

Before starting today, I just wanted to quickly say, a few people have asked why I've been talking like the Old Testament prophet Jeremiah wrote Lamentations. I don't want to get too bogged down in this, so if you want the long version then ask me afterwards, but for now I'll acknowledge: no, the book of Lamentations isn't specifically attributed to any author. However, there is a strong Jewish tradition, including attribution in the Greek Old Testament that make it a good likelihood. There's also some literary similarities between the book of Jeremiah and Lamentations that support the idea. There's more to that but we'll leave it there for now.

I want to open today by asking a bit of a raw question: what are the worst personal struggles you've faced? I'm not asking you to share now, but consider: what are some of the significant struggles you've faced in your life?

We all have them. If you haven't had big struggles then be warned, they are coming.

I remember quite vividly the day a few years ago that I found out my grandfather, Papa we called him, had died. I loved him dearly, and I struggled with that pain.

Where do you turn on days like that? On days where the suffering seems too terrible to bear, how do you manage? What do you say?

Today is our second week in the book of Lamentations; a book in which the author is struggling through the destruction of the chosen city Jerusalem and the unimaginable suffering of the remnant there. And today, as we enter chapter 3, things get personal.

You may remember that the book opened in chapter one with Jeremiah struggling with the tension that God is on the one hand the city's only possible hope and comforter, and on the other hand is the just, wrathful judge of the city. Really that's the tension and question of the whole book: who is God to us? Our judge or our comforter?

In the second chapter, Jeremiah nosedived into the possibility that God was there to deliver final, wrathful judgement on his people, in keeping with their disobedience and his promises. And 33 times in 22 verses he attributed the destruction of the city directly to God. Where we left off last week, Jeremiah seemed overwhelmed in the dark certainty that God had chosen to destroy the people altogether.

(pause)

But in today's chapter, he begins to grapple specifically with the wrath God has poured out on him personally. And it's in the midst of pressing into his own suffering that Jeremiah begins to see hope, and accordingly it's in this chapter that we find hope for us as well.

And the first chunk of it, from verse 1-21, opens with these words:

“I am the man who has seen affliction under the rod of his wrath”. In many ways this part of the chapter echoes the words of chapter 2, the major difference being that it is now personalised.

He uses words like these, from verse 16:

Lam. 3:16 He has made my teeth grind on gravel,
and made me cower in ashes;

17 my soul is bereft of peace;
I have forgotten what happiness is;

18 so I say, “My endurance has perished;
so has my hope from the LORD.”

Now there’s a couple of facts that probably intensified this personal struggle for Jeremiah. Jeremiah was God’s prophet. Chosen by God from youth to deliver His word to the people. Though like us all he was a sinner, he wasn’t like the sinful nation around him that was being punished for its unrepentant, continual sin. He had been obediently following God’s direction for many years. And yet still he receives the same wrath as the city around him.

And what’s more, God had promised Jeremiah that he would be there to deliver him. Right back in Jeremiah chapter 1:8, 19, when God called him to be a prophet, God twice promised Jeremiah “I am with you ... to deliver you”.

How could this line up with what Jeremiah is experiencing here? How can God be his deliverer, when Jeremiah is so downtrodden that he can say “my hope from the Lord has perished”?

Well, this is where we come to verse 21.

Read it with me:

*“But this I call to mind,
and therefore I have hope:*

Before we get to the hope, stop there. The fact that he says that he’s calling something to mind tells us something: nothing’s changed in his circumstances, he still sits in a destroyed

city, by all appearances downtrodden and oppressed. But there is a truth in which he finds hope. So what does he call to mind in the middle of his struggles and pain:

“the steadfast love of the Lord never ceases;

He reminds himself of the character of God. He is the God of steadfast love.

The Hebrew word there is *hesed*. Different translations make it out as “lovingkindness” or “loyal kindness”. And what it carries is more than just a general sense of God as loving. It denotes his loyal love to his covenant people. So it seems Jeremiah is saying: “God is the God who loves his people. Therefore I have hope.” Continuing on:

His mercies never come to an end;

They are new every morning

Great is your faithfulness

Again, he reminds himself of the character of God. God is a God of mercy, and he provides mercy for every day.

Now that seems to stand in contrast to the reality Jeremiah is experiencing. How can he say that God gives mercy every day when he is experiencing such wrath? In what sense does God give mercy in the midst of disaster?

Well, continue on again with me:

“The Lord is my portion,” says my soul,

“therefore I will hope in him.”

This is the key verse. The beating heart of hope in this book of struggle is here.

“The Lord is my portion,” says my soul,

“therefore I will hope in him.”

This is important. Hope comes, for the author and for us, in one realisation: “The Lord is my portion.”

Jeremiah realises, drives himself to the realisation: I have the Lord and I cannot lose Him. So you can take everything else. The city can be destroyed, because I have the Lord.

And Jeremiah spends the rest of this chapter dwelling on this truth and speaking it to himself, preaching the gospel of God's good character to himself.

Now, you might hear me saying that and think: he's not preaching the gospel. He doesn't mention the cross, or the empty tomb, or even Jesus. How could he! It's the old testament!

Well, no he doesn't, but the gospel at its core is God. The glorious identity of God. And that's why the life, death and resurrection of Jesus are good news, because they open the way back to God, and they perfectly reveal the identity of God, and his love and his justice.

But in the Old Testament, the gospel existed in a not fully-realised form: in faith that God is good and faithful to his people. And so Jeremiah is preaching this gospel, this good news to himself.

In verses 25-42, in the middle of his suffering, Jeremiah continues to dwell on the gospel truth of how good and mighty God is. He speaks the gospel in his suffering.

1. reflecting on his faithfulness to those who are trusting in Him, *"the Lord is good to those who wait for him, to the soul who seeks him"* he says
2. reflecting on his compassion and covenantal love to his people, *"the Lord will not cast off forever"* he writes *"but, though he cause grief, he will have compassion according to the abundance of his steadfast love"*,
3. and reflecting on his sovereignty, *"Is it not from the mouth of the Most High that good and bad come?"* he says.
4. and he sees hope that repentance, throwing himself on the mercy of God, may yet bring salvation. And that the hope of repentance could stretch to the people as well.

And then in the last third of this chapter he speaks the gospel into the suffering. He dives back into the struggle, but it's different now. Now that he sees that God is his unshakable hope, he returns to the pain he's experienced and speaks that truth into it. Applying the truth he knows to the situation he sees.

He still struggles. He is clearly still agonised by what has happened and is happening, but now his pain is mixed with solid hope.

And we see a few significant changes in how he speaks. Read a few verses with me and see if you can pick the difference:

In verse 45 he says: "you have made us scum and garbage among the peoples". Now clearly that's very painful still, but do you see the difference between this and the struggles he's been going through so far?

Maybe this is a good time to say: please read this book whilst we're walking through it together as a church. And when you read it you'll see a change here.

He's started speaking with God.

Compare it to, say, verse 2 where he said "he has driven and brought me into darkness without any light." Do you see the difference?

At the start of this chapter, and indeed for the whole book so far, Jeremiah has spoken about God.

He has lamented God's action in destroying the city.

He has lamented God's action in bringing about his own suffering as well.

But in all these he has been speaking about God.

Now he turns. And he speaks to God. Notice the pronouns. He moves from "he has, he has, he has" to "you have, you have, you have".

And that's significant, because once the author sees that he has real, solid hope in God, and only in God, he has no choice but to take his struggle to God in prayer.

And so he returns to his pain, again he dwells on the struggle, but now trusting in God. Jeremiah speaks of his situation as though he's been thrown into a pit, covered in rocks and the water is rising.

And from the darkest moment with least hope he found hope from God.

In verse 55 he writes:

Lam. 3:55 "I called on your name, O LORD,

from the depths of the pit;

56 you heard my plea, 'Do not close

your ear to my cry for help!'

57 You came near when I called on you;

you said, 'Do not fear!'

And he concludes the chapter on the thought that God has redeemed him, even though his suffering still remains, and God will punish those who have oppressed him. (and for us that is an eternal truth rather than an immediate one, and one which is always tempered by the fact that we know we deserve the same wrath).

But do you see it? Do you see what he's doing here? He's taking the gospel and speaking it into his own situation. He's pitting it against his suffering. He's willing to press into the suffering rather than avoid it because he trusts that the Lord is bigger than his suffering.

So there are two powerful truths here for us:

Firstly, and this is vital so if you walk out today with one thing let it be this: True hope is the person of God.

Like the author of laments, our desire and satisfaction should be that He would be our portion. When our hope, our desire is anywhere other than the person of God then we lose the central, gospel truth of our faith. We despair, we fall apart, because nothing else truly satisfies and anything else can be lost, but God truly satisfies and if he has saved you He will not lose you.

If your hope is a comfortable or healthy life, then you'll find that it eludes you, and when that comfort is challenged, as it will be, then you'll lose hope.

Our hope is not popularity, or fame, or fancy toys and clothes. Those things offer so much satisfaction and yet isn't our experience that they never deliver in a meaningful sense?

Our hope is not a spouse, or a family. Once again, they can be challenged and lost, and they were not made to give us full satisfaction.

God is our hope. And because God is our hope we never need to lose hope. Ever.

Let me put this against a truth that many Christians believe, and that I believe is more harmful to our faith and our life than we think.

Our hope is not the place of heaven. Our hope is God.

Let me explain what I mean: many of us seem to live our lives with this perspective that my hope is that one day I am going to somewhere better, to heaven. Now that's true, if you are in Christ then you will be in a better place one day, but still it isn't the centre of our hope, and if it is the centre of our hope then it often distorts how we live now.

To put it in the context of Lamentations, there is a world of difference between "heaven is my portion, therefore I will hope in it" and "the Lord is my portion, therefore I will hope in him".

Let me just quickly detail a few of the key differences for you, because I realise this might sound a bit like splitting hairs. It's not.

Perhaps the key one is, if my hope is heaven then my hope is just in the future, and I am passively waiting for it. But if my hope is the Lord, then my hope is in the future *and* in the now. It's like Paul says in 1 Corinthians 13: now I see as in a mirror dimly, then face to face. Now I know in part, then I shall know fully, even as I have been fully known.

Here's what that difference could look like:

If God is our hope and desire, then we will live out our lives with the certainty that in Christ he is yours.

If heaven is your hope, then you will have Christ to get to it.

If God is your hope and your desire you will speak the gospel of the goodness of your God because who doesn't talk about what they love and desire?

if heaven is your hope then you may well speak the good news of entry into heaven,
but God will only be the tool for getting there.

If God is your hope and your desire you will fight sin and take personal transformation seriously. Sin is, right from the garden of Eden, the thing that separates people from God. And transformation for the Christian is transformation into the likeness of Christ. Becoming like what we love, and becoming closer to the one we love.

If heaven is your hope, then you may still take the fight with sin seriously, but your best reason to do so is gone. If your faith is just: "I have trusted Jesus, so I'm going to heaven" then the amount of sin in your life is somewhat irrelevant.
Personal transformation will take a back seat.

If God is your hope and your desire, then like we see in Lamentations, you will be able to face terrible tragedies, and you will struggle with them, but you will not lose hope because the one you hope in cannot be taken away. And what's more you will still communicate hope to others in the same circumstances, because as their hopes are stripped away, yours will remain.

In contrast,

If heaven is your hope, then when sufferings come you may well hole up and wait for the end, instead of carrying the message of current and future hope to the world around you.

Second, because God is our hope we can, we should be able to face our struggles and our pain. We should be able to lament.

I want to push us not to take part in the denial of pain that characterises our culture. We, Australia, tend to go for this stoic approach to life, where we pretend we're OK and deny uncomfortable truths like our own struggles and mortality.

But Lamentations, in many regards sets an example for us, especially in this third chapter. Like the author, we need to trust the goodness of God enough to face into our pain, bring it to God and speak the good gospel we have into it. We need to trust God enough to lament.

How often is our inability to lament, and struggle through the pain an issue of unbelief? We quietly don't want to face the pain because we're afraid it might win?

We have the gospel which the New Testament says is the power of God for salvation to everyone who believes. Do we believe it enough to struggle?

I think sometimes we believe that Godly people don't struggle. That if you're Christian enough, if you have enough faith, you'll remain happy all of the time. And so we act like the Godly thing to do is to deny the problem, and maybe we even look down on people who visibly struggle. That's just not Biblical.

Job, David and Jeremiah, amongst others, all struggled and lamented, and they're not condemned for it.

In fact their struggles are recorded as the inspired word of God.

The best example for us is Jesus. We read in the Bible that on the night he was betrayed, when he knew that the weight of God's wrath was going to fall on Him, Jesus struggled and lamented. "my soul is sorrowful, even to death" he said to his disciples. He sweat like drops of blood, and he prayed "My Father, if it's possible, let this cup pass from me; Nevertheless, not as I will but as you will" (Matthew 26, Luke 22).

Certainly, we're not called to be constantly depressed. That's because the Bible tells us that we have an undefeatable hope in the person of Christ.

But if we really believe that then the Biblical answer is not to run from the struggle, but to engage it, to let ourselves encounter the suffering and doubt, to speak the good news of our God into that situation and trust Him to win out in the end, even if it is in ways we don't understand.

I mentioned at the start the day that I lost my Papa, my grandfather. There's more to say there. In early 2015, when we were visiting family in South Australia, he became suddenly and unexpectedly unwell. He seemed to come and go a fair bit. He'd seem to get better for a while, then he'd get worse. After a while the doctors at the local country hospital started to take it seriously, and eventually he was diagnosed with Leukaemia.

When it came time for us to head off to make the trip back to Brisbane for the year, we stopped in at the hospital one more time. He said he thought he had years left.

Less than a fortnight later, on February 16th, I had a text from my mum: “Papa died peacefully at 1:45 this morning.”

He’d never been a Christian, and although we’ll never know what happened in his heart after he became unconscious and was still hearing the gospel from family, the likelihood is that he never came to a saving faith.

With tears and pain I had to struggle through that. I didn’t just have to deal with him being gone, but with the thought that my Papa may have died an unrepentant sinner, who would face the just consequences of that.

I had to cling to God and his goodness and throw myself on this reality: God is my portion and my only hope. And I know his love toward me because his very Son died on the cross to save me.

I found that God, through his goodness in the gospel, reinforced my faith and comforted me in ways I can’t fully explain.

Now I’ve only been here a month or so, but I know that many of you are faced and have faced harder struggles, more personal struggles than me. But I tell you with certainty God is bigger than our struggles, and he is faithful to those who hope in Him.

So let’s engage our struggles with the gospel. Dwell in the truth of who God is and what he has done.

Home Group Questions

Please take the opportunity again to encourage your people to read through this book for themselves. I've been encouraged to hear that some are even giving it a few reads, just to get their heads around it. It's a short book, but we're looking at it in large chunks, that we can't necessarily read through in an evening/service.

Introduction:

Lamentations 3 is the third poem of the book. Like 1, 2 and 4 it is an acrostic of the Hebrew alphabet, but unlike them it has 3 verses to each letter, making it three times the length of the others. In a book so structured we have to recognise that this is very intentional: Jeremiah wants to emphasise the point of this chapter as the central one of the book.

And the point of the chapter is this: there is solid hope in the person and identity of God, even when all else is lost.

General Questions:

1. Spend some time recalling what we learned from chapters 1-2. **What were the major emphases? What is Jeremiah struggling with and where did he end off in the second chapter (poem)?**
2. Now read the first 3-4 verses of chapter 3. **What's changed? What remains the same?**
3. Now read 3:21-24. This, particularly 24, is the turning point of Lamentations, the key to understanding the heart of the book. And the heart of the book is hope. **So, what exactly does the prophet put his hope in?**
4. Verse 17-18 says that the author has 'forgotten what happiness is' (the ESV footnote says that this could be "I have forgotten what *good* is"), 'so I say "my endurance has perished; so has my hope from the Lord"'. **How does this contrast with what he says in 3:21-24? What, for the author, is true happiness/good?**
5. The author then spends the remainder of the chapter in 2 exercises: first he dwells on the truth the gospel (good news) of God's character and its relevance for humanity (25-42) and then returns to his own situation, again diving into the suffering, but now speaking *to* God, praying through it and speaking the gospel of God's goodness into it.
6. How can we take Jeremiah's activity in this chapter as an example? Where might we need to qualify that (i.e. when he reassures himself with the punishment of his enemies)?

Application Questions:

1. What are the struggles that you're facing right now?
2. In what ways do you speak the gospel into them? In what ways do you remind yourself that "the Lord is your portion" and therefore you have hope?
3. We will always try to comfort ourselves with something in suffering. We will always look somewhere for hope, in suffering and in general life. What things do you jump to for comfort and hope? How do they let you down? Perhaps a more confronting question is: in what ways do you run to a false gospel when you struggle? (We all do at times! We are all still being transformed)

4. Why is it better to run to God? Why is He better than our other hopes?
5. Here we've majored on the need to speak the gospel to yourself in struggles. Equally, we are called to offer each other the gospel in struggles (see Ephesians 4:15. "the truth" in this verse refers to the gospel, the truth that is in Jesus; Ephesians 4:21). To do this, clearly we need to be able to see each other's struggles. So:
 - a. How can your group foster an atmosphere where people can be open with their struggles?
 - b. How can your group be intentional in holding out gospel hope and practical gospel centred love to each other?
 - c. How can your group be intentional in avoiding holding out false hopes and fleeting gospels to each other?