

“Hopeful Lamenting”
Lamentations 3:21-33
April 19, 2020

INTRODUCTION:

We’re considering today the second of the three opportunities the Church has to reach our secular world. The three are beauty, lament and belonging. Each of these three, in combination with the proclaimed word of God, provides a path for people to connect with the true God. More and more these days, people’s minds are closed off to the truth of the gospel. Secularism erects massive barriers to the gospel. For example, secularism puts religious beliefs into a category we might call imaginary truth. Whether a person is a Christian, a Hindu or a Muslim is akin to deciding who might win a fight between Spiderman and Ant Man or some other Marvel superhero. Secularism says that it’s okay to have an opinion about religion, just don’t claim that your religious truth is any better or truer than anyone else’s. If we think of secularism as a house, it has locked the front door against all claims of absolute truth, and termed as evil anyone making such claims. Where does that leave us as Christians? We follow a God who claimed himself to be the way, the truth and the life. So secularism brands us as evil when we just say what Jesus has said. How should we attempt to share the love of Jesus in the face of this kind of opposition? I believe we do so by forgetting about the front door, the one that is locked up tight against us, and go instead to the side door. That’s where these three opportunities come in. They are able to reach around the barriers into the heart.

We looked two weeks ago at beauty. The human heart is built to respond to beauty, because we are created in the image of God. God is the source of all beauty because God is ultimately beautiful. Lament also provides a path for secular people to begin connecting with the true God. Lament acknowledges that we live in a broken world. But instead of falling into despair or getting angry about that, it comes to trust God. Lament is raw honesty about the brokenness of life, followed by trust in God that results in hope. Mark Vroegop defines lament as “the honest cry of a hurting heart wrestling with the paradox of pain and the promise of God’s goodness.” Lament is so important that there is an entire book in the Bible about it, the book of Lamentations. Our passage today lies at the heart of the book and outlines for us the past, present and future components of lamenting.

I. Renewed by the Past – v. 21-24

We are renewed as we consider the past mercies of God, particularly his covenant promises to his people. **“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 word translated “steadfast love” is a word that appears throughout the Bible, the Hebrew word *hesed*. It refers to God’s covenant love, the most solid thing in the universe. God has bound himself by his promise to be the faithful God of his people. He will do anything to provide for his people. In Jesus we see that he has done everything, giving his life for us. This is the mercy of God that brings renewal.

The promises of these verses have been made into a hymn, the beloved “Great Is Thy Faithfulness.” If we are to appreciate the faithfulness of God, it is vital that we understand the context of these verses. In his book on the topic of lament, Mark Vroegop makes an important point about the context of these well-known verses.

While attending a meeting at a Christian conference center, I noticed a picture on the wall. It featured a painted scene of a small English cottage tucked between two mountains with a flowing stream. A small garden surrounded the house. It resembled a Thomas Kinkade painting with pastel colors, soft lines, and a bright sky—the kind of art you’d find in a Christian bookstore... Below the painting was Lamentations 3:22-23... The artist connected this famous verse to the idealized scene. I guess many Christians would do the same. But they’d be wrong.” P. 105-6

The reason it is wrong to connect these verses to such an idyllic scene is that the context is just the opposite of a log cabin in the Smokey Mountains. We need to understand the historical context of the passage. After Israel’s Golden Age under King David and King Solomon, the kingdom split into two kingdoms. The southern kingdom was called Judah and the northern kingdom Israel or sometimes Samaria. The northern kingdom had not one single faithful king, and God’s judgment was to bring the nation of Assyria to conquer Israel in 722 B.C. The southern kingdom had a mix of good and bad kings, but eventually judgment came in 586 B.C. when the Babylonians conquered the nation after a three-year siege of its capital city, Jerusalem. The three-year siege was devastating. Hunger was so severe that mothers resorted to cannibalism of their own babies. The siege was broken when the Babylonians entered the city and tore down the city walls. The temple was the prized possession of the Jewish people. The Babylonians stripped it of anything of value and then reduced it to a pile of rubble. It is this destruction of Jerusalem that forms the context of Lamentations.

The first two and a half chapters of Lamentations are some of the bleakest in the Bible. I went through those chapters this week and listed twenty-six different descriptions of the devastation brought by God’s judgment. These judgments include things like weeping with none to comfort (1:2), roads formerly filled with happy pilgrims now empty and mournful (1:4), enemies gloating and mocking (1:7), infants and babies fainting in the streets from hunger (2:11), and even, as mentioned before, cannibalism (2:20). So when we

think of these beloved verses about the faithfulness of God, don't think a log cabin in the Smokey Mountains, think of a news report of a community levelled by an EF5 tornado. Jeremiah, the author of Lamentations, seems to come to a low point just prior to these verses. **“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’”** (3:17-18). Then comes the turning point of all lament. **“But this I call to mind, and therefore I have hope”** (3:21). Perhaps you're at the bottom right now. God teaches us here, through his prophet Jeremiah, that the bottom is where we can meet God. The bottom is not the end of the road, it's the turning point in the road. If we don't meet God at the bottom, lament leads only to anger or despair.

Biblical lament, then, is to be honest about the brokenness of life. Its opposite is denial. But then the lament must say, “But I trust in God.” That's what Jeremiah does in these verses. He looks back to God's faithfulness, and that faithfulness becomes an anchor to his soul. He holds onto it like a drowning man holds onto the life preserver thrown to him. This faithfulness of God becomes the source of renewal to his heart, even though the nation is still in ruins. He says that God's mercies are “new every morning.” The newness he means isn't the sense of new as in never having existed before. It is, rather, new in the sense of fresh and renewed.

How might we apply this to ourselves? First, know that it is good to mourn your losses. Ecclesiastes 7:4 says, **“The heart of the wise is in the house of mourning.”** Second, remember God's covenant faithfulness to us through Jesus. We have an even more solid basis than Jeremiah to know God's steadfast love, because we see the full expression of it in the life and death of Jesus. This is how much God is committed to us—He stopped at nothing to redeem and rescue us. This suggests to me a good nighttime prayer. “God, this has been a hard day. My tank is empty and I'm feeling a little discouraged. But you are completely committed to me, so make your mercies new to me when I awaken tomorrow morning. Renew my heart as I trust you. Help me sleep now, remembering that you are in control of all things and that you love me.”

II. Waiting in the Present – v. 25-30

Lament is the response to life when things aren't going as we might want and as they should. Our natural inclination when things are not going well is to want that bad thing, whatever it is, to end as soon as possible. During this Covid-19 pandemic, the desire we all have is for things to go back to normal as soon as possible. We don't like not being able to gather publicly for worship. We don't like stores, gyms and restaurants being closed. We don't like the fact that twenty-million people have become unemployed in just a few weeks. In light of this very natural desire, it is easy to spend our time longing for a return to normal. The next section of our text teaches that there is a better use of our

energies than longing for a return to normal. That better thing is to wait on the Lord.

In the original Hebrew text, verses 25-27 all begin with the same word, the word “good.” Though it’s a little awkward to do so, we could translate these verses, “Good is the Lord to those who wait for him... Good it is that one should wait quietly for the salvation of the Lord. Good it is for a man that he bear the yoke in his youth.” As good as it might be for this coronavirus to be eliminated from the earth overnight, there is something that would be better. The thing that is even better is to wait on the Lord.

To wait on the Lord when things are not going well is a difficult thing. I think that’s why the text singles out the young. The young generally have a harder time waiting than those of a more mature age. The young want to take action. But it is also the case that the young are generally better able to endure under trying circumstances, due to their greater strength and general health. So it is good for the young to wait on the Lord, but it is not easy to do so.

Why is it so difficult to wait patiently on the Lord? I think it is because it feels like we are not doing anything, and we like to take action. We like to say, “Don’t just stand there; do something!” We get to the heart of what it means to wait on God when we accept the fact that there is nothing we can really do about a particular trial or difficulty. Only God can ultimately take care of the situation.

I notice in these verses how silence is tied to waiting on the Lord. Verse 26 tells us to wait *quietly* for the salvation of the Lord. Verse 28 tells the young man to **“sit alone in silence.”** Verse 29 says of this same young man, **“Let him put his mouth in the dust.”** What does that mean? R. K. Harrison says that “placing the mouth in the dust was a typically oriental way of expressing or exacting complete submission.” It’s not hard to see how this might be the case. When a subject bows in submission to his king, he can’t get any lower than putting his mouth in the dust. And when his mouth is there, he won’t be able to say anything.

Let’s apply this. When God calls us to wait on him in a difficult area of life, he is calling us to release control of our lives by submitting to him. He is asking us to give up and surrender to him. It is in this way that we sink our roots more deeply into God. The next verses give us a good reason to do so. **“Let him give his cheek to the one who strikes, and let him be filled with insults.”** It’s easy to see how those words apply to Jesus in his sufferings and death. He surrendered himself, submitting fully to the will of the Lord. He waited on the Lord, and look what happened. Salvation has come to the world through him. When we wait on the Lord by submitting to him, we will never be disappointed. He knows what he is doing, and we can trust him even if we don’t understand what he’s doing.

III. Full of Hope for the Future – v. 31-33

The last paragraph of this section is filled with hope. Jerusalem may lie in ruins as Jeremiah writes these words, but Jeremiah believes that the Lord will not allow this situation to last. **“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”** (v. 31-32). God desires that we be filled with hope. Despair is an evil thing that God desires to deliver us from. Lament is one of the chief ways God has given for us to come to the place of hope in the midst of difficulty. Lament says, “This stinks. It is not the way life is supposed to be.” But then it goes on to trust God, saying, “God, I know that you agree with me that this is not the way things are supposed to be. But I cannot fix this. So I trust you to do so, and I trust you to do it in your time and I wait on you to do that.” As you do that, what grows in the heart is a longing for a better future, and one that God himself will bring about. Jesus will have the last word. He is the Alpha and Omega, the first and last. He had the first word in creating this world, and he will have the last word in putting it right again.

In his book *Dark Clouds, Deep Mercy*, a book on this topic of lament, Mark Vroegop writes of this hope.

One of my favorite places for lament is the cemetery where our stillborn daughter is buried. I will never forget the sense of profound loss as I placed a small casket in the cold ground in the middle of winter. Walking away from her graveside was one of the most painful things my wife and I ever experienced. You would think that with the painful memories connected to that location, I would never want to return. But it’s actually the opposite.

Etched on Sylvia’s grave marker are the words “Blessed be the name of the Lord” from Job 1:21. The words are a small protest against the tragedy of death. They are a memorial that even as we face death, we will bless the Lord. I have tearfully stood over that grave and said, “This is not over! One day Jesus is going to make this all right.” So I love to return to that grave, because it is a constant reminder that not only has the Lord proven his compassion to me through the years of sorrow and pain, but there is also a coming day when graves will be emptied and death will be defeated.

CONCLUSION:

Challenging times are designed by God to be like the plant that responds to drought by sinking its roots more deeply into the ground. God’s desire for us is to sink our roots more deeply into him. Biblical lament is a powerful resource for doing so. What’s more, our secular world needs to see us being honest about the brokenness of life, while also being filled with hope in God as wait on him.

Small Group Discussion Questions
Lamentations 3:21-33

1. Mark Vroegop defines lament as “the honest cry of a hurting heart wrestling with the paradox of pain and the promise of God’s goodness.” Have you ever wrestled with that paradox? Has anyone you know wrestled with it?
2. Another way to look at biblical lament is to see it as raw honesty about the brokenness of life followed by trust in God and resulting in hope. What do you think is the alternative to biblical lament? In other words, if we don’t respond to the brokenness of life in this way, how will we respond?
3. One of the lessons of this passage is to affirm that it is a good thing to mourn one’s losses. Ecclesiastes 7:4 says, “The heart of the wise is in the house of mourning.” What are some ways we can help others to mourn their losses? What are some common ways we hinder people from mourning their losses?
4. God promises that as we trust him, we are renewed. “His mercies never come to an end; they are new every morning” (3:22-23). What is like to have God’s mercies be new to you every day? How often do you experience this renewed sense of God’s mercies? How can we experience that more frequently?
5. When we encounter difficulties in life, waiting is never easy. Why does God ask us to wait on him?
6. Notice the frequent connection in verses 25-30 between waiting on the Lord and silence. Why do you think that connection is made? Do you see ways in your life in which you use words instead of waiting on God?
7. Verses 31-33 give hope. All the possible things we might lament in this broken world will not be allowed to last. What element of brokenness is it you are most looking forward to the Lord removing from his world?