

**June 28, 2015 – Lamentations 3:22-33 (New Testament: 2 Corinthians 8:1-9, 13-15 Gospel: Mark 5:21-43)**

*We Can Endure Difficulties By God's Mercies Which Are Ever New*

During a difficult time, people sometimes question God and wonder how God could let them go through what they are experiencing. Atheists like point to all the injustice in the world and ask, “If God is loving and all-powerful, how can all this be happening?” They conclude that either there is no God, or that He is not loving, or isn’t all-powerful.

The words we consider from Lamentations 3 reassure us, however, that the Lord is there for us, even in the midst of difficult times. They show us that we can endure difficulties by God’s mercies, which are ever new.

It is important to keep the context of these words in mind. The book of Lamentations was written when Jerusalem was destroyed by King Nebuchadnezer of the Babylonians over 500 years before Jesus was born. While the author of Lamentations does not identify himself, Jewish and Christian traditions agree that the prophet Jeremiah wrote Lamentations when he wept over the destruction that he saw (see 2 Chronicles 35:25). The book of Jeremiah ends with a description of God’s temple being ripped apart, Jerusalem being burned, and the people being taken captive into Babylon (see Jeremiah 52).

In the midst of all this death, destruction and horror (see Lamentations 2:20-21), Jeremiah writes these lovely words: “*Through the LORD's mercies we are not consumed, Because His compassions fail not. They are new every morning; Great is Your faithfulness*” (v. 22-23). I’m not sure what channel Jeremiah was watching, but to the outside observer it certainly looked like the people had been consumed. So how could Jeremiah then write these words?

It wasn’t because Jeremiah had lived an easy life. Quite the opposite; Jeremiah’s life had been very difficult. God called him when he was very young to bring words of judgment against Judah. The kings, priests and false prophets in Jerusalem did not listen to his words of warning, but rather they attacked him, threatened him, and imprisoned him. And it seemed that Jeremiah’s difficult life as God’s prophet accomplished nothing – Jerusalem was still destroyed and the people taken into exile. All this was not lost on Jeremiah. Just a few verses before our reading he wrote: “*I have become the ridicule of all my people—Their taunting song all the day. He [that is God] has filled me with bitterness, He has made me drink wormwood. He has also broken my teeth with gravel, And covered me with ashes. You have moved my soul far from peace; I have forgotten prosperity. And I said, ‘My strength and my hope have perished from the LORD.’”* (Lamentations 3:14-18). And yet he goes on to write here: “*Through the LORD's mercies we are not consumed, Because His compassions fail not. They are new every morning; Great is Your faithfulness.*”

What a contrast! How could Jeremiah find such hope when things were so hopeless? As we read, it wasn’t because he didn’t see what was happening – he did, and even correctly identified that the difficulties he experienced came from the Lord. But that is also where he found hope, as he explains in the next verse in our text (v. 24): “*‘The LORD is my portion,’ says my soul, ‘Therefore I hope in Him.’”*

When God lead the people of Israel out of slavery in Egypt into the promised land, He had them divide the land by casting lots (see Numbers 26:55). Each tribe was given a portion of the land, except for one: the tribe of Levi – the descendants of Aaron – who were to serve as priests. The Lord said to Aaron, “*You shall have no inheritance in their land, neither shall you have any portion among them. I am your portion and your inheritance among the people of Israel*” (Numbers

18:20). Instead of receiving an earthly inheritance, the Lord was their “portion and inheritance”. They were to depend solely on what God would provide for them.

Here Jeremiah says that he has hope in God because He is Jeremiah’s portion. Jeremiah had hope even though everything around him had been destroyed, because he had something far better: an eternal inheritance from God.

The same is true for us. Jesus Christ is the Mediator of a new covenant – a new testament – brought about by His death on the cross in our place to redeem us from our transgressions under the old covenant, so that we now have the promise of an eternal inheritance from God (Hebrews 9:15). Through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead you have “*an inheritance incorruptible and undefiled and that does not fade away, reserved in heaven for you*” (1 Peter 1:3-4).

And in this is our hope: that God is our portion. If we cling to the things of this world, we will lose hope when these things are taken away. But Jesus said, “*Do not lay up for yourselves treasures on earth, where moth and rust destroy and where thieves break in and steal; but lay up for yourselves treasures in heaven, where neither moth nor rust destroys and where thieves do not break in and steal. For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also*” (Matthew 6:19-21). We lay up treasure in heaven through faith in Jesus Christ and in His sacrifice for our sins. The things we see are temporary, but the things which are not seen are eternal (2 Corinthians 4:18). That is why Jesus encourages us to look to the eternal, to make the Lord our portion. What God will give us because of Jesus Christ is far better than what we have here and it will never fade away. By remembering that the Lord is our portion, we have hope even when the world around seems to be falling apart.

Jeremiah gives us some important reminders here. In verse 25 he says, “*The LORD is good to those who wait for Him, To the soul who seeks Him.*” This is important to remember when we face difficulties, because it may not seem at that time that the Lord is being good. We often have the opinion that if the Lord is good, then our life should be easy. But that isn’t what God promises. He doesn’t promise us an easy life here on earth. Rather He promises us an eternal salvation in heaven where life will be easy. There will be no more death, sorrow, or pain (Revelation 21:4).

“*The LORD is good to those who wait for Him.*” We live in an age of instant gratification. We don’t like to wait. But sometimes that is what God calls us to do, to wait for Him. We can either loose heart, or use our time of waiting as an opportunity to grow in our faith and trust in God. We have God’s sure promise that He is good to those who wait on Him. Our waiting will not be in vain. As King David wrote in Psalm 25:3: “*Indeed, none who wait for you shall be put to shame.*” Although we may find it difficult to be patient, “*The LORD is good to those who wait for Him.*”

Another thing that Jeremiah says here is that “*it is good that one should hope and wait quietly for the salvation of the Lord*” (v. 26). Isn’t that hard to do? It can be challenging to wait quietly when things aren’t going our way. It is so easy to complain. It may seem that Jeremiah himself did not follow his own advice here. He wrote the book of Lamentations after all, in which he cried out to God. But there is a difference between Jeremiah’s laments and the complaints that we often raise. That difference is their focus. When we complain, we usually focus on our situation and, if we consider God at all, on what God isn’t doing. Jeremiah, however, came to God with his frustration and sorrow over what he was experiencing, but he also turned to God in trust and hope that God would provide the answer. God here encourages us to hope and wait quietly so we, with our complaints, will not miss what God is doing in the midst of our difficulties. We are to wait quietly so that we remember the salvation of the Lord. Sitting alone and keeping silent, rather than running to complain to someone, (v. 28), can help us remember and focus on God’s promises.

Jeremiah says that *“It is good for a man to bear the yoke in his youth.”* It is easier to learn patience when one is younger, when one has more strength to bear the yoke of sufferings. This can help us to be patient later in life and wait on the Lord’s salvation in the midst of trials.

Verse 29 may sound a little strange to our ears: *“Let him put his mouth in the dust—There may yet be hope.”* Here God refers to the Eastern custom in those days of bowing down in reference, even to the point of putting your face to the ground so that your mouth is in the dust (see for example Ruth 2:10, 1 Samuel 20:41, 2 Samuel 14:22). This shows the attitude we should have before God; we should have an attitude of humility and reverence. And a mouth that is in the dust is not one that can easily complain.

We should be humble before God because we do not deserve His mercy and salvation. We all have turned away from Him time and again and failed to keep His commands. But *“He has not dealt with us according to our sins, Nor punished us according to our iniquities”* (Psalm 103:10). Instead God punished His Son Jesus Christ in our place. Therefore we do have hope for God’s undeserved mercies, which are new every morning.

Sometimes, however, God may lay on us a yoke of suffering (v. 28). He may cause us grief (v. 32). He may let us be struck by others and be full of reproach (v. 30). At times our suffering can be of our own doing, as the “natural consequence”, if you will, of our own sin. Other times it is the result of living in a world stained by sin and the result of the sins of others. But because Jesus Christ took the punishment we deserve for our sins by suffering and dying on the cross, God does not punish us for our sins. The chastisement for our sins was laid upon Jesus (Isaiah 53:5). Rather, we are to view the difficulties we face as loving discipline from our heavenly Father (Hebrews 12:3-11). It may be painful at the time, but it is for our benefit.

Jeremiah here gives us these encouraging words: *“the Lord will not cast off forever. Though He causes grief, Yet He will show compassion According to the multitude of His mercies. For He does not afflict willingly, Nor grieve the children of men”* (v. 31-33).

That last verse, verse 33, is so important. There are some who view God as a heavenly taskmaster watching over us, waiting for us to step out of line. When we do, He hits us with some punishment. Others ask how a loving God could ever send someone to eternal punishment in hell. But God tells us here that *“He does not afflict willingly”* – He does not willingly “grieve the children of men.” God told the prophet Ezekiel: *“Say to them: ‘As I live,’ says the Lord God, ‘I have no pleasure in the death of the wicked, but that the wicked turn from his way and live. Turn, turn from your evil ways! For why should you die, O house of Israel?’”*

God does not want anyone to perish, but He will let those who continue to reject Him and His salvation have their wish and spend eternity separated from Him. He treats us who wait and hope in Him as His beloved children. Earthly parents do not have the goal of disciplining their children – they don’t hope that their children will do something wrong so that they can punish them. Rather they discipline their children out of love to help them learn and grow. In the same way God *“does not afflict willingly”* – literally “from His heart.” That is not His goal, but He lets us endure difficulties for our benefit, so that we will grow in our faith and trust in Him and make Him our portion, rather than the temporary things of this world.

So when you face difficulties in this life, remember these words of Jeremiah. *“Through the Lord’s mercies we are not consumed, Because His compassions fail not. They are new every morning; Great is [His] faithfulness.”*

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