



GRACE CHURCH

## From Lament to Hope

Lamentations 3

Grace Church | 4.19.20

Good morning, everyone, I am glad so many of us are able to tune in today as we hear from the Word of God. I wanted to make sure to give a welcome to any of those who are watching who are new to Grace Church or unfamiliar with our body. You can connect with us and receive more information by filling out the quick form in the comments. If you are still having trouble, just leave a comment and one of our members will get back to you. The mission of our church is to Make Jesus Known, and so that is our aim today: that even though we cannot meet physically that you would know the true and living Jesus Christ more intimately and see him more clearly by the time we are finished today. It's in his name you are welcome here, because he has never turned away a needy heart.

Let's begin today with a Biblical story. Maybe a story that you are not quite familiar with. It's the story of how Jeremiah, the prophet of God was abandoned by his own people to die in a dried up, muddy well. His story begins in Jeremiah 37 with an accusation. As he rides among the city, he is falsely accused of being a dissenter, and unjustly thrown into prison. It is there that Jeremiah appeals to the king for his release, but he also makes a prophecy: Jerusalem will fall in due time to the Babylonians. Neither the king nor Jeremiah's enemies receive this prediction well, and their anger is kindled greatly against Jeremiah. His only crime was heralding the word of the Lord, but his fate is sealed in chapter 38:6:

So they took Jeremiah and cast him into the cistern of Malchiah, the king's son, which was in the court of the guard, letting Jeremiah down by ropes. And there was no water in the cistern, but only mud, and Jeremiah sank in the mud.

This kind of treatment was typical of God's prophets. Their words, especially words of warning and repentance, were seldom received warmly or kindly. They became the objects of persecution at the hands of their own people. I bring up this particular story because it flavors Jeremiah's lament in Lamentations 3. Listen to how he describes his experience in **3:52-54**.

Here we see Jeremiah's corporate lament for the destruction of the city of Jerusalem move towards a personal lament for his own pain. Although we may not be able to relate to Jeremiah's experience of being cast into a deep well to die, the image of the long, dark well is not lost on many



of us. Yes, I want you today to think of the darkest personal moment of your life—your dry and dirty and dark cistern, where you sank slowly into the enveloping mud. For most, the well of our life was in the past. For some, it is current. For other, you have trouble identifying just one well, because you feel like your life has been categorized by one sorrow after another. And as we are lowered by ropes into the pit, this the place where lament springs. But, we will also find today that the deep wells of our life, the pits and cisterns and holes, those are the places where hope springs too.

Last week in chapter 1 and 2 we identified three aspects of Biblical Lament. Lament is a God given way to bring our sorrow to him. If you remember, we said last week that lament asks hard questions of God and the world, lament sees God and the world for how they really are, and lament cries out to God in the night. Asks, sees, cries. And today we will discover the last piece in our formula of lament, the Biblical language of sorrow. All true laments do not end in cries. They end in hope. Lament Ask, Sees, Cries, and it *Hopes*.

You see, Biblical lament becomes transformative for the Christian when it takes sorrow and transitions carefully and purposefully towards hope. Even if you struggle to believe truth in the midst of personal darkness, lament can be the pathway to get you there. “Rehearsing truth” every day and every new morning, even through sorrow, is the final stage in true lament.<sup>1</sup> In the well, this is Jeremiah’s tactic too. In our wells, it must be ours too. Look with me in our text as we identify four aspects of lamenting hope. It begins with pain, it springs with remembrance, it flourishes with patience, and it continues with confidence.

## Hope begins with pain (1-18)

Chapter 3 is the climax of the book of Lamentations. Notice the form of this poem of lament. Chapters 1 and 2 were acrostics, with each line starting with a letter of the Hebrew alphabet. The poems had 22 lines, expressing Jeremiah’s sorrows from A-Z. But here in chapter 3 we find a triple acrostic heightening the tone. There are 66 verses, each three verse stanza begins with the corresponding letter of the Hebrew alphabet. Sorrow is now not only from A-Z, but goes around every letter three times over.

And the reason that the sorrow of chapter 3 is so climactic and realized is because Jeremiah laments not only the destruction of all he holds dear, but his own destruction, The sorrow has overtaken him personally. See **verse 1-3**. The finger of affliction turns from the people of Jerusalem right to Jeremiah himself.

In **Verse 4**, we find two verbs that help us pinpoint Jeremiah’s feelings. The words “waste away” can also be translated as “swallowed”, as in he “swallowed up my flesh and my bones, all my being. This verb actually occurs several times in chapter 2 as well, such as **2:2**, the lord has “swallowed up all the inhabitants of Jacob”, or verse 5, “he has swallowed up Israel”. The verb occurs again in **2:8**

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<sup>1</sup> Mark Vroegop, *Dark Clouds, Deep Mercy*



and 2:16. Just as Jerusalem has been swallowed up by her grief, so has Jeremiah. The next verb in verse 4 is translated as “broken” in our text, but also may be translated as “shattered”. His bones have been shattered. This is in fact the same language used by Jeremiah to describe the fate of Jerusalem in chapters 1 and 2. 1:15, her young men have been shattered or crushed, 2:9 her bars and gates have been broken. Both the verbs Jeremiah uses to describe himself here are intentionally repeated and reused from his description of Jerusalem’s destruction.

Why is this important? Because it shows us how clearly Jeremiah identifies with the suffering of Jerusalem. Their sorrows are his sorrows. **Verse 5**, Jeremiah feels as if he himself is under siege, just as the city is: surrounded. He goes on, detailing how it feels as if God himself is his personal enemy, the one who has pointed the arrows of his deified bow directly into his organs. **Verse 15**, he is tired of it, full of bitterness, it feels as if God has made him eat the poisonous and hallucinogenic herb wormwood.

If we skip to **16-18**, we find the climax of Jeremiah’s personal pain. He covers himself in ashes, outwardly signifying his inward turmoil. He is in the bottom of his pit. Not just his mind, but his soul is void of peace. He is not just unhappy, he has forgotten what happiness is. The end of the rope has come for him, he can’t hold on any longer. He is utterly devoid of hope.

Church, suffering is always personal. Sometimes lamenting the suffering of others places us in the line of fire for our own sorrows. We can’t be in a suffering world that long and not feel this. This week, even as our community group met over zoom, we explored the realities of sorrow a bit. We heard stories of the pain, of unspeakable sorrow. We asked difficult questions of the world and of God. I have heard that many groups did the same. And as we shared, we bore our sorrows together. The sorrows of others became our sorrows. Eventually the sorrows that we pity others for will make their way into our own hearts. And if our aim in lament is to get to the place where we can have a confident, sure, grounded, hope, we have to start there: with the pain. Personal, deep, pain.

Curiously enough, there are several instances in early church history where the church Fathers spoke of our Christian hope in sorrow using the image of the Phoenix. The Phoenix is a mythical bird that has the power to burn itself at the end of its life and rise again from its own ashes in new birth. Church fathers like Clement of Rome, Tertullian, and Cyril of Jerusalem, at the time they wrote, heard legends and rumors of this bird and thought that perhaps this bird was real, though rare. Now, we’ve never found a phoenix, but I love the imagery they pinpointed. In order for the glorious rising and hopeful regeneration of this mythical bird to occur, it must first endure the pain of fire. At the darkest moment, when the majestic bird appears to be perishing in a blaze of glory and nothing is left except its own ashes, hope springs forth.<sup>2</sup>

As people of the resurrection, someone greater than the phoenix has come. Jesus Christ has risen and reigns victorious, and therein lies our unshakable hope. But that singular hope required

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<sup>2</sup> Pulling this imagery from Jason Duesig, *Mere Hope: Life in an Age of Cynicism*



unimaginable pain. This is the shape of the gospel: at the very moment where we utter: “my endurance has perished, and so has my hope from the Lord”, that is when hope is most likely to spring up.

## Hope springs with remembrance (19-24)

Jeremiah's time in the physical pit lasted for a few days, and who knows how long his time in the emotional and spiritual pit lasted. But in his poem, the height of his despair doesn't stick for long. Look at **verse 19-20**: His pain turns into a prayer. He asks God to not forget him, to remember his suffering. Jeremiah cannot forget it, his soul continually remembers that pain. His request is that his God would call it to mind as well.

The good news for Jeremiah is that God cannot forget. The first remembrance we see in this passage is God's remembrance. He hears Jeremiah's prayer. His memory is eternally flawless and omnisciently present. He has no past or future, only pure being. But God's remembrance of Jeremiah's suffering is not just due to the nature of his knowledge, but the nature of his heart. A similar instance is recorded for us in Exodus 2:23-25, when the people of God cry out from the pit of slavery.

During those many days the king of Egypt died, and the people of Israel groaned because of their slavery and cried out for help. Their cry for rescue from slavery came up to God. And God heard their groaning, and God remembered his covenant with Abraham, with Isaac, and with Jacob. God saw the people of Israel—and God knew.

Notice the reason the author gives for God hearing their groaning. He remembers and hears their cries because he remembers his covenant. He is a covenant remembering God, one who cannot break his promises. And he has a covenant with Jeremiah, so when Jeremiah calls out to him, God hears. He cannot forget or forsake his covenant. And so when in your pain, you wonder: does God hear? Does he remember all I've been through? Does he know? If you are covenanted with him by repentance and faith in Christ, you are God's very child. And the heavenly Father always hears the cries of his children. He remembers their pain.

We know covenant remembrance is the kind of remembrance Jeremiah is speaking of because of **verses 21-22**. As Jeremiah turns to call upon the remembrance of God, he also remembers something. The hope that seemed cast off and never to return comes back. And it comes back as Jeremiah calls to mind the covenant keeping character of God. This phrase “I call to mind” is difficult to translate. We hear that phrase and think of a simple remembrance, a nice thought floating through our heads. Nostalgia even. But the Hebrew here means something much deeper. The word for “recall, or “call back” means literally to “return” or “restore”, and the word for “mind” is translated as “heart” over 70 times in the Old Testament. Here Jeremiah is experiencing a restoration of the heart. He is returning his heart to where it belongs. His whole being, his inner



emotions, all swell as he returns himself to stand on a truth that is infinitely more eternal than his sorrow.

Lament dares to hope when life is hard. Hope doesn't come from a change in circumstances, it comes from truth rehearsed.<sup>3</sup> And what is the truth that turns Jeremiah's heart inside out? **Verse 22.** It is the unceasing nature of the steadfast love of God. This is the truth that is powerful enough to punch through the darkness of any sorrow. Steadfast love is the Hebrew word *hesed*, used all over the Old Testament to convey not just affection or emotions of love, but covenant-love. This is a love that is unchanging, unwavering, founded not on emotion but on commitment. It is truly steadfast. That is why it can be described in Bible translation as both devotion and mercy, as loveliness and faithfulness. It is divine and perfect covenantal love: *Hesed* does not only promise to never leave or forsake, it promises to provide constant, never-ending, unrelenting affection. What does this mean? It means that when we picture God's love, we can think of *hesed*, and remember that not only is his declaration of love is steadfast, but that his act of love is steadfast. God does not love like a fickle husband - committed but with bad days and unromantic moments. No, God's love is *hesed*, it stalks us with divine precision and unwavering relentlessness. This is why Jeremiah describes it powerfully just so in **verses 22-23**. *Hesed* is never ending mercies, since he himself is mercy. *Hesed* is fresh mercy and love, where in Christ all who are God's have no need to worry that a single sunrise will not also bring with it the promise of mercy and love. All of this points to the great faithfulness of God. Yesterday, today, and forever, always *hesed*.

Thomas Chisholm wrote the familiar hymn "Great Is Thy Faithfulness" in 1923. He based his hymn on the word of Lamentations 3. Many hymns are born out of unique and specific personal experiences, but not this one. Chisholm did not have a singular experience of lamentation and grief, but rather his sorrow was more constant. He was sick and poor.

"My income has not been large at any time due to impaired health in the earlier years which has followed me on until now. Although I must not fail to record here the unfailing faithfulness of a covenant keeping God and that He has given me many wonderful displays of His providing care, for which I am filled with astonishing gratefulness."

Church, sometimes sorrow comes lightning fast, like a thief in the night. But often it comes gradually. The siege of Jerusalem lasted three years. The first day of the siege, perhaps hope was still clearly visible, easily attainable. But as the clouds began to form and week after week passed by, hope was harder to grasp. Sorrow tends to creep in over time.

But God's faithfulness is not like that. It's new every morning, fresh and applicable. His covenant keeping nature isn't susceptible to the clouds of sorrow. We find his faithfulness in the simple mercies of everyday life, the rock-hewn truths that lie just beneath the surface of our pain, ready to be remembered.

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<sup>3</sup> Vreogop, *Dark Clouds, Deep Mercy*



This kind of love is hard to fathom and grasp. But the very act of calling into our hearts is where hope springs. The good news of the gospel is the good news of the proven faithful hesed of God in Christ. His cross secured his covenant love, his empty tomb proved his covenant love, and his Holy Spirit seals his covenant love. Ultimately, the hesed of God ensures that our prize and our portion is not a distant, contractual union, but an intimate one. See how it is described in **verse 24**. God himself in Christ is the portion for the portionless. When hope is gone, the Lord remains. And where the Lord is, hope is. Hope springs from remembrance.

## **Hope flourishes with patience (25-36)**

And yet, Jeremiah's sorrow don't go away. Hope doesn't chase away sorrow forever, and neither is it supposed to. Hope is the constant companion of the Christian, even as sorrow ebbs and flows. So how can we maintain the hope of God in Christ as sorrows rise and fall? Lamentations helps us see that patience is key.

**Verse 25-27** all begin with the word "Good". In sorrow, the best thing that you can do is to wait on God. **Verses 28-30** show us exactly what that looks like: sitting alone in silence. So often our sorrow brings us to the point where we are unable to speak, and in fact that is a good place to be. When we stop making excuses, when we are able to sit still in awe of God, that is where our hope is displayed. Waiting on God is never a waste. When it feels as if the hope is not coming, wait. Consider the words of the psalmist:

I wait for the Lord, my soul waits, and in his word I hope; my soul waits for the Lord more than watchmen for the morning, more than watchmen for the morning.

Your hope will flourish in patience as you show that you truly believe **verses 31-33**.

This is the truth that allows us to wait with faith. Silence is not the final word, you are waiting for the final conclusion. God does not find pleasure in your pain, verse 33 tells us. He is not making you wait for no reason, he does not afflict out of hatred or injustice. Patience is putting our hope to the test, and when hope in the right object is tested, it never proves worthless. Do not fear or lose heart, you may have sorrow now, but relief is coming. And ultimately, we remember our hope is a living hope. Our patience is not lifeless, as if we are searching for some treasure we really know down deep isn't there. Our hope is living and proven in the gospel. Faithful lament waits for the revealing of all things that is to come when Christ returns, when the dim mirror becomes clear again.

## **Hope continues with confidence (37-66)**

We will end our time in Lamentations 3 with a bit of a summary. Jeremiah has turned to remember in his heart the covenant love of God, and he is content, although still full of sorrow, to wait for the clear culmination of that covenant love with a living hope. How is it that Jeremiah knows that God



is steadfast, that he can wait on him? After all, he has seen a lot of sorrow. His time as God's prophet has been anything but easy. The rest of Lamentations 3 shows us exactly where his hope is grounded: in a confidence in the character of God.

His confidence is rooted in God's sovereignty, which we see in **37-39**. Here the prophet Jeremiah rules out any action, word, or event being outside of the hands of God. It boggles my mind how we attempt to explain this away. Let me be clear as to what this text says: nothing happens apart from God's command. And the point of that assertion in this text is not so that we can philosophical muse on the nature of human freedom or divine responsibility, but simply so that the truth of God's sovereignty may cause us to pause. Why should we complain, says Jeremiah, when sorrow comes? For those who truly see God for who he is, speaking against him is impossible. Now, this does not mean that there are not times where we do speak against God, wondering and doubting. But the nature of our doubt comes from our inability as fallen creatures to grasp his magnitude. Because you see, a supreme confidence in the sovereignty of God does act as our grounding hope. My charge for those who are in sorrow and suffering is to fall with simple faith on the truth that you are not God. That is the best truth you can hear, because it allows us to place our confidence in the only one who truly deserves it. Our hope is rooted in confidence in God's sovereign character.

It is this sovereignty that allows Jeremiah to close his poem with a confidence that a God who is in control is ultimately a God who will avenge and bring justice. After a pause for reflection and repentance in verses 40-51, Jeremiah moves on in 52-66 to praise God's sovereignty in action. **Verse 52-54** recalls his time in the pit, being hunted like a animal. His response is to cry with confidence in **55-57** on his sovereign God. He is the one who takes up his cause, verse 58, sees all the wrong done, verse 59, hears the plans of the wicked, verse 61, and will ultimately bring justice and repay the wicked, verse 64.

You see, Jeremiah is a perpetrator, and he knows that. It's why Lamentations is so full of repentance and confession. But he is also a victim. His sorrow flows from the wrong done to him. So how can his hope continue? He must have confidence that God himself will make all things right in the end. He hopes in the future to come, where justice rolls down like a river. We are right to lament our own sin, but part of lament is also lamenting the injustice of the world. This last week many of you joined us for a conversation on Biblical justice and church history. A simple glance over the stories of the past reveals to us that the sin of Jerusalem is not novel to that time. Men and women like us have enslaved other humans, and continue to do so to this day. We've treated those different than us as subhuman, and still that evil lies close to our hearts and is engrained in our society. We are the kind of people who choose personal freedom over and above the lives of the innocent, killing hundreds of thousands of babies on the altar of our careers and our reputations and our comforts.

For all of this, church, we should be people of lament, people who cry out for justice. But we are also people of confidence. God will not be mocked, and one day the sorrows of oppression and racism and abortion and poverty all will answer to the wrath of almighty God.





Perhaps one of the most famous illustrations in all of American Christianity comes from the most famous and effective sermon in American history. The sermon is Jonathan Edwards' "Sinners in the Hands of an Angry God", an exposition of a single line in Deuteronomy 32 which was the spark that set ablaze the first Great Awakening. In speaking of the surety of the justice and wrath of God against sin, Edwards says this:

The bow of God's wrath is bent, and the arrow made ready on the string, and justice bends the arrow at your heart, and strains the bow, and it is nothing but the mere pleasure of God, and that of an angry God, without any promise or obligation at all, that keeps the arrow one moment from being made drunk with your blood.<sup>4</sup>

This striking image is eerily similar to the image Jeremiah uses earlier in our text in verses **12-13**.

He bent his bow and set me  
as a target for his arrow.  
He drove into my kidneys  
the arrows of his quiver;

In his sorrow, Jeremiah feels as if the wrath of God has been unleashed on him, as if God has become his enemy and the justice of God finally released the great arrow of his wrath. But Jeremiah also knows that if that were entirely true, if the full and total displeasure of God was released on him. He could not stand it. If he really felt the full justice of God, he would be no more, as he reminds himself in **verse 66**. No, Jeremiah may feel as if God has filled him full with arrows of wrath, but it isn't true. God has had mercy on him. His arrows are reserved for his true enemies. And that truth is Jeremiah's bedrock of hope. If he repents and trusts in God, sorrow may come now. He may *feel* as if all is lost. But it isn't. God is faithful and merciful and steadfast.

Christian, the same is true for you. If you have repented of sin, and put your trust in Christ for new life, it may *feel* as if the wrath of God has come to bear on you. The sorrow may be so deep and serious that it feels as if he is shooting you down with the bow of his justice. But make no mistake, no matter how deep your sorrow goes, his mercy goes deeper still. As Edwards said, it is only his good pleasure that keeps the arrow from becoming drunk with your blood. But oh, can we rest in the good pleasure of God. Isaiah 53:10 tells us it was his *good pleasure* to crush his Son. It was the will of God to point the bow of his just wrath not at you, but at Christ. At the cross Jesus took your sin and sorrow and his blood was split by the arrow of God, all so that you may have a hope that is unshakable and a future that is indescribably bright.

Never forget, Church. If you are in Christ, your sorrow is real, even promised. But it is not forever. Wrath isn't headed your way, glory is. Your hope springs eternal, not your sorrow. Biblical lament asks, sees, cries, and hopes. In our pain, our hope springs from remembrance and rehearsal of truth, it flourishes with patience, and it continues with confidence in the finished work of Christ.

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<sup>4</sup> Jonathan Edwards, "Sinners in the Hands of an Angry God"

