

## GOOD

### Lamentations 3:19-33

We hear of so many tragic situations in which people's lives are drastically changed. It could be the death of child, a divorce, the loss of a job, or an auto accident that caused serious injuries. We see the pain and suffering that comes from wars that alter the direction of people's lives. The results of weather-related disasters have been in the news and we can remember the hardship associated with the destruction of Japan from the earthquake and tsunami in 2011.

A lot of people struggle with acceptance of such drastic changes. You probably know people who have had losses and they just can't get over it. Their lives rotate around the tragedy and they relive the loss and the grief every day for decades. The major question that needs to be addressed is "how do we get over it?"

The people of Judah who went through the deportations and the destruction of Jerusalem had a lot of grief and bad memories. I would image that in addition to the losses they experienced that many of them were so traumatized that something akin to post traumatic stress syndrome was an issue with most of the people. Even those who were left behind in Judah struggled with the loss and the devastation of their nation. It was hard to forget what had happened when the rubble of the destruction was there for them to see every day. Even Jeremiah was affected by all that had happened. How did he deal with such memories and the ever-present reality of the loss?

#### From Despair to Hope – 3:19-24

<sup>19</sup> Remember my affliction and my wanderings, the wormwood and the gall! <sup>20</sup> My soul continually remembers it and is bowed down within me. <sup>21</sup> But this I call to mind, and therefore I have hope: <sup>22</sup> The steadfast love of the LORD never ceases; his mercies never come to an end; <sup>23</sup> they are new every morning; great is your faithfulness. <sup>24</sup> "The LORD is my portion," says my soul, "therefore I will hope in him." Lamentations 3:19–24 (ESV)

Sometimes it helps to just talk about how you feel. Jeremiah talked about it, he wrote about it, he prayed about it, and he wrote songs about the losses and the grief. It is thought that Jeremiah wrote the five funeral dirges that make up the book of Lamentations immediately following the destruction of Jerusalem in 586 BC but before he was forced to go to Egypt following the assassination of Gedaliah.

The structure of the chapters in Lamentations is most interesting. Chapters 1, 2, and 4 have 22 verses and each verse begins with a succeeding letter of the Hebrew alphabet. Chapter 5 also have 22 verses but it does not follow the alphabet acrostic. Chapter 3 is Jeremiah's response regarding the destruction of the city and judgment of the people which he wrote about in the first two dirges. This third chapter (dirge) also follows the alphabetic acrostic in groups of (an average of) three verses for each letter of the alphabet and has sixty-six verses. The suffering of the people and the destruction of the nation are shown to be a parallel of Deuteronomy 28 in which Moses (900 years earlier) told what would happen to the Israelites if they were not obedient to God's commands.

In verse 19 of chapter three, it is not clear to whom Jeremiah is addressing the words "remember my affliction . . . and bitterness." Maybe he was addressing God and requesting that God not forget him in the midst of his grief. David made such requests to God in several of the Psalms. It is also possible that Jeremiah was addressing himself or the other Jews who were left in Judah who were not able to forget the terrible situation that they had been exposed to during the past couple of years before the city fell to the Babylonians.

These nightmarish memories would be very convincing reminders that the person would

want to avoid whatever contributed to getting into such a mess. As mentioned earlier, Jeremiah was apparently aware of the correlation of what Moses warned the Israelites about and what had actually happened to them because of their disobedience to God's commandments. Based on what we know of the history of the Jews following the Babylonian captivity, they did not ever engage in idol worship following that experience.

Jeremiah commented that he remembered and the result was deep humility rather than bitterness. The verse literally says "my soul was bowed down – which might even suggest humiliation or depression. Many times, people will experience a bitter affliction or tragic loss and the result is that they become bitter in their outlook on life. What would cause one person to be humbled and another to become bitter after experiencing similar tragedies? I guess the answer to this question is wrapped up in the perspective we use to view what has happened. Some might raise the question "why me?" You might hear people say something like "I don't deserve this!" Another typical statement is "life is not fair." Such a mindset will likely result in bitterness.

On the other hand, if we think that we may have brought the tragedy on ourselves, then we would have a different response to such a crisis. Humility could be considered to be a good response; however, it is possible that the tendency to blame ourselves can result in depression rather than humility. What would be the difference that would cause one person to have humility and another to sink into a state of depression? The answer is closely connected to whether we have any basis for hope rather than concluding that the situation is hopeless. The basis for our hope is in knowing that God is for us and that His desire is for our ultimate good.

Here we see Jeremiah taking a balanced approach in dealing with his memories. On the one hand, he remembers the tragedy and on the other he remembered that the character of God is love and that He is always faithful. In a sense, we find some irony in the fact that God is faithful and evidence of that faithfulness was seen in the devastation and destruction that came about. However, it is that same faithfulness that forms the basis for hope so that we rely on Him for our salvation.

The specific character traits attributable to God that will lead to hope are His mercies and compassions. The meanings of these two descriptive words are very close and the Hebrew words are sometime translated both ways. Some Bible translations use the term lovingkindnesses in place of mercies. The basic idea for each is that mercy and compassion have their origin in unconditional love. It looks as if Jeremiah is saying the same thing twice in verse 22 and that is done deliberately in Hebrew poetry. An idea is stated and then is restated in slightly different terms that express the same idea.

We see evidence of some of the difficulties of translating from an ancient language into a more modern language. Most translations render the first part of verse 22 as the Lord's mercies being the reason that we "not consumed" or that we are not struck dead (ended) immediately because of our sins. The second part of this verse speaks of the Lord's compassions not having an end. The New American Standard has opted to use an alternate choice of words in translating the first part of the verse so that it is more parallel with the second part and in the NAS and ESV we then see that the Lord's "mercies do not cease and His compassions have no end." These are likely better renderings of the Hebrew text. The other popular translations still give us a statement of truth regarding the fact that it is only because of God's mercies that judgment on human sins (the wages of sin is death) has been deferred because of God's mercy.

Another characteristic of God's mercies and compassions is seen in the statement that they are new every morning. This could be a reference to God provision of manna when the

Israelites were in the wilderness and they received a fresh supply of food each day. It also speaks of the limitlessness of whatever God provides. We may have found ourselves at the end of our patience or the end of our stamina in dealing with difficult situations or people and thought that we could not continue doing what we had been doing. This usually happens at the end of a long trying day. Then, after a good night's rest, we get back on track and press on and are able to do the right thing. Jeremiah could see that God was always faithful and, even though we continue to be disobedient and we are slow to learn, He has a fresh supply of patience and is willing to give us another chance and this occurs not just day after day but time after time.

### From Waiting to Seeing – 3:25-30

<sup>25</sup> The LORD is good to those who wait for him, to the soul who seeks him. <sup>26</sup> It is good that one should wait quietly for the salvation of the LORD. <sup>27</sup> It is good for a man that he bear the yoke in his youth. <sup>28</sup> Let him sit alone in silence when it is laid on him; <sup>29</sup> let him put his mouth in the dust— there may yet be hope; <sup>30</sup> let him give his cheek to the one who strikes, and let him be filled with insults. Lamentations 3:25–30 (ESV)

Jeremiah realized that when all is said and done, the only thing that will remain is God and, therefore, our inheritance or portion has to be in Him. If we are relying on anything else, then we will find disappointment and failure. A person's portion in life was associated with what he would inherit and pointed to the future. In the same way hope points toward the future and the hope that will not fail is that which is based on our relationship with God which will endure throughout all eternity. We can't know if Jeremiah had an eternal perspective in his declaration that his portion or inheritance or future was in God and His provision based upon His promises which are sure because God is always faithful and true to His word. Jeremiah was likely focused on what would be happening to him and those in his same predicament over the next several decades. He knew enough about God that he realized that God operates on a different timetable than we do and patience would be required. Even Isaiah had written "They who wait upon the Lord will renew their strength." The ability to have patience and to not be anxious is a result of having faith in God and to really trust in His promises. We have confidence in His promises in proportion to how well we know God and His character. In this we see that the patience we should have is not a passive "sitting around and waiting," but is an active patience that seeks the Lord and His will while we are waiting upon Him.

When there is chaos all around and everyone is confused, it is good to step back and get a bigger picture of what is going on. If the nation of Israel had not lost sight of God's ultimate purpose in making a nation of them, then they would not have drifted away into disobedience or idol worship or other bad behaviors. If they had kept in mind that God had a purpose of blessing all mankind through them, then they would not have viewed the discipline and correction that God brought upon them as punitive but as redemptive and as a method to bring about restoration.

The idea that people had of the pagan gods was that they were capricious and enjoyed controlling, manipulating and making people suffer. Such ideas do not apply to Jehovah and if we learn of God's nature and sterling character early in life by bearing the yoke of learning the doctrines, precepts, and commandments, then we can avoid the tendency to murmur and complain when situations arise that are unpleasant or corrective since we realize that God is in control. The correct response is one of humility rather than rebellion and when we are unfairly treated, then we know that God can use the ill treatment for His ultimate purpose and in knowing this, we cannot only give our cheek to the smiter (KJV) but we can (as Jesus taught) turn the other cheek.

### From Rejection to Compassion – 3:31-33

<sup>31</sup> For the Lord will not cast off forever, <sup>32</sup> but, though he cause grief, he will have compassion according to the abundance of his steadfast love; <sup>33</sup> for he does not afflict from his heart or grieve the children of men. Lamentations 3:31–33 (ESV)

Jeremiah realized that it was never God's will to inflict affliction upon people or to see people treated unjustly or cheated by others. When such things happen, they can be used to bring us closer to God and bring us in alignment with His will for He acts out of His compassion and mercy. Just as good earthly parents do not want to have to discipline their children for disobedience, God wants all of us to prosper and be blessed by walking in the ways of righteousness. God's commandments are good and are intended for our benefit. Not everyone agrees with this perspective and those who ignore God's ways and teachings are likely to suffer the consequences.

Many people who are rebellious against the Lord will raise questions such as "If God is all powerful and good, then why do we see so much suffering in the world?" In Deuteronomy 28, God spoke (through Moses) a long list of good things (benefits) for those who obeyed His commandments and an equally long list of bad things (calamities or evils) for those who failed to obey. We could conclude that these things (the good and the evil) will happen in accordance with what God has said, but we have the choice of what we do and the good or evil that we experience is a result of the choices we make. In light of this, Jeremiah asked a rhetorical question in the latter verses of this poem that essentially says that when we suffer because of disobedience, then why do we complain? We already have been told what was going to happen.

There are several lessons that we can learn from this lamentation about how to view and deal with afflictions. Affliction can be seen as temporary when we have the hope of restoration because of God's salvation. Whatever the source of affliction, we need to realize that whatever we are experiencing, it is influenced by God's compassion and mercy. We should be encouraged to know that the problems we have will be used by God to bring us closer to Him.