

Lament and Hope

A Sermon Preached at Incarnation Church in Williamsburg, Virginia on July 1, 2018

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LAMENTATIONS 3:22-33

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 that seeks him. It is good that one should wait quietly for the salvation of the Lord. It is good for one to bear the yoke in youth, to sit alone in silence when the Lord has imposed it, to put one's mouth to the dust (there may yet be hope), to give one's cheek to the smiter, and be filled with insults. For the Lord will not reject forever. Although he causes grief, he will have compassion according to the abundance of his steadfast love; for he does not willingly afflict or grieve anyone.

To talk about Lamentations, I have to talk about the 1989 Ford Crown Victoria.

I owned one of these, in my youth. The '89 was an old car, even back then. It was approximately 23 feet wide, and its general design philosophy was "Bulldoze things out of the way." When I first acquired this car, I was in the process of trying to woo a young lady who was studying French at my college. I had the bright idea of surprising and impressing her over summer break by becoming fluent in French, with the aid of some cassette tapes from the local library [for those of you who are too young to remember such things: cassette tapes were a kind of clay tablet on which we would carve sounds in cuneiform writing].

The idea behind these language tapes was that a woman's voice would state a French word or phrase, then pause to give the listener time to repeat it once or twice, and then a man's voice would state the English meaning of what had just been said. I inserted the cassette into the Crown Victoria's tape player, eager to get started.

"*Merci*," said a voice on the left speaker. "*Merci*," I dutifully repeated. Then there was silence.

"*De rien*," said the left speaker. "*De rien*," I said, wondering when the translations would start. Still nothing from the right speaker.

And so it continued, through "*pamplermousse*" and "*Où sont les croissants?*" with no English at all. I learned no French and won no one's heart that summer. And that's how I learned that the Crown Victoria's right speaker was broken because of a faulty wire. (1989 had not been a shining moment for U.S. car quality...the tape player also ate the library's French cassette. My next car was a Honda, and it has lasted for twenty years and counting.)

Much like I needed both speakers if I wanted to learn French properly, we Christians need to listen to both “speakers” of the Bible if we want to have the whole truth. On the one hand, we need to be thinking and speaking about what is good, right, true, beautiful, and blessed in the world. Many of our worship songs, sermons, and inspirational quotations focus on passages of the Bible that are about these things. But on the other hand, we need to pay attention to passages like Lamentations (and one-third of the Psalms, and many other texts) which speak about what’s broken in the world, in the church, in ourselves, and in our relationship with God. Some of that brokenness is our fault, some isn’t.

Lament is a biblical practice in which we name what is wrong and talk to God about it very honestly.

The passage we just read from Lamentations is a beautiful, hope-filled poem, and we’ll talk about hope in a minute, but it shines even brighter when we see it in its proper setting, in the middle of a book of lament. Otherwise, it can risk being “cheap hope,” like patting a deeply depressed person on the back and saying “Hang in there, it’ll be OK.” (don’t do that, by the way.)

This affirmation of hope in God’s love comes in the middle of Lamentations: a collection of five poems expressing shock, horror, sadness, anguish, questioning, even anger at God’s allowing the pagan Babylonians to punish his people Israel for their sins by devastating Jerusalem and its people, and their temple. These poems get really raw, and honest, and God took them and made them Scripture, His words, so that we as individuals and communities could have them as a resource.

Are we listening to both speakers, or only to the “happy” one? Are we afraid that God won’t be able to handle our honesty, or that we will make the Christian faith seem unattractive to people if we admit that we struggle? If we focus only on the happy and the feel-good, we will force a false gladness on our families, our churches...we will send people the message that our God is afraid of suffering and can’t handle hearing about it, so they will lie to us and to Him and will say they are fine.

Leaving out lament also makes us vulnerable to complicity in injustice and oppression, because we lose the ability to criticize the status quo. We think that whatever is happening must be what God wants, and we find ourselves accepting things we should mourn.

So let’s spend a few moments this morning learning about the goodness of lament.

POINT ONE: LAMENT IS GOOD AND NECESSARY

The Scriptures give us all kinds of language for faithful lament: the practice of naming, not ignoring, what is wrong with the world and with us, and telling God about it...telling him honestly how we feel and not just how we are “supposed” to feel. Biblical laments don’t shy away from saying to God, “this is what’s going on, and I don’t understand it.”

Stuffing these realities down, and only saying what we *ought* to say, leaves us numb, fake, guilty (“I really shouldn’t feel this way”), and unable to honestly grieve what afflicts us or others.

The Bible not only encourages us to grieve when enemies or sin or suffering overwhelm us; it also gives us vivid examples of sad songs wailed to God by desperate, sad, hurting people. People’s words cried out to God become God’s words, for the use of individuals and communities.

But in verse 21, the tone shifts dramatically. He says, “But I call THIS to mind, and therefore I have hope!” What’s his hope?

POINT TWO: OUR HOPE IS FOUND IN GOD’S STEADFAST, SPECIFIC LOVE.

The word here for God’s “steadfast love” is a great Bible word, *chesed*. It means “God’s covenant love...God’s committed, persistent love.” God’s love isn’t just a whim or a feeling that comes over Him and might go away. God has bound himself to his people and is committed to them, faithfully loving them whether they remember him or not.

And so it isn’t just a general thing: “God loves you and shows you mercy.” That sentence is so general that it isn’t very helpful when you are having a hard time. It becomes a cliché with no content. God loves you in **specific** ways. God shows mercy and faithfulness to you in **specific** ways.

You hear this in the prayers of the African-American churches in the county where I live. The folks there often get very specific in their thanks: “God got me up this morning, gave us a mind and bodily strength to come here, got us here safely, gave us someone to give us a ride, provided this church and these people for us to share,” etc.

Do we take time to ground ourselves in the everyday faithfulness of God, specifically thinking about (and giving thanks for!) how he is showing love and care for us?

Or do we ground ourselves in the news of the day, the things we lack, the complaints we have against circumstances or people who aren’t doing what we want, or what we think God wants? There is a real danger in becoming nothing but one constant droning grumble. (A character from CS Lewis’s “The Great Divorce” grumbles so much that in the afterlife she becomes nothing but a Grumble.) We probably all know people who are like that. Resist that temptation by meditating for a few moments each day (maybe in the morning, before too many of the tasks and distractions of the day pile onto you) on how God is faithful to you **now, today**, where you are.

The next statement I want to draw your attention to is in verse 24:

The Lord is my portion, says my soul; therefore I will hope in him.

What does he mean by “portion”? You also hear it sometimes in the Psalms, but it comes from the book of Numbers 18:20. When you see that word, you can often think of it as “inheritance.”

When God gave the Promised Land to the Israelites, he gave each tribe its “portion” or inheritance, its piece of the land to work and keep. The priests and Levites, those who worked in the temple, got no piece of land because God was to be their “inheritance.” They were to devote their time to serving God and helping others worship him. They relied on the tithes of others for their income. God says, “You don’t get to have bank accounts and paychecks. I myself will care for you, through the generosity of others. You have to rely on Me.”

In a similar way, we are called to believe that God is really all we need, all we can depend on. God is all we’re getting, all we are guaranteed...no matter what our bank account or our health anything else says right now. God is the only One who will last through our death, and beyond. So it would be good to learn now who He is and how to enjoy Him.

Do we believe that God is our inheritance? Do we remind ourselves regularly that God is all we need, and that He will often use others to give us what we need? Or do we put our trust in something else? (How the stock market is doing, who is on the Supreme Court, how many people were at our church this week, how many likes our last Instagram picture got, how happy the boss is with us, which people find us attractive...)

Vulnerability, dependency on others is not a trait that many Americans value. But we have no promise apart from depending on God.

So when you listen to the speakers, what might you hear?

POINT THREE: SUBMITTING TO GOD’S INSTRUCTION

Verse 26 begins a new section: “It is good to wait quietly for the salvation of the Lord...to submit to His yoke, to eat the dust, to offer one’s cheek to those who smite and insult, for though he causes grief, he will bring salvation because of the abundance of his steadfast love. For he doesn’t willingly afflict anyone.”

This seems like the opposite of what I said earlier about Lamentations and the lament Psalms, etc. Now it seems like it’s telling us to keep our mouths shut and “just take it.” And these verses have been used that way, and can be very bad advice to people who are in situations of grief or abuse (whether in families or churches), being told “This is God’s will; stop whining.”

But remember that this comes in the middle of a whole book of lament! And also that we are told to submit to the yoke **when God has imposed it**, which is a tricky thing to discern. Don’t go around casually telling people that God is disciplining them when you don’t know their situation.

So seek God, try to see if there is some aspect of training in the hard things you are going through. We know that God trains those he loves. Ask a trusted friend or counselor or pastor for help.

If you are experiencing frustration at your circumstances, is it only because they are evil? Or is it because you have been wanting things that have become idols, and God is lovingly trying to pry

you away from them? Have you made an idol out of a clean house or a big church or well-behaved kids or the right opinions or a comfortable job or a schedule that is never interrupted?

POINT FOUR: THE SUFFERING GOD

Lamentations ends with no answer from God. After all of this outpouring of grief, the people ask “Have you forgotten us forever? Have you given up on us?”

And then nothing. Silence. God’s answer is not given. They wait.

Eventually God sent them prophets to speak comfort and instruction to them in their exile, to tell them why these things had happened and about the healing that God was planning for them. But the ultimate answer came with Jesus. In Jesus, God experienced suffering and desolation, lamented a world that was out of joint...lamented more than anyone, because He knew better than anyone how the world was supposed to be. Where Lamentations had told people to submit to the blows of discipline, Jesus, who deserved no wrath or punishment, gave his cheeks to be struck and his face to be beaten and his life to be crushed by wicked men, in order to let us know that God loves us, but also to take on himself the consequences of our sin and the world’s injustice, so that we could inherit everything. He became poor so that we could become wealthy, and was broken so that we could rejoice one day.

This morning, let the communion meal be a tangible reminder of God’s mercy to you, of God’s faithful love. Broken bread, because our God is not distant and unacquainted with suffering; He knows what it’s like to be broken. If you are going through hard times, let it give you strength to go on. This mercy is new this morning. It’s not grace and strength for next year. It’s grace for **today**. God is kind to those who suffer. He gives them everything he has. Himself. This meal helps us along the road to the new heavens and earth where no one will need to lament any more.

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