

Having Hope

Facing Covenant Disaster

By Dr. D. Ralph Davis

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Bible Text: Lamentations 3
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First Presbyterian Church
1324 Marion St
Columbia, SC 29201

Website: www.firstprescolumbia.org
Online Sermons: www.sermonaudio.com/fpccolumbia

Our text this evening is Lamentations 3 and just a comment, you may note it has 66 verses. It's not really much longer than the two previous chapters, it's just that every line in chapter 3 is designated with a verse number and it's really a triple acrostic. We mentioned before that chapters 1 and 2 follow an alphabetical scheme, the first letter of the Hebrew alphabet begins verse 1, the second letter begins verse 2, etc. etc. through the 22 letters. In chapter 3, it's a triple acrostic in that the first letter of the Hebrew alphabet begins verses 1, 2 and 3, the second letter begins 4, 5 and 6 and so on. So it's a little bit more ornate structure, you might say, or pattern. But let's read some of Lamentations 3 and get it in front of us again.

1 I am the man who has seen affliction under the rod of his fury; 2 he has driven and brought me into darkness without any light; 3 surely against me he turns his hand again and again all day long. 4 He has worn out my flesh and my skin; he has shattered my bones; 5 he has built and surrounded me with poison and hardship; 6 he has made me sit in darkness like the dead of long ago. 7 He has walled me in and I cannot get out; he has made my fetters heavy; 8 even when I cry out and call for help, he shuts out my prayer; 9 he has walled up my ways with hewn stones; he has twisted my paths. 10 He is a bear lying in wait for me, a lion in hiding; 11 he has turned aside my ways and torn me to pieces; he has made me desolate; 12 he has drawn his bow and set me as the target for his arrows. 13 He has brought into my insides the shafts of his quiver; 14 I have become something to laugh for all my people, the theme of their music all day long. 15 He has satiated me with bitter things; he has made me drink my fill of wormwood. 16 So he crushed my teeth grind on gravel, he has bent me down into ashes; 17 and my soul has rejected peace; I have forgotten what happiness is; 18 so I say, "My endurance has perished; and my hope from the Yahweh." 19 Remember my affliction and my homelessness, the wormwood and the poison! 20 My soul surely remembers them and sinks down within me. 21 This I bring to mind, therefore I have hope: 22 The un failing love of Yahweh, that's why we're not finished off, for his compassions have not reached their limit; 23 they are new morning by morning; great is your faithfulness. 24 My soul says Yahweh is my

portion, that's why I will hope in him." 25 Yahweh is good to those waiting for him, to the soul that seeks him. 26 It is good to be waiting silently for the salvation of Yahweh. 27 It is good for a man that he carry a yoke in his youth. 28 Let him sit alone and be silent for he has imposed it upon him; 29 let him put his mouth in the dust-- perhaps there is yet hope; 30 let him give his jaw to the one who strikes him, let him have more than enough of this grace. 31 For the Lord will not reject forever, 32 but, if he cause grief, he shall show compassion in his massive unfailing love; 33 for it is not from his heart that he afflicts or grieves the sons of men.

We'll stop our reading after verse 33 there.

You've probably been behind someone in traffic and the turn signal of that vehicle is on continuously and you begin to divine that the turn signal signifies nothing. They have signaled maybe to change lanes or whatever and forgotten that they turned the turn signal on and so it just goes continually blinking and when it doesn't reflect the conscious intention and it's kind of useless. And our creeds and our confessions of faith can be something like that if we're not careful. We may slide through them without sufficient thought or conscious intention. Here in Lamentations 3:23B there is another confession of faith much briefer than many but it's easy to take it too lightly as well, "Great is your faithfulness." But why focus on these words in the last of verse 23? Well, because these words are sort of near or at the climactic turning point of Lamentations 3. You sense that as you read through it and there is, I think, a significant change in grammar in the last of verse 23 because throughout chapter 3, the writer has been speaking or the speaker has been speaking in terms of "he, he, he," third person or about Yahweh and so on. But for a brief moment in the last of verse 23, he changes to the second person, "Great is your faithfulness." It's as if at the last line of verse 23 he turns and looks at Yahweh and addresses him directly. He speaks to Yahweh just two Hebrew words which come across as four for us, "Great is your faithfulness." That's his confession of faith.

Now, of course, you may be familiar with this text primarily through the well-loved hymn, Trinity Hymnal #32 and so on, was written by Thomas Chisholm who, I understand, was born in a log cabin in Kentucky. He wrote the hymn in 1925. Chisholm was converted at the age of 27; at the age of 36, he entered the ministry; after a year in the ministry, he had to remit his ministry because of poor health. He lived in New Jersey for a number of years as a life insurance agent and at some point he wrote this hymn, well, wrote it fairly early apparently but it may not have been an extraordinary life to some people's way of thinking but here was a man who wanted to record the unfailing faithfulness of a covenant keeping God. Then in 1954, George Beverly Shea, the Canadian born singer in the Billy Graham Crusades, introduced this hymn in the Crusade, the Graham Crusade in Great Britain and it became an immediate favorite. But we want to look at its biblical surroundings and so we pay some attention, don't we, to Lamentations 3 because in space and time we can't cover all of the chapter so we wanted to get this climactic point and deal with it.

Now several matters about Lamentations 3. As I said earlier, it's a triple acrostic, working through the alphabet from A to T, you might say for the Hebrews, but that's in place here. And the notice that there is an individual perspective here in chapter 3. It begins, "I am the man who has seen affliction." This suffering is not that Judah was going through was not merely mass suffering, it was also personal and individual suffering. It affects individuals as well. It's just not something for the group. It's intensely individual and we ask ourselves perhaps is this man who is speaking here the prophet Jeremiah. I think it's quite likely that it is but I can't prove it and I don't want to take 10 minutes talking about authorship so we move on simply to say that here is the individual believer who endured the ruin and wrecking of Jerusalem who is now speaking. This suffering is not just something general and across the board but it's very specific and individual as well, intensely so.

Now, you look at chapter 3 of Lamentations, it breaks down in basically three broad blocks of material. You can call it devastation, verses 1 to 18; meditation, verses 19 to 39; and supplication, verses 40 to 66. Devastation, meditation, supplication. Now that last chunk, verses 40 to 66, is a prayer and it's the longest prayer that we've seen in Lamentations so far. They've been very brief and so on, but here you have almost a third of the chapter in terms of a prayer. And if you look at verses 40 and following, you can break up that prayer into three chunks: there is anguish, 42 to 54; and then there is turning point, 55 to 57; and then there is assurance, 58 to 66. You can follow that out. We cannot explicate or deal with that tonight.

So the writer came to have hope because he could say, "Great is your faithfulness." Let's look at that confession of faith. The first thing I want you to notice is there's a context that illumines this confession. There is a context that illumines this confession and it's basically verses 1 to 18 for our purposes. Oh, I know you can pick up the historical context by going back to 2 Kings 25 and you can get the historical report of what happened in Jerusalem in 587 BC and so on, but you can also get it from verses 1 to 18 here in what the speaker says, his complaint in verses 1 to 18. Notice some of the things: he's under the rod of God's fury, verse 1. He says that when he cries out for help, verse 8, he shuts out my prayer. You say, "Well, pray." Well, God shuts my prayer out. I can't get through. It's as if verse 9, he's taken huge building blocks of stone and plunked them down in my path so I can't make any progress. He's like a bear, verses 10 and following, or a lion who rips me out of the road, drags me off in the bushes and mauls me and so on. He's like an archer who uses me for target practice, verse 12. So he says when he gets to verse 17, "I have forgotten what happiness is."

That's post July 587 BC Jerusalem and Judah, so that when you see that in verses 1 to 18 and then get to the confession of faith in the last of verse 23, "Great is your faithfulness," you know that those words were not written in a wall-to-wall carpeted, air-conditioned library on a bright spring day with the sun shining and the barometer rising. No, they were set in the rubble and wreck and ruin of a battered city and countryside. Nebuchadnezzar and company had ravaged and besieged, I think they besieged Jerusalem for something like 18 months, and they ravaged the countryside. So our man here, verse 1 and following, is going, walking through, crunching through the rubble and he looks at

the gutted house of Yahweh and he sees the lifeless forms of priests lying on the floor and it's this man who says, "Great is your faithfulness." Do you see how context helps you to appreciate an expression of faith?

Back in November 24, 1951, there appeared on the cover of the "Saturday Evening Post," now maybe some of you were never familiar with that. It was a very popular magazine at that time. It was about this wide and about this high and sometimes Norman Rockwell, the American artist, would have a cover for the "Saturday Evening Post," and on November 24, 1951, to coincide with the Thanksgiving holiday, there was this Rockwell portrait or picture, reproduction, that was called "Saying Grace." Really, it was his most popular one, you might say. But there was an elderly widowed grandmother with her straw hat on sitting at a table, really a corner of a table in a train station cafe, kind of a greasy spoon, and she has her head bowed and her hands folded along with her grandson who is at the other corner right next to her, and they are giving thanks over their lunch. They're probably catching a train to go somewhere for Thanksgiving and there they are. There are two other fellows there at that square table looking at them with interest. There is another fellow standing and staring down at them. There is another fellow at an adjacent table who has his cigar and his cup of coffee and a copy of the "New York Times" who is taking them in and so on. Everybody is looking and they are saying grace.

Now, that portrait or reproduction of that cost Rockwell a bit. He made at least three trips to the train station in Troy, I think it was Troy, New York, in order to get a sense of what it was like and so on. He had some outfit in New York City deliver a whole batch of furniture like what would have been in the train station to his studio so that he could put it up and use it for background and so on. And he had his, well, it took many months to do this and he became so disgusted one night, he took the canvas and threw it out in the snow. He retrieved it the next morning and he had his photographer pose for one of the people and his son posing for another one. He took an eight year old, third grader, from a local elementary school and used him to pose for the grandson and May Walker posed for the grandmother. Sadly, she died before the cover was published and so on. But you don't think about something like there just appears on the cover of the "Saturday Evening Post," but that was the fruit and the frustration of any number of months with all kinds of concern for authenticity and all of that, when you know the context and the background, sometimes it helps you appreciate and illuminate something and that's the way it is with faith.

I recall a woman, she was a middle-aged widow in one of our congregations asked me to do a funeral. It was her 26 year old daughter who had been killed in an accident and we were there the day of the funeral and so on and she came by and she said, she was talking to me about, apparently she had been talking to some of her friends and mourners who had gathered with her and so on, but apparently was just a little bit edgy about certain things. She said to me, "We're talking about a plan here." That doesn't strike you as, I suppose, as indicating the sovereignty of God or something, but it doesn't strike you necessarily as very moving etc. or profound, perhaps, but when you realize that she had apparently had some of her well-wishers and friends talking so much to her about the tragedy and the sadness of all this, that she became just a little bit aggravated, I think. She

said, "We're talking about a plan here!" That's what she said to me. What did she mean by it? She meant, "The Lord really is sovereign, even in this. He wasn't asleep three nights ago, you know, when this happened."

You don't think too much about that but when you see, we're talking about a plan here. Did she mean that all she was was just sort of a theological guru? No, no, no. Would she grieve and would she mourn and would she weep, would she go on with months and months of grieving because that girl was also really her best friend? Yes, she would though it's not like this is some, not like she never had any more grief but in the middle of it, we're talking about a plan here. When you see the context, it kind of lights up the faith.

What about that Chinese Christian woman who about 1937 or 1938 said to some China inland missionaries, "But I will not let go of Jesus Christ." Well, that's very commendable to be able to say that but when you understand that what she said to those missionaries in total was, she was facing the rampages of the Japanese who were heartless and cruel as they were coming through China and so on, and she said, "My house has been burned twice and nothing is left. Four of six relatives there are dead, including my brother who was branded with a hot iron. My daughter-in-law was shot before my eyes and my only grandson has died from exposure but I will not let go of Jesus Christ." When you see it in that context, it puts a different spin on it. It puts a new depth into it and that's the way it is here, the context helps you to appreciate. When you see what he went through and what he was a part of in verses 1 to 18, and then he comes to say, "And I still have hope," and he says, "Great is your faithfulness," in the face of all that.

Now, what does this mean for us? Does it mean we should all have a fine one-liner to use so we can sound like heroes at a critical time? No, no, no. We're not going there. But doesn't it tell us that there are various times when we must confess our faith and not merely from the pews, although that is good, but amid the crud and the yuck and the muck and the rubble and the corpses and the mess of life. And in order to do that, then faith must be a supernatural gift, mustn't it? And yet for all that, don't we need to also plead with God that he will enable us to confess his faithfulness even when the evil day comes? There is a context that illumines this confession.

Now, secondly, there are certain convictions that support this confession and those convictions are primarily in verses 22 and the first part of verse 23. There are certain convictions that support this confession. Now let's look back at verse 18 briefly. Notice you have a paradox here. In verse 18, he says, "My endurance has perished. My hope from Yahweh has perished." That's verse 18, then in verse 21 he says, "But I have hope." So he says, "My hope has perished," verse 18, but now there's something, "I bring this," he says, "to mind." Verse 21, "and therefore I have hope." Hope has perished, now I have hope because what? "This I bring to mind." What is the "this"? The "this" points forward. I don't know what translation you're following but it ought to have a colon punctuation mark at the end of verse 21, "this I bring to mind therefore I have hope," and the colon there points forward to verses 22 and 23. The "this" that he brings to mind are the convictions that are in verses 22 and 23, that is, "the unfailing love of Yahweh, that's why we're not finished off, for his compassions have not reached their limit," and so on. These

convictions explain why hope can be there and why the last of verse 23, "Great is your faithfulness," can be said.

Now you notice there is what we might call a negative conviction first. Notice verse 22, "the unfailing love of Yahweh, that's why we're not finished off." You know, he says, "I have hope because of what Yahweh has not done." I don't know if you've ever thought of that but we need to think of that more than we do. Here he says, "I have hope because of what Yahweh has not done. It's because of the unfailing love of Yahweh that we're not finished off." Actually, that word "unfailing love," that's the word "chesed," is in the plural here, the unfailing loves of Yahweh. It could be the acts of unfailing love. Or it could be maybe a plural that means and refers to the abundance and the immensity of his unfailing love, but it's the unfailing love of Yahweh. That's why we're not finished off. And why is that? "For his compassions have not reached their limit." Though even when Yahweh has scourged his people in raw and brutal and just judgment, his compassions have not reached their limit.

And then this is the positive conviction in verse 23a, "his compassions are new morning by morning." Now before you begin to get all warm and devotional over that phrase, remember what mornings he's talking about. These are not fun mornings. These are 587 BC mornings. These are mornings that are dreary and hard and dark and aching. Mornings in which most of them are going to begin trudging the 900 mile trip to Babylon as exiles. "Your compassions are new morning by morning, even in those kinds of mornings." That's the positive conviction.

What's he saying in verse 22 and 23a? He's saying the Gospel of Exodus 34:6 and 7 is still true. "Yahweh, Yahweh, a God merciful and gracious, slow to anger, rich in unfailing love and fidelity," and so on. That's what he's saying. Those are the convictions that support this confession so that he can say, "Great is your faithfulness," but let's get a little skeptical. Let's dig down beneath it a little bit. Did the writer really believe these convictions? Is there any actual evidence that he did? Well, I think there's some very implicit or indirect evidence and that's in verse 19. I think he really believed these convictions because of the way he prayed.

Look at verse 19, "Remember my affliction and homelessness," etc. What's going on there? If you have the New International Version, it says, "I remember my affliction," and that's a mistranslation. The verb there is an imperative second singular form, "Remember." What's he doing? He's addressing Yahweh. This is prayer. He's not talking about if he remembers, he's asking Yahweh to remember. He's praying there. It's like Job in Job 7:7, you know, Job was answering Eliphaz and so on, and sometimes he does this in the book of Job, he'll answer some of his friends and so on and then he just gets tired of that and he turns away and in Job 7:7 he says, "Remember," and he's addressing, that's the same thing, he's addressing God. He turns away from them and he goes to God and that's what he's doing here. "Remember my affliction and homelessness," and so on.

Do you catch the drift here? You have verses 1 to 18, right, and you have the repeated "he, he, he," talking about Yahweh and describing the experience of the wrath and anger

of God in the 587 BC situation. Do you remember what we talked about, how he said in verse 8, "He shouts my prayer. He's a bear and a lion that tears me up. He's an archer that uses me for target practice." And in verse 13 he says, "The shafts of his arrows sink down into my guts. I've forgotten what happiness is." Then the climax of that despair in verse 18, "My hope from Yahweh has perished." And then I can't explain it, what does he do then in verse 19? He prays for Yahweh to remember and act in mercy. Then in verse 21 he says he does have a basis for hope.

Do you see what he's doing? There should be a great gulf fixed between verses 18 and 19. And remember this, it's not just general suffering in general, this is suffering for sin. This is fully deserved and no hope, that he sees apparently no hope of God being gracious. And then what does he do in verse 19 and following? He turns to the God whom he thinks cannot be gracious and he's convinced that he will in some way be gracious anyway. He assumes that the enemy who has slain him is yet the only friend to whom he can go and that's what leads him to these convictions. If he prays like that, he must believe verses 22 and 23a.

So I wonder if you have these convictions about God? The unfailing love of Yahweh? That's why we're not finished off, where his compassions have not reached their limit. They are new morning by morning. Do you have those convictions about God even in your sins? Your life may be scarred and marred and defaced and twisted by your own rebellion and your own sinful stupidity and you may be fully aware of it but how do you know if you hold these convictions? You pray. When perish, verse 18, when perish seems to be the last word, you simply find yourself turning to the God who should have written you off, verse 19, and you do so because by the instinct of faith, you are convinced that the unfailing love of Yahweh explains why you are not finished off for his compassions have not reached their limit. Even in your case, there are convictions, certain convictions that support this confession so that you can say, "Great is your faithfulness."

Now, I want to push you on one other matter, thirdly, there is a challenge that flows from this confession where he gets to the point where he says, "Great is your faithfulness." Now there is a challenge that flows from this confession, verses 25 to 33. It's one thing to confess 23b, "Great is your faithfulness," but you must live out this confession of faith by ongoing faith in Yahweh's faithfulness. So the climax was reached from despair to fresh faith, but after he said, verse 23b, no twanger went kerplunk, there was no plop, plop, fizz, fizz, oh what a relief it is. No, faith is not Alka Seltzer. God will bring relief eventually to these believers but it has not yet arrived and it won't for another 50 to 70 years. How then is the believer to go on living and continually to believe that Yahweh's faithfulness is great?

Well, I think he gives you the proper attitude and I can only give it to you in summary here but he seems to say that the proper attitude we need to have is one element: a waiting for his time. A waiting for his time, verses 25 to 27, and then a submission to his discipline, verses 28 to 30. Okay? Now, this is what looks like the long haul of faith. You come to confess his faithfulness and this is how you have to live it out, and what is it that

sustains us in this waiting, verses 25 to 27, and in this submitting, verses 28 to 30? Well, simply the same or similar assurances as he mentioned of the convictions before.

Do you see what he does? He says, now, you need to go on waiting for Yahweh, 25 to 27; you must submit to his discipline, 28 to 30; 31 to 33, "for, for, for." There is a little reasoning going on there, isn't it? Why can you or should you wait? Why do you submit to his discipline in the midst of this? "For the Lord will not reject forever, for if he causes grief, he shall show compassion in line with his massive unveiling love, for it's not from his heart that he afflicts or grieves the sons of men." Those considerations make you able to go on waiting and submitting in the meantime. It seems to be what he's saying there. All of those "for's" in verses 31 to 33, perhaps you can take verse 33 as maybe the most basic, "for it's not from his heart that he afflicts or grieves the sons of men." I know what that phrase "from his heart" means, it's translated in many of our versions as "willingly, he does not willingly afflict or grieve the sons of men," but I rather prefer the literal there, "it's not from his heart that he afflicts or grieves the sons of men." It's as if he says, "Oh, yes, you endure this suffering, you endure this chastizement, you will go through exile and banishment with the rest of your people, but though Yahweh is putting you through this, his heart's not really in it." That's not from his heart. It takes you behind the surface of circumstances and shows you backstage. It's almost as if it's like Calper's phrase in his hymn 128, "Behind his frowning providence, he hides a smiling face." It's not from his heart.

I think this is difficult. Human analogies can distort this and I don't want to do this, but I think sometimes human analogies can help a bit. There was a time during the war between the states when Edwin Stanton, who was Lincoln's Secretary of War, was working one night in his office and one of his clerks apparently was around there as well. The clerk found Stanton in his office standing there and a mother, wife and children of a soldier who had been condemned to be shot as a deserter, were all on their knees before Stanton pleading for the life of their loved one. The mother for her son, the wife for her husband, the children for their father, and they were making their emotion-laden case. And he listened standing there in cold silence and at the end of their heart-breaking sobs and pleas, he answered briefly that the man must die. That crushed little family left and Mr. Stanton turned apparently unmoved and walked into his private room. The clerk thought Stanton was a brutal tyrant the way he behaved and then he discovered Stanton apparently, I don't know, looking through a crack in the doors, I don't know. He discovered Stanton in a few moments leaning over a desk, his face buried in his hands, his frame shaking with sobs, saying with a low moan of anguish, "God, help me to do my duty! God, help me to do my duty!"

Sometimes what appears on the surface isn't nearly the whole story and this tells me I have a reason for hope here. Not that I have details. I don't have a time table for relief. I don't know the method of his help. But he's shown me his heart. Maybe you may think this is too sentimental but maybe this is a time when what Calvin says can help us when he says something like, "Sometimes the Lord in his word stoops down and babbles to us in language we can understand." It's not from his heart that he afflicts or grieves the sons of men, as if to say, "Well, he does it but his heart's not in it."

Of course, you have all the more reason to confess verse 23b today, "Great is your faithfulness," for another has suffered nothing less than the judgment of God in our place, and in that moment, you remember what he said. Various people point out that Jesus did not call God Father at that point. Well, no he didn't. He was quoting Psalm 22, but he said, "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?" I can't plumb into the depths of that statement but do you catch something of that "my"? That even in his God-forsakenness, he was still "my God." It's as if he is saying, "Even in this forsakenness, great is your faithfulness," isn't he? Else why would he claim him as "my God" even now?

Let us pray.

O our God, how great is your glory, how great is your truth, how great is your justice, how great is your power but we would join and say, "Also great is your faithfulness," and make us able to go on saying that through whatever you take us. In Jesus' name. Amen.