, from 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 on you. You said, Do not fear. 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 their vengeance, all their plots against me. You have heard their taunts, O Lord, all their plots against me.

The lips and thoughts of my assailants are against me all the day long. Behold their sitting and their 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. Your curse will be on them. You will pursue them in anger and destroy them from under your heavens, O Lord. What gives you hope?

[5 : 33] What gives you confidence that your future is going to be a good one? Maybe it's the mobile phone you've got. I don't know if you remember the company Orange, their slogan saying, The future's bright, the future's orange.

Maybe that's what gives you hope. Or maybe you're about to go to university and you feel that the whole world is out there just waiting to meet you. Maybe it's your children or your career or your bank balance that makes you hopeful about the future.

But what if life is going badly wrong? Where do you look for hope then? Some of you will have heard of a guy called Viktor Frankl who was a Holocaust survivor from the Second World War. And like millions, he suffered unspeakable evil under the Nazi regime. He spent months in a concentration camp doing forced labor. But Viktor was a psychologist and a philosopher and he couldn't help noticing how people responded to suffering.

He couldn't help noticing that those who began to believe in something else, something outside of themselves, were more able to endure suffering than those who didn't. He wasn't a Christian himself, Viktor, but he noticed that those who believed in God were able to endure suffering.

[6 : 51] In other words, those who found hope not in themselves, but in something outside of themselves. Now you don't need to own an iPhone to know that our culture is utterly self-obsessed, isn't it?

It's all about me. We've even created a new word, probably decades ago, I don't know, the word selfie, because we needed a new language to describe our self-obsession.

So as a result, when it comes to suffering, we naturally look to ourselves, don't we? To put our hope in me. Last week we began a series in the book of Lamentations in the Old Testament, which we've read again this morning.

And we thought last week that Lamentations was written to express the unimaginable grief of the Jewish people at the fall of Jerusalem to the Babylonians in 587 BC.

Despite God's patience, his people persisted in doing evil. So eventually, after many years, he punished them by sending the Babylonians to destroy them. And we saw last week that God is in sovereign control over suffering and evil.

[8 : 02] But also that from their point of view, the situation looked hopeless. The temple where God dwelt was a pile of rubble. Now last week we said as well, didn't we, that the suffering that they experienced in Lamentations was not like our suffering.

It was a unique event in history that God said was a punishment for their sin. So it's really important to say, as we said last week, that suffering that we face today is not a punishment for our sin.

Not all suffering is the same. So obviously we need to be careful about drawing parallels to us. But we also said, didn't we, that if Lamentations was able to give them hope, if it gave hope to people whose entire city had been destroyed, their way of life had been torn apart, then of course it can give us hope in our suffering and our grief.

It can help us look outside of ourselves for hope. Now perhaps you're here this morning and you feel like, you know, you've never felt that much hope from the Bible, you know, if you're honest. If you felt, you know, the Bible doesn't really give you much hope, then Lamentations is a great book to be looking at together. And even if you wouldn't call yourself a Christian this morning, hopefully you'll be able to see why Christians can have such certain hope in the midst of suffering and the darkest of times.

[9 : 23] So chapter 3 of Lamentations is the middle of the book. There are 66 verses, three verses for each letter of the Hebrew alphabet, as we mentioned last week.

And the climax is verses 21, 22, and 23. That's the climax of the whole book of Lamentations. And chapter 3 is much more personal.

I don't know whether you noticed, but rather than talking about Jerusalem as a woman suffering, as all the other chapters do in personifying Jerusalem, chapter 3 talks about it from a personal perspective, the personal experience of the writer.

So let's get into chapter 3 together. And if you've got a service sheet, you'll see points on the back if you want to follow along. So the first thing I want us to see is that God's covenant love gives us hope in our grief.

And that's from chapter 3, verse 1 to 24. So have a look with me. This man has personally experienced grief like no other.

[10 : 27] Chapter 3, verse 1. 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.

Verse 3. Surely against me he turns his hand again and again the whole day long. Verse 4. He has made my flesh and my skin waste away. He has broken my bones.

Verse 6. He has made me dwell in darkness like the dead of long ago. Verse 7. It's like he's in prison. He's walled me in so that I cannot escape. He's made my chains heavy.

He says in verse 8, it's as though God is not listening. I call and cry for help, but he shuts out my prayer. Verse 9. He's blocked my ways. Rather than making my ways straight, God's made them crooked.

Jump forward to verse 15. He says he's filled me with bitterness. He's sated me with wormwood. And verse 17. My soul is bereft of peace.

[11 : 33] I've forgotten what happiness is. We said last week, didn't we, that the suffering of Jerusalem was God's punishment for their sins. And so that's why the writer is saying that God did these things.

He, every single verse is saying he has done this to me. God is the one who's punished them for their sins. And yet God is also in control of them. It's amazing, isn't it, how convinced the writer of Lamentations is of God's personal hand in his sufferings.

He doesn't think, you know, God's a distant God far away. He kind of would like to do something if he could, but he can't. No, he's right there with him in his sufferings.

So he concludes in verse 18. Have a look with me. My endurance has perished. And so has my hope from the Lord. The writer feels his hope is gone.

He feels like God's hand is against him. Imagine if you were in this situation. You say, I've forgotten what happiness is. And my hope has vanished.

[12 : 40] Imagine how he felt. And yet, look at verse 21. Amazing that he can say all of that and say in verse 21, But this I call to mind, and therefore I have hope.

What is it that gives him hope? The steadfast love of the Lord never ceases. His mercy has 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. See, the hope that the writer has is clearly from outside himself, isn't it?

There's nothing in his situation or on him and what he owns in his family, in his career, That can give him hope. His hope is outside of himself. And it's not a hope in the kind of remote possibility that he might be able to twist the arm of a distant and uncaring God.

It's not a vague hope like saying, you know, I really hope that Brexit will work out in the end. No, his hope is based on God's steadfast or covenant love.

[13 : 42] I wonder if you notice that in verse 22. The steadfast love of the Lord. Now throughout the Old Testament, the steadfast love of the Lord, That's the security that people come back to again and again in time of trouble.

God had promised to Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, Moses, David, Solomon, all the kings of Israel, That he would be their God and they would be his people. That is God's covenant love.

God's covenant love is like the best marriage vows, marriage promises that are faithfully kept you could ever see. Do you remember what the marriage vows are?

For better, for worse. For richer, for poorer. In sickness and in health. In other words, I'll love you no matter what. I'll be faithful to you no matter what.

I don't love you because you're lovely. I don't love you because you're rich. I don't love you because you're healthy. I love you because I've promised to love you. That's how marriage vows are supposed to work.

[14:41] No matter what. So do you see why he can say in verse 22, His mercies never come to an end. Because for those who hope in God, his covenant love means he'll love them no matter what.

He'll get them to the new creation, to the new world that he'll make, whatever happens. Whether you get bad news from the hospital or you'll face losing your job or your house or you'll face bereavement or financial ruin, God's covenant love never ceases.

Now it's absolutely astonishing, isn't it, that the writer of Lamentations could say these things. I mean, imagine him looking out on the desolation of Jerusalem, the temples full of rubble.

And despite losing everything, he says, the Lord is my portion. Therefore, I'll hope in him. It's a bit similar to some of the Psalms, isn't it?

Psalms 73, 26, where the psalmist says, My heart and my flesh may fail, but God is the strength of my heart and my portion forever. It's not a blind faith, just kind of a trust despite any evidence.

[15:47] It's a trust in God's plans throughout history. That what God says he does, he'll do. So what the writer gets by looking outside of himself is the perspective of history, isn't it?

So God had always promised to destroy Jerusalem if his people didn't turn back to him. But he also promised to keep his covenant. And as many of you know, later on, the Jews did return from exile under the Persians.

So the writer of Lamentations can have confidence in God's faithfulness. He can have hope despite the utter hopelessness of his situation. Now, I don't know here whether you're married or not, but I wonder whether you've ever thought about being married to Christ.

Because that is the language the Bible uses time and time again. Not individually, but as a church. That's why the covenant love of God works so well with the image of a marriage.

The language the Bible uses is of marriage covenant. And Jesus says, whatever you're going through, whatever suffering you're enduring, I will never leave you or forsake you.

[16:55] For better, for worse. For richer, for poorer. In sickness and in health. And before he went up to heaven, the end of Matthew's gospel, he says, I'm with you always to the very end of the age.

And that's what the writer of the Lamentations was able to call to mind in verse 21. I guess it wasn't easy, was it?

In the midst of all this suffering and death around him. It wasn't easy to call that to mind. But it's because he looked outside of himself for hope. To the God who'd always promised to be with him, that he had hope.

And my guess is if you're suffering at the moment, that it's very difficult to do verse 21. To call God's covenant love to mind.

Because naturally, suffering makes us turn in on ourselves, doesn't it? It makes it hard to kind of see how glorious God is. So take another look at him. Don't look at your iPhone or your career or your house or your bank balance to give you hope.

[18:00] Because they won't last, will they? Look to Christ and his marriage vows. Because he is the fulfillment of God's covenant love here in Lamentations.

Well, the second thing I wanted to see from these verses is that God's compassionate heart gives us hope in our grief as well. And that's from verses 25 to 41. God's compassionate heart gives us hope in our grief.

Have a look at verse 25 with me. The writer goes on and he says, 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. Wait for God because he's good. And in verse 31, we get these verses which we looked at last week.

He says, The Lord will not cast off forever. Though he will cause grief, he will have compassion according to the abundance of his steadfast love.

[19:03] For he does not willingly afflict or grieve the children of men. We did these fantastic verses which shows God's heart in us all.

As God punishes sin, his heart is full of compassion. And so that's why the writer says that he delights in showing compassion. He punishes not because he must.

Not because it's his heart, but because he must. But he doesn't delight in affliction. And that's why the writer goes on in verse 38 to ask, Is it not from the mouth of the Most High that good and bad come?

In other words, he says that God's sovereign. He's sovereign over good and evil. But that's okay. It's okay. Because he's full of compassion. Because we can trust him.

Now it's easy to become cynical of politicians, isn't it? Particularly perhaps as the Tories have their over a dozen people joining the leadership race. But politicians want to be seen to be compassionate.

[20 : 08] Whether it's because of poverty they see around them or the difficulties people are facing in everyday life. They want to be seen to be compassionate. But we often wonder, don't we, whether they're going to change their tune once they get elected.

Or what about the National Health Service? One of their core values is compassion. But often we wonder, you know, are there other things like financial pressures that are really driving what's going on? Well, not so with God.

We never have to doubt God's heart for a moment, do we? He's got no ulterior motive. He's compassionate because he loves compassion. He sees how our sin has cut us off from him. He sees how it's damaged us, how it's led to a broken world, a world in rebellion against him. He sees our suffering. He knows what it's like. I wonder what image you have in your mind of God. He's not cold or uncaring. He's a generous, compassionate father who loves his children. He punishes sin, yes, because he's righteous and good.

[21 : 15] But he's full of mercy. He's patient. When we're suffering, what we need is someone who cares. I wonder if you've had that experience of going through the difficulties of life.

You're carrying so much inside. Perhaps it's extremely painful, but it's all hidden away. It's hidden away and no one really knows what you're going through. But then perhaps your best friend comes along or your husband or wife or a family member, and they're full of compassion.

They want to know how you are. They really care about you. And talking to them, it feels like a whole weight is just lifted from your shoulders. And they listen to you.

And as they do, you feel their compassion. It's what we should be like as a church, isn't it, to each other. Well, how much more the God of the Bible, the God of all compassion.

And that's why the writer ends this section in verse 41 by saying, have a look with me. Verse 41, let us lift up our hands and our hearts to God in heaven.

[22 : 19] Because he knows that God is full of compassion. He knows that he can turn back to God in repentance and praise. So we've seen, haven't we, that God's covenant love is what can give us hope in our grief.

And his compassionate heart gives us hope as well in our grief. But hope doesn't stop there, does it? Hope gives you a desire to act. Hope drives us to action.

And it calls us to turn back to the God who made us. So the third thing I want to see from these chapters is that God rescues those who call on him in Christ.

And that's in verses 42 to the end of the chapter, verse 66. God rescues those who call on him in Christ. We said at the beginning that this chapter is very much from the personal point of view of the writer.

I am the man who has seen affliction. But in verse 42, there's a gear change. Have a look with me. Verse 42, he starts with saying, we. We have rebelled and transgressed.

[23 : 26] Speaking on behalf of the people, he says, we have transgressed and rebelled and you have not forgiven. Now we might read that and think, you know, that's a bit strange.

I mean, I thought God was full of forgiveness. We've just seen how he's full of compassion. But the point is that forgiveness has to be asked for. And the people hadn't turned back to God.

They hadn't turned back to God. So the writer goes on in much the same theme that we've seen earlier. The utter destruction which their sin had led to.

Verse 43, you have wrapped yourself with anger and pursued us, killing without pity. Or look down at verse 48. My eyes flow with rivers of tears because of the destruction of the daughter of my people.

Or verse 52. I've been hunted like a bird by those who are my enemies without cause. Verse 53.

They flung me alive into the pit. They cast stones on me. Verse 54.

[24 : 26] Water closed over my head. I said, I'm lost. The writer and the people he represents are completely lost. They cannot save themselves.

They cannot look to themselves for salvation. So what does he do? Verse 55. He calls out to God. Have a look with me. I called on your name, O Lord, from the depths of the pit. You heard my plea. Do not close your ears to my cry for help. Again, it's similar language, isn't it, to the Psalms? Psalm 130, verse 1. Out of the depths I cry to you, O Lord. Hear my voice. He's calling out to God for rescue. And amazingly, he's so confident of being rescued that he can say in verse 58, you've taken up my cause, O Lord. You have redeemed my life. What's he on about? What an incredible thing to say. After all his weeping and lamenting, after all his hopeless despair, he writes as if God has already rescued him. [25 : 30] It's a language of victory, of triumph of God over his enemies. He's utterly confident in God's ability to rescue him. I wonder when the last time you needed rescuing was.

Last year, my older brother and his wife and their three daughters needed rescuing halfway up a mountain. They were walking, as they often do. And the weather wasn't great. And it was clouding in, and it was getting wet and raining and dark. And there was a risk of avalanche. They were probably off the path on some shade or something. And they quickly realized they were in serious danger.

Now, in that situation, there was absolutely no point in trying to save yourself. What you need is rescuing. You need someone outside of your situation. You need to hope in something outside of yourself.

And thankfully, the mountain rescue came and got them safely off the mountain. Now, I guess the problem for most of us is that we don't think we need rescuing. We think we don't really need God. [26 : 34] We're not really in serious danger. But the suffering we face now proves that not all is right with the world. We're cut off from God, aren't we?

We live east of Eden. We're cut off from the God who made us. And we desperately need to wake up. As C.S. Lewis famously writes in his book, *The Problem of Pain*, When God whispers to us in our pleasures, speaks in our consciences, but shouts in our pains, is his megaphone to rouse a deaf world.

Now, again, as we keep saying, it's not that our suffering now is a punishment for our sin. And that's really important. But our suffering now does point to the fact that not all is right with the world, that we're in a world under God's judgment ever since Genesis 3.

Many of you will know that in Romans chapter 8, Paul explains how the whole creation is subject to futility in the hope that one day it will be made new. So our current suffering is not a punishment for sin, but it should remind us that we need rescuing.

Rescuing by God from our sin and our brokenness. I wouldn't wish any of us to be stuck halfway up a mountain, or to need rescuing from the sea, or to be broken down by the side of a motorway.

[27 : 53] But it does remind us what it feels like to need rescuing, doesn't it? It's not something we like feeling very much, but it's absolutely essential if we're going to call on Christ to rescue us.

We need to know that we're in danger. And there was no doubt in the mind of the writer of Lamentations that he needed rescuing. But he was convinced that God could rescue him because of who he is.

So we've looked at the last verses of Lamentations that he's calling out for rescue. And you'll know that lots of the Old Testament language uses the language of calling on the name of the Lord. And later on, as we know, in Acts chapter 2, the people ask, you know, what should we do?

How do we call on the name of the Lord now? And Peter says, repent and be baptized, and believe in the name of Jesus. So in other words, he's saying that Jesus' death and resurrection is the rescue that Lamentations was pointing forward to.

It's the way that we're calling on the name of the Lord. The ultimate way that God rescues us is in Christ. So if you're here this morning, you've never kind of felt you needed rescuing.

[29 : 06] Look at the danger you're in. You're cut off from the God who made you. His judgment hangs over the world. Look to the rescue that God offers us in Christ.

He offers a world made new in the new creation. Now as we get to the end of the chapter, the gear changes just again. And have a look at the very end as Warren read it to us in verses 59.

In the last few chapters, the writer asked God for justice for the wrong done to him. So verse 59 says, doesn't it, you've seen the wrong done to me, O Lord. Judge my cause.

Verse 60, you've seen all of their vengeance, all their plots against me. You've heard all their taunts, O Lord. And the writer finishes with the confidence that God will do what is just.

Verse 64, you will repay them, O Lord, according to the work of your hands. Verse 66, you will pursue them in anger and destroy them from under your heavens, O Lord.

[30 : 05] Now these verses, I mean, they do seem a bit out of place, don't they? The whole of Lamentations so far, chapter 1, chapter 2, chapter 3, has been all about how God is right to have sent the Babylonians to punish his people.

And that's true. But it doesn't let the Babylonians off the hook. Because they have committed unspeakable evil against God's people, and they will be judged for their sins.

God's sovereignty over their actions doesn't exclude their sin. Now I don't know how God's sovereignty over human sin works exactly, but the point is that we can be confident that God will do what is just and right.

And verse 66 is true. One day God will destroy all evil from under heaven. He'll wrap up history, and he'll make a new world. He'll do away with suffering once and for all.

So whatever suffering you're going through now, or in the future, in the years to come, you can have hope that your future will be a good one. Because Christ will make a new world.

[31 : 12] The mobile phone company Orange said that the future was bright because the future was orange. But they actually got rid of that slogan back in 2008, partly because their company wasn't doing so well.

So it turned out the future wasn't so bright after all. What if humanly your life is going badly wrong? Maybe not in a Nazi concentration camp, but what if your family has been torn apart, or you've got bad news from the hospital, or you've lost someone you love?

Nicholas Wartemstorff wrote this book, Lament for a Son, which I mentioned last week briefly, in which he tries to make sense of his son Eric's death, aged 25, as he fell in a mountaineering accident.

He knows that God's sovereign and full of compassion, but he doesn't have all the answers. In it he writes this, he says, I have no explanation.

I can do nothing else than endure in the face of this deepest and most painful of mysteries. He accepts that there is mystery in suffering.

[32 : 25] But he goes on to say this, he says, I believe in God the Father Almighty, maker of heaven and earth, and the resurrector of Jesus Christ. See, knowing God's covenant love never ceases, gives us hope even in the most painful of grief.

Knowing that God's heart is full of compassion, helps us to trust him, even when we don't know all the answers. And so calling on Christ to rescue us, gives us confidence that he will get us to the new creation.

The future is bright, the future is Jesus Christ forever. Let's pray. Let's pray.