

Man of Hope, Man of Despair

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[0 : 00] This is the morning service at Holy Trinity on the 1st of May 2005. The preacher is Paul Barker.

His sermon is entitled Man of Hope, Man of Despair, and is based on Lamentations, Chapter 3. Thank you.

There are many Christians who end up faithless, sometimes even embittered, disillusioned, cynical with God because of a life of difficulty, a life of suffering of any sort of form.

For some, it feels that their prayers are unanswered, that God is absent, that he's abandoned them, or that God is really just a figment of imagination. And so they give up trusting and believing in God.

In the midst of real suffering, when Jerusalem fell in 587 BC, when the people of God who'd believed that this was the city where God dwelt with them, when Jerusalem fell with devastation, homelessness, poverty, grief, suffering, death, famine, illness, all those sorts of things, when many of the population were carted off into exile to Babylon, when many who were left had to scrounge around in the rural surrounds of Jerusalem to eke out some sort of subsistence, in the midst of that suffering, the writer of Lamentations digs deep, very deep.

[2 : 13] This is a book that is written with tears. It's full of very emotional and expressive language, full of real grief and suffering, a heart poured out to God.

But it's not just words, a torrent of words flowing out spontaneously in grief and suffering. The words are actually very tightly channeled.

Chapters 1 and 2 that we've looked at the last two weeks, each with 22 verses, each verse begins with a consecutive letter of the Hebrew alphabet. There are 22 letters in the Hebrew alphabet.

Chapter 3 that we're looking at today, 66 verses, the first three verses each begin with the first letter of the Hebrew alphabet, the next three begin with the next letter, and so on, all the way through 22 letters, 66 verses.

And throughout this whole book, there is not only that sequence of letters beginning each verse, but each verse is tightly controlled with rhythm and meter as well.

[3 : 17] That is, the writer has put in, in one sense, a lot of effort and tightness of structure to give vent to his suffering and grief and lamentation.

In a sense, the tightness of the structure of the book is like a river bank or a canal bank, so that the waters of grief don't just sort of flood out and flow anywhere, but that they are channeled deeply.

And we see that today, that in the midst of the shadow of death and the waters of grief being expressed, they are actually tightly channeled, so that they rest on firm ground.

And grief finds some real resolution through faith in God. It would have been hard work to write. It's hard work to read.

Let me tell you, it's hard work to prepare sermons. And I know from comments the last two weeks, it's hard work to listen to sermons on lamentations. But this book is driving us to ask of ourselves, is our faith deep enough that in the midst of grief and suffering, we rest on sure ground?

[4 : 39] Is our trust in God secure enough that the waters of grief or suffering, when they come upon us in life, as invariably they do, they're not going to wash us away in their torrent?

They're the questions that lamentations is driving us to answer rightly. So let's pray. God our Father, all the scriptures are written by you for us, even these difficult chapters of the book of Lamentations.

Speak to our hearts from your word, we pray now, that we may come to trust resolutely in you and your goodness, whatever suffering we face.

For Jesus' sake we pray. Amen. You may like to have open the passage on page 669 in the Bibles, in the pews in front of you.

The Lord is my shepherd, therefore shall I lack nothing. He leads me beside still waters to green pastures, and that psalm, of course, ends with the confident statement that we'll dwell in the house of the Lord forever, cup overflowing and so on.

[5 : 58] A wonderful picture of the providence and protection of God, a good shepherd for us. The writer of this Lamentation, Jeremiah, traditionally regarded as the writer, the prophet Jeremiah, may well have been him.

There's lots of echoes of words with this book and the book of Jeremiah. finds, in a sense, the antithesis of the 23rd Psalm, the antithesis of God as a good shepherd in this passage.

The good shepherd leads and guides with a rod. We've seen that, in fact, in the children's talk this morning. But here, this person has been the victim of God's rod of wrath, not a rod of guidance and protection.

I am the one, he says, who has seen affliction under the rod of his wrath. So rather than a rod of guidance and protection, he's been the victim of the rod of God's anger and punishment for sin.

Rather than being driven to green pastures, verse 2, he declares, that he has driven and brought me into darkness without any light.

[7 : 08] Rather than being for him, verse 3 declares, he's been against me. He's against me alone. He turns his hand again and again all day long.

Instead of being a good shepherd providing food, he suffered famine. Verse 4, he has made my flesh and my skin waste away and broken my bones.

Maybe really, maybe metaphorically. Instead of being protected and surrounded, as it were, by a shepherd for protection, the surrounding of this shepherd, false shepherd, bad shepherd, God, whatever, has been to besiege and envelop him, verse 5 says, with bitterness and tribulation.

Instead of dwelling in the house of the Lord forever, it's as though, verse 6 says, he's dead, long dead. Verses 7 and 8 have the sense of being walled about, imprisoned by him.

He's walled me about so that I cannot escape. He's put heavy chains on me. The sorts of things that were done in the ancient world as they led people away into exile. And though I call and cry for help, he shuts out my prayer.

[8 : 31] No answer to prayer is what he's saying. He's cried out for relief, but it's not come. It's as though God has put up the shutters and barred the doors and is no longer hearing his prayer.

And verse 9, he's blocked my ways with hewn stones. The idea of actually cutting stones to make a very firm wall to block the way. And he's made my paths crooked.

Straight paths are the way that we're meant to live and God would provide. Not so here. I guess if you choose the crooked path of sin, you end up with the crooked path of suffering in response.

And instead of being a shepherd who protects from wild animals who seek to devour, God himself is like the wild animal, devouring. So verse 10, he's a bear lying in wait for me, a lion in hiding.

He led me off my way and tore me to pieces. He's made me desolate. Instead of being a friend, he is now a foe. So verse 12, he bent his bow and set me as a mark for his arrow.

[9 : 38] He shot into my vitals, literally actually the kidneys, the arrows of his quiver to kill, to destroy. And instead of filling him with good things as the good shepherd might do, verse 15 tells us that he not only fed him but actually force fed him bitterness.

He's filled me with bitterness and has sated me with wormwood. And then we might use the expression he's rubbed his face in the dirt and that's in effect what verse 16 says.

He's made my teeth grind on gravel and made me cower in ashes. Probably an expression of mourning and grief. The writer sums up his despair in verses 17 and 18.

My soul is bereft of peace. I've forgotten what happiness is. So I say, gone is my glory and all that I had hoped for from the Lord.

Helpless and hopeless. Despairing and desolate. And he hasn't even wanted to name God as the perpetrator of all of this.

[10 : 55] So from verse 1 through, it is he. He's the rod of his wrath. He has done this. He's besieged me. He is a bear. I remember when you used to try and detect if your parents had had an argument.

So your father would say, what does your mother say? If they hadn't had an argument, what does mum say? What does your mother say? Distancing the relationship a little bit. That's what's going on here.

There is a great chasm of distance between this writer and God, it seems. That's his perception. He, he, he is not prepared to say the Lord.

Until he gets to verse 18, when in naming the Lord, it actually exacerbates the sense of distance because gone is my glory. All that I'd hoped for from the Lord in a tight and intimate and loving relationship, gone is all of that.

A chasm of distance and estrangement now between the writer and God. And so he says in verses 19 and 20, the thought of my affliction and my homelessness is wormwood and gall.

[11 : 59] Bitter to the taste. The sort of thing that you put in your mouth and you'd want to spit out or throw up about because it's so bitter and revolting to the taste. My soul continually thinks of it and is bowed down within me.

Here at the bottom of the pit, at the dregs, in the depths of despair, in the slough of despond, we come with surprising words.

But this I call to mind and therefore I have hope. We don't expect verse 21 after reading verses 1 to 20.

We expect that this is total darkness, total desolation, total despair, total helplessness and hopelessness. And yet, there at rock bottom, he says, this I call to mind and therefore I have hope.

What is it that he calls to mind? What follows in the next three verses sums it up. The steadfast love of the Lord never ceases.

[13 : 14] 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.

You imagine in the midst of grief and despair, when you've hit rock bottom, when nothing looks hopeful or bright or cheerful, when all is dark and dismal, singing with the top of your voice, great is your faithfulness, O God my Father.

For that's in effect what he's doing. As we'll sing that hymn at the end today, words that come from this passage, these verses. The steadfast love of the Lord never ceases.

His mercies never come to an end. They are new every morning. Great is your faithfulness. How can he sing or say or recall even such words in such a miserable place?

Well, here at rock bottom, in the turmoil of his despair, in the emotional upheaval that he's been experiencing because Jerusalem has fallen, presumably he's lost his home, maybe he's lost relations, some have been carded into exile, all he'd hoped for in the temple is gone, the city's gone.

[14 : 28] Here now springs faith and hope. not just a trite, cheer up, all's going to be okay. He hasn't heard a voice of someone at the top of the pit calling down to him saying, you'll be right mate, it'll be fine, sun will rise tomorrow, it'll be better, have a good sleep.

Those sort of empty, stupid words that sometimes we're even prone to say to those who are suffering. No, what's led him to this hope is that he's struck in his grief the bedrock of biblical faith.

He's come actually down so far, he's come to solid ground. Solid ground about the character and the purpose of God Almighty. And out of that bedrock springs his faith and hope for the future.

Not just a wishful thinking, not just a blind and stupid optimism, but biblical faith in the real God. A God of steadfast love, mercy, and faithfulness.

For they're the three key aspects of the character of God that are touched on in verses 22 and 23. The steadfast love of the Lord never ceases, his mercies never come to an end, they're new every morning, great is your faithfulness.

[15 : 43] Three things, three absolutely essential parts of the character of God that have come to mind as he sits in the gloom of his grief.

Where do they come from? Well, all through the scriptures we read testimony of the faithfulness, the steadfast love, and the mercy of God.

They're there all the way through scripture. They come together in a very famous verse, a verse that's actually quoted a number of times in the scriptures. going back a few hundred years from the fall of Jerusalem, when Israel had been led out of Egypt by Moses and come to Mount Sinai where they received their laws before going into the promised land.

There where they'd been declared to be the sovereign people of God, a holy people to him, a people of his mercy and love in effect. While Moses was on top of Mount Sinai receiving further laws after the Ten Commandments, down on the bottom the impatient people of God demanded of Moses' brother Aaron, their priest, that he make for them a golden calf, an object of worship, an idol.

And there, even in that 40 day period, having received the Ten Commandments, they broke the first one dramatically and drastically and bowed down and worshipped that golden calf. On top of the mountain, God said to Moses, this is what my people have done down the bottom.

[17 : 11] I'm going to destroy them. I've had enough of them. I'm going to start all over again with you, Moses. And Moses pleaded with God a prayer of intercession that he spare his people. And God relented.

And the people were spared. But not totally in a sense. They were condemned into a 40 year wilderness period so that that generation of idolatrous sinners would die out and not enter the promised land but that their children, the next generation, would enter the promised land.

And subsequently, it happened. As you read through the story through the rest of Exodus into Leviticus, Numbers and Deuteronomy and Joshua. Having relented and spared the people comes this famous verse in Exodus chapter 34 at the end of this incident of the sin of the golden calf.

The Lord, the Lord, a God merciful and gracious, slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love and faithfulness.

Keeping steadfast love for the thousandth generation, forgiving iniquity and transgression and sin, yet by no means clearing the guilty, but visiting the iniquity of the children, of the parents upon the children and the children's children to the third and fourth generation.

[18 : 31] Steadfast love, mercy, faithfulness. They come together in that verse, but they come together in that incident. And the writer here is recalling not just a Bible verse to cheer him up, but he's recalling a parallel situation.

For Jerusalem had fallen as the punishment of God for their sin, a deserved punishment. But he recalls another sin of the people of Israel hundreds of years before in his scriptures.

And there, the steadfast love, the mercy, the faithfulness of God all come together with God's justice and wrath. And the people overall are spared, although that generation dies out in the wilderness.

And therefore he says, I will have hope. This writer knows his Bible. That's where he's come to in effect. The bedrock from which springs his faith is his Bible.

The testimony of God's character and purpose. Not just a wishful thinking, not just a God who's benign with a long beard floating up on a cloud somewhere, but the real and living God.

[19 : 45] And that's where he's dug deep to in his grief and sorrow and lament. And that's where he's found hope. Because he knows that God is holy and does punish sin and sinners deserve the punishment of sin and so be it.

Jerusalem has fallen because of its sin and they deserve that suffering and that grief. But he also knows that the steadfast love of the Lord never ceases.

His wrath will end after three or four generations, but to the thousandth generation, that is forever, the mercy, the steadfast love, the faithfulness of God continues and continues and continues.

And he knows that now he's in the midst of experiencing the wrath of God duly given, rightly given for the sins of the people. But he knows that wrath will not last forever.

The steadfast love, the mercy and the faithfulness of God, they last forever. They never cease. But his wrath and his anger will cease.

[20 : 49] Therefore, he says, I have hope. A hope that is future-oriented, that is expectant. He knows that if he keeps waiting patiently as he goes on to say, that wrath will end.

But the steadfast love, mercy and faithfulness of God will keep on keeping on. He says in verse 24, the Lord is my portion, therefore I will hope in him.

The idea there is that that's what he relies on and in a sense in the destruction of Jerusalem, all the things that a person of God might well have relied on wrongly, they're gone.

The temple, the priest, the law, the prophets, the walls of Jerusalem, the palace, the king, all gone. All that's left in effect is God.

And sometimes God treats us like that. Sometimes he takes away from us things that in themselves are good, but he may take them away from us because what's happening in our lives is that we're actually placing too much trust in those things and maybe not enough in God.

[21 : 57] And so stripping away so that in the end the Lord is my portion, therefore I'll hope in him. For he alone is where our trust must be, not in our family, our security, our church, or whatever, but in God alone is what this writer declares.

What he's showing us and teaching us in writing this lament is that as we plumb the depths of grief, come to the bedrock of biblical faith and find there the reliability of the character and purpose of God and depend on him.

Depend on him. And if he could do that in 587 BC in Old Testament times, well how much in a sense easier and how much more ought we do the same post New Testament times?

For if he dug deep to find that reliable character of the mercy, steadfast love and faithfulness of God, such things are written even clearer in the New Testament pages of Scripture.

for above all, as Jesus hung on the cross, the steadfast love, mercy and faithfulness of God are beaconing out for us to see.

[23 : 23] Where wrath and mercy meet at Calvary, we see the same thing, punishment for sin, wrath appeased by Jesus' death, death, but forever, never ceasing, the steadfast love, mercy and faithfulness of God, keeping on and keeping on.

the writer then goes on to say, it is good, the Lord is good to those who wait for him, to the soul that seeks him.

It is good that one should wait quietly for the salvation of the Lord. That is, he doesn't expect an immediate answer to his prayer. He doesn't pray, God, somehow take me out of this grief and this suffering and this loss and this condition, and he expects to wake up the next morning and everything is rosy, not at all.

There is a long-term patience and expectation that he is modelling and commending here. Sometimes we're too impatient in our prayers. We sometimes expect God to deliver too much too soon.

It can be a long wait for answers to prayer and as we'll see in a few minutes, this writer urges us to pray and pray and pray and keep on praying, to persevere and be persistent in prayer.

[24 : 42] And he's not expecting an immediate relief, but rather he's commending patient waiting for God's answers to prayer. Indeed, he recognises that if God is good, even the suffering itself is good, like a yoke, he says in verse 27, it is good for one to bear the yoke in youth to sit alone in silence when the Lord has imposed it.

A yoke you put on an ox or a bull or whatever to do the gardening, but to do the crops and the ploughing or whatever it's called, and the yoke would direct the animal in the right way.

And he's saying here in effect that suffering given by God is sometimes to direct us in right paths, to keep us off wrong paths, so that suffering itself is even a good thing to endure.

It trains us, it disciplines us, it educates us. It may not be easy to take, but it's for a good purpose. And that's even the suffering of punishment for your sin, the same sort of educational directive ways.

It's a good thing, he says. And as well as patience, he commends humility. That we're not trying to buck the direction of God by shaking off the yoke of suffering, but as he says in 29 and 30, to put one's mouth to the dust, an expression of great humility, to give one's cheek to the smiter and be filled with insults, again an expression of humility of submission to God's will.

[26 : 09] Patience and humility is what he's commending to us as we suffer for our sins and as we wait for God to act. So he reiterates the grounds of hope in verse 31.

For the Lord will not reject forever. Although he causes grief, he'll have compassion according to the abundance of his steadfast love, for he does not willingly afflict or grieve anyone.

The sense of that last verse is that God takes no pleasure in afflicting anyone. He wills it where it's punishment for sin, but it gives him no pleasure other than to bring people out better the other side of their grief.

In the ancient world, if your city was defeated or country defeated, then you would often read into that that the God of the victor is better than your God. So when Babylon conquered Jerusalem, they boasted that their gods, Maduk, Bel, Nebo and others, they were more powerful than Yahweh, the God of Israel.

If that is the case, then why actually keep trusting in your God if he's been defeated? All of this hope and reference back to the scriptures would be wasted. All his argument depends on the fact that God is actually sovereign over all, that God is in charge of all.

[27 : 28] And that's his argument in the next few verses. When all the prisoners of the land, verse 34 says, are crushed under foot, when human rights are perverted in the presence of the Most High, when one's case is subverted, does the Lord not see it?

And the answer is yes, he does, and not just see, but see in the sense of care. Who can command and have it done if the Lord has not ordained it? And the answer is no one, God ordains all.

Is it not from the mouth of the Most High that good and bad come? Yes, it is. God is in charge of all. Why should any then who draw breath complain about the punishment of their sins?

He's reminding his readers that like himself, they are sinners. They have in a sense nothing to complain about. All the suffering they deserve.

God is in charge. He's brought it about. But God is the one who is worth relying upon for steadfast love, mercy and faithfulness to the end.

[28 : 37] It's a far cry from how often we react. Even when we've sinned and we're suffering God's punishment in some way for our own sins, we're much more liable to whinge and to complain and to pray that God will just take it away.

We've got nothing to complain about, verse 39 is telling us. Sinners deserve suffering. And so he urges them in their prayers in verse 40 to 42.

to pray and pray and pray to repent of their sins in turning to God. Let us test and examine our ways and return to the Lord.

Let us lift up our hearts as well as our hands to God in heaven. We have transgressed and rebelled. You have not forgiven. Yet is the sense.

He's calling sinful people to repent. Not just to complain to God about the suffering, but to see the suffering as a good yoke that is to lead us to repentance of our sins so that we may then find mercy.

[29 : 45] Mercy is what we need. We like he are sinners. mercy is what we are we doing. There is no mercy without judgment for if there is no judgment there is no thing called mercy.

And mercy is not deserved for if it is deserved it is not mercy. mercy. When we plead for mercy we do so in a context of judgment and we are pleading for something that we do not deserve.

And yet how often when we confess our sins we are actually misunderstanding this. We are making up excuses for our sins. We are passing the buck to others and so on.

Just like Adam and Eve did in the garden. See how slow we are to lament our sin to confess it and repent of it. We belittle our sin and say that is not really important.

It is hardly even worth mentioning to God. Or we might say that someone else has made me do this. The devil has made me do it. I have been under pressure and lots of work. We pass the buck.

[30 : 50] How fast we are to underplay sin seriousness. How quick we are to make up excuses. Lamentations calls us to lament our sin.

To confess it honestly. To turn from it and to turn to God. For his mercy outlasts his wrath.

His mercy never ceases. His steadfast love never comes to an end. God in exhorting his readers and fellow Israelites to repent of their sins.

He then models this prayer in the verses that follow. Which we won't look at in detail. He recounts some of the things that are already there in the earlier part of this chapter and in earlier chapters as well.

He reiterates his own grief and his tears and his crying and lament for the fall of Jerusalem. He determines verse 49 and 50 say to pray without ceasing.

[31 : 58] My eyes will flow without ceasing, without respite until the Lord from heaven looks down and sees. He knows that God will answer in due time but not necessarily immediately. So he resolves to pray and keep on praying and keep on praying until God brings mercy and relief.

sinner we cannot complain at any suffering we receive from God.

We deserve even more. The suffering of punishment is what we are due for our failure to love God with all our heart, soul, mind and strength and our failure to love our neighbour as our self.

We do not deserve the mercy of God. We deserve his wrath. This writer urges us to lament our sin, to pray and pray and pray to repent of our sin in turning away from it and in turning to God, to wait patiently and humbly for the Lord.

A long wait perhaps until he returns. Some have said to me over the last couple of weeks, this is difficult stuff, lamentations, can't we have something nicer?

[33 : 30] I've thought the same every day in preparing the sermons. God's mercy is but in the depth of the darkness of grief, the light of the candle of God's mercy is seen more brightly against such a black and dark background.

God's mercy is in the midst of judgment for sin, a ferocious and righteous judgment by God for the sin of God's people in the devastation of Jerusalem and its aftermath.

wrath, the flame of his steadfast love in one sense looks small but in another sense is brighter by comparison.

And in response to the persistent faithlessness of Israel for hundreds of years leading up to the destruction of Jerusalem, the faithfulness of God is the more clearly seen.

the steadfast love of the Lord never ceases, his mercies never come to an end, they are new every morning, great is your faithfulness.

[34 : 43] That supreme display of steadfast love, mercy and faithfulness is seen on Calvary when Jesus died on the cross.

There wrath and mercy met. wrath consumed, taken by Jesus so that eternally and ultimately we may be the beneficiaries and recipients of steadfast love, mercy and faithfulness.

And there is nothing nicer and nothing sweeter, nothing lighter better and nothing better than that.

Thank you.