

RELY ON THE LORD'S LOVE

Lamentations 3:19-39

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.

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 you get over it?"

The people of Judah that 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 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?

Expressing Painful Memories - 3:19-20

¹⁹Remember my affliction and my wandering, the wormwood and bitterness. ²⁰Surely my soul remembers And is bowed down within me. Lamentations 3:19-20 (NASB95)

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 force 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 has 22 verses but it does not follow the alphabetic acrostic. Chapter 3 is Jeremiah's response of the destruction of the city and judgment of the people (contents of chapters 1 and 2) and has 66 verses. It also follows the alphabetic acrostic in groups of three verses for each letter of the alphabet. 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 to not forget the terrible situation that they had been exposed to during the past couple of years before the city fell to the Babylonians.

Why would a person want to remember something this terrible? It would be a very convincing reminder 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 **did** remember and the result was deep humility rather than bitterness. 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 can see 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.

Remembering the Lord’s Faithful Love - 3:21-26

²¹This I recall to my mind, Therefore I have hope. ²²The LORD’s lovingkindnesses indeed never cease, For His compassions never fail. ²³They are new every morning; Great is Your faithfulness. ²⁴“The LORD is my portion,” says my soul, “Therefore I have hope in Him.” ²⁵The LORD is good to those who wait for Him, To the person who seeks Him. ²⁶It is good that he waits silently For the salvation of the LORD. Lamentations 3:21-26 (NASB95)

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 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 we then see that the Lord’s “mercies do not cease and His compassions have no end.” The NAS is likely the better rendering 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. You have probably found yourself at the end of your patience or the end of your stamina in dealing with difficult people or situations and thought that you could not continue doing what you had been doing. This usually happens at the end of a long trying day. Then, after a good night's rest, you get back on track and press on and you 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.

Jeremiah realized that when all is said and done that the only thing that will remain is God and, therefore, our inheritance or portion has to be in Him. If we are counting 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. I'm not sure that Jeremiah had an eternal perspective in his declaration that his portion or inheritance or future was in God and in 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 always fretful and complaining is a result of having faith in God and to really trust in His promises. We know His promises if we seek Him and seek to know 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.

Recognizing the Lord's Purpose - 3:27-36

²⁷ It is good for a man that he should bear The yoke in his youth. ²⁸ Let him sit alone and be silent Since He has laid *it* on him. ²⁹ Let him put his mouth in the dust, Perhaps there is hope. ³⁰ Let him give his cheek to the smiter, Let him be filled with reproach. ³¹ For the Lord will not reject forever, ³² For if He causes grief, Then He will have compassion According to His abundant lovingkindness. ³³ For He does not afflict willingly Or grieve the sons of men. ³⁴ To crush under His feet All the prisoners of the land, ³⁵ To deprive a man of justice In the presence of the Most High, ³⁶ To defraud a man in his lawsuit— Of these things the Lord does not approve. Lamentations 3:27-36 (NASB95)

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 but we can (as Jesus taught) turn the other cheek.

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.

Acknowledging the Lord's Power - 3:37-39

³⁷ Who is there who speaks and it comes to pass, Unless the Lord has commanded it? ³⁸ Is it not from the mouth of the Most High That both good and ill go forth? ³⁹ Why should *any* living mortal, or *any* man, Offer complaint in view of his sins? Lamentations 3:37-39 (NASB95)

Many times we say things that just do not turn out the way we stated it. We may say, its going to rain tomorrow and it may or may happen. The only time we can speak with certainty is when we say something that is in agreement with what God has already said. If the Lord commands or speaks, then whatever he says happens. If we go all the way back to the creation account in Genesis, we read that God said "let there be light and there was light." If we acknowledge God as the Creator then we realize that He is all powerful.

In verse 38 Jeremiah raises an interesting question regarding God's role in "good and evil" as it is rendered in most translations. Some have then concluded that God is both "good" and "evil." This is a serious error resulting from faulty logic. God in His nature and character can be described as "good" but never would "evil" be a characteristic of Who He is. Verse 38 addresses what results from what God says. If I tell you that you will be injured and likely die if you jump without a parachute from an airplane that is at 10,000 feet in the air, then I have declared something bad (evil) will occur but that does not make me evil for having said it. 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, then Jeremiah asked a rhetorical question in the next verse 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.