

Sermon 8, Hope at the Center: The Pain of Judgment, Pt. 3, Lamentations 3

Proposition: At the center of Lamentations lies the message that God’s mercy endures and He does not willingly afflict. But that message must grapple with the fierce pain of God’s judgment.

- I. The Identity of the Mighty Man, vv. 1, 52-58
- II. The History of the Mighty Man, vv. 1-58
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Introduction

Dearly beloved congregation of our Lord Jesus Christ, we come this morning to one of my very favorite passages of Scripture. I already knew coming into this that Lamentations 3 was glorious, and having studied the passage I am far more convinced of that truth. You are going to hear a tremendous gospel message this morning from the lips of this *gibbor*, this “mighty man” who begins his message with the statement “I am” and who was put into a grave and sealed in with a stone. Yes, that is all right here in the text of Lamentations 3. Does it sound like anyone you know of? Brothers and sisters, it’s more than fair to say that the narrator of Lamentations 3 is a type of our Lord Jesus Christ, leading us through his own misery and pain during judgment, but also reminding us of God’s character and sharing with us his own personal testimony of how he endured tremendous affliction in the past and how God saved him out of it. I would also point out that God does speak here in Lamentations 3, the only place in the whole book where the narrator quotes Him. He only says two words (in English), but they are enough: “Fear not.”

Brothers and sisters, we are going to see the mighty man’s odyssey of hope here at the center of Lamentations, a hope founded on the rolling away of the stone and deliverance out of the grave. And it will be glorious.

I. The Identity of the Mighty Man, vv. 1, 52-58

I just mentioned most of this, but I want you to look at it in a little more detail. I tell my English students all the time that in order to understand any poem, it is crucial that you know the identity of the speaker. Who is talking here? In the previous poems we had the voice of the narrator and

the voice of Zion, personified as a daughter. Clearly, then, this is not Zion speaking, for it is not the daughter. Instead, this speaker calls himself a man. Indeed, he does not simply call himself a “man,” for which the standard Hebrew words are *adam* or *ish*; he calls himself a mighty man, a strongman, a *gibbor* or warrior. This word refers to a man in his prime, the one who is as strong as he’s going to get and is therefore best equipped to cope with the trials of life. We know, then, that it is not Zion speaking; it would seem probable that the narrator we’ve heard in the previous two chapters is finally stepping forward and identifying himself to us.

So we know that he is a man. We also see that he begins his statement with “I am,” a very different beginning from that found in any of the other chapters of Lamentations. Why does he say this? Well, the genre in the Ancient Near East most likely to begin with “I am” is statements by a king, inscriptions or things like that where he brags about all his accomplishments. Thus, the genre cue here signals that we may be reading something by a king figure. Add to that the Biblical resonances of “I am,” and we are looking at quite a man in this text.

I want to skip ahead now to v. 53, where the man says that they put an end to his life in the pit and cast a stone on him. Now, most translations take “stone” as a collective noun and so translate plural “stones.” But I think we are more than justified in seeing something analogous to going into a grave and having a stone rolled in front of the door here. Yes, the picture is a bit different in that the mighty man has been thrown into a cistern and the water has risen to the point where it covered his head, and meanwhile, the top was sealed with a big stone that he couldn’t move. But here, as in the rest of the Bible, the water is not just literal, but is also a metaphor for the chaos waters, the primal realm of chaos and death. To have the water close over your head is like descending into hell. But the man’s story doesn’t end there; it proceeds to a resurrection brought about God Himself when He heard the mighty man’s voice calling from the lowest pit.

What’s the point? Just this: In Lamentations 3 we are listening to the testimony of a Christ figure. The parallels are clear. This mighty man unhesitatingly asserts rule over the church, telling her what to do while suffering. But he is also someone who has suffered greatly himself, and someone whose personal testimony is one of rescue by God out of the profound depths of suffering, despair, and death itself. Am I saying that the Son of the God is the narrator here? Yes and no. The narrator is like Christ, and because the narrator’s words are Scripture, they are the very words of God, speaking in the person of His Son.

So do you want to find Christ in Lamentations? Then listen to the words of this Christ figure, whose testimony is the testimony of our Lord. Are you suffering under God’s judgment? Then listen and learn and imitate. His salvation can yet become yours.

II. The History of the Mighty Man, vv. 1-58

Most of the chapter is taken up with the mighty man telling his story. The first two-thirds or so orbit around the theme of hope — first hope lost, then hope regained by knowledge of the lovingkindness of the LORD. Then, in the final part of the chapter, the mighty man tells his testimony again, this time with even more dark details.

A. The Mighty Man's Odyssey of Hope, vv. 1-39

We pick it up in v. 1, where we see that yes, this is a mighty man who says "I am" — but what is he? He is a man of sorrows, a man who has seen affliction under the rod of His wrath. Notice how God is not named until v. 18; it's though He is "He-who-must-not-be-named."

1. He Loses Hope, vv. 1-18

This man of sorrows, this afflicted man, tells us his story. Once again, the story is the same story we've already seen in the previous two chapters. It's a story in which virtually every sentence has God as the subject, doing some horrific and violent action to the narrator. Thus, we have God driving this man into darkness, turning His hand against the man, breaking his bones, walling him up and putting him into the forgotten grave like those who have been dead a long time. (Those recently dead are remembered and mourned; those long dead are simply forgotten, and the world moves on.) God has been to this sufferer like a lion and bear; He has shot him with arrows that pierced his kidneys. He's broken the guy's teeth on gravel and laid him in ashes. He's taken the man's soul and removed it far away from peace and well-being.

Brothers and sisters, you may have lost your jobs, your health, even your money, home, and family. But I daresay that no one here can tell a tale of woe to match this one. And the upshot of it is v.18: "My strength is gone. My hope has perished. Anything that I ever thought God might do for me, I now see He's not going to do."

Do you feel this man's pain? As you look at the absolute disaster this pandemic has been, are you ready to chronicle all the ways in which God has hurt you and ruined your life? If you aren't today, you will be soon enough. We are all going to have moments, or lifetimes, of saying "My strength and my hope have perished from the LORD."

2. He Regains Memory, vv. 19-20

Yet even at this dark moment, the mighty man begins to remember. And memory leads to the blossoming of hope. Of course, vv. 1-18 were all about memory, as he recounted what God had done to him. He remembered his affliction and wandering. But as he turns his mind to remembering, something else emerges. Even as his memory of what's happened to him bows down his soul, he also brings to mind something else.

3. His Memory Stirs Hope, vv. 21-39

That memory, brothers and sisters, is the memory of who God is. And I want to urge you to realize that the mighty man's concept of God's nature and character is perfectly accurate. No matter what you're going through, this is the God you serve, this is the God you trust in, and this is the God who can deliver you from all of those problems and difficulties and pains and bereavements. If you can call to mind the character of God, then you can begin to have hope, even if your life story to this point sounds just like vv. 1-18.

What does this mighty man remember about the character of God? The first thing he remembers is the *hesed*, the covenant love or steadfast love or lovingkindness of the LORD. This is God's most prominent attribute; it is a specific manifestation of His identity as love that we've looked at recently in our sermons on 1 John.

Are you familiar with this aspect of God's reliability, of His delight in keeping covenant and mercy for those who fear Him? His lovingkindness never comes to an end. Why not? Because it is renewed every morning. There is always more loving kindness coming out of His inexhaustible fountain of love and good deeds and faithfulness to all of His promises. We will see in ch. 4 that God's wrath comes to an end — but His loving kindness never does. It is new every morning.

Do you believe that? Have you seen God's kindness played out repeatedly in your life? How can the sufferer remember that this is what God is like when his life experience is everything we read in the first 18 verses of this chapter? And yet he does. This is what we call faith, and it is this faith that produces hope. The God of new morning mercies is full of faithfulness. We sing this verse as a hymn, and rightly too, because it celebrates the character of our God. Though we are faithless, He remains faithful, for He cannot deny Himself.

Moved by this memory of God's character as the one who acts for those who wait for him, the mighty man chooses God as his portion. This refers to saying "I choose God. If I can have Him, I don't care about the rest." If you aren't a Christian, then you choose something in this world as your portion. At best, you'll choose some good moral quality as your portion and say "If I can have kindness or tolerance, then I don't care about the rest." That doesn't really work, of course. What we need is to have God as our portion.

If you choose Him as your portion, then you are saying "I waive the right to a problem-free life. I waive the right to health, wealth, food, good digestion, full bank accounts, plenty of vacations, and retirement at 62 or even 72." You have already said that you don't want those other things so long as you can have God. Imagine a little kid saying "When the pinata opens, I want the nerds. That's the only candy I want." The kid gathers up all the nerds, then starts fighting with his sister because she has a lollipop. Outraged, you say, "Kid, what's wrong with you? You said you only wanted the nerds! Why are you now trying to help yourself to the dum-dums too?" Well, brothers and sisters, if you are a Christian, then you have already formally confessed that God is enough. You don't need the health. You don't need the national peace and prosperity. You don't need the 3-story house in a nice neighborhood. You don't need politicians you can respect. You have everything you need already because you have the Almighty. Ultimately, of course, these are the words of Jesus Christ. He chose the Father as His portion, and He wanted nothing else. You have chosen Christ as your portion; if you really get to know Him, you will see beyond all doubt that you have chosen the best portion of all.

So if God is your portion, you can choose to hope. Specifically, you can hope in Him. That means a hope that's driven by His reality, a hope that's predicated on His faithfulness, a hope that exists only because He exists and always keeps His promises. Do you hope in Him? Remember, faith looks primarily to the one promising while hope looks to the thing promised. To hope is to know that God will keep His promise of giving you a better future, dwelling in His house forever. The specific content of this mighty man's hope is the goodness of the LORD, shown to the one who waits for Him and seeks Him. This language occurs over and over in the

Bible; what does it mean? It means being content with Him acting in His own good time. I trust that Jesus will return, and until that happens, I'm waiting on God. When He's ready for His Son to return, His Son will return — and that means that you and I just have to wait until He's ready. Waiting on God, in other words, is not an exercise beneficial in itself. Rather, it's the right response to His seeming delay in keeping His promises.

What about seeking God? That is not the same thing as waiting on Him. Rather, to seek God is to approach Him through prayer, to look for Him in His word, to attempt to commune with Him through the sacraments. To seek God is simply to initiate contact (as we understand doing that; obviously He seeks us first!) and build a relationship with Him. That is of positive value all the time; that will happen right through eternity.

So when you are doubting God's goodness because of tough life circumstances, what should you do? You should wait for God to change those circumstances and fulfill His promises. And you should move heaven and earth to get in touch with Him. That is the summary of the correct response to suffering, according to this mighty man. But then he proceeds to offer advice to fellow sufferers, filling in further details. In addition to the goodness of the LORD, this man lists two other good things: waiting silently and bearing the yoke of suffering. Now, we can ask, how on earth can you recommend waiting silently when you have spoken two and half chapters of exquisite poetry and are about to speak two and a half more? The answer is that the silence here does not mean "Never opening your mouth" but rather "not grumbling and fussing about your life." To sit in silence under God's judgment doesn't mean that you can't mourn and lament and even talk about your problems. But it does mean that you can't say "Poor me" and have a big pity party in which you complain and whine and moan and groan. I think you all know the difference. I can say "I had a lot of work I had to do this week, and it was hard." That's a fair statement, assuming it's true. But if I say "Lincoln freed the slaves, all but one," then I am not just saying my life is hard. I've started grumbling. The difference, ultimately, is one of attitude. To grumble is to vent your bad attitude; to mourn as Lamentations does is to acknowledge the pain and sorrow God has inflicted but to do so with a good attitude, one that recognizes that God is in the right and that we need to submit to Him.

So are you ready to bear the yoke in your youth? The mighty man is not telling us that all the devastation Lamentations chronicles is a good thing. Rather, he's saying that if you have to bear the yoke of suffering, it's better to do it while you're young and strong enough to endure it. He's also saying, I think, that if you can learn discipline when you're young, that's not so painful as learning it when you're old. This yoke is additionally pictured as hearing rebuke and as being slapped in the face. Most of you have probably gotten a rebuke that felt like a slap in the face at one time or another. In other words, the discipline of learning to hope while suffering is not an easy one. Learning to accept discipline, particularly when it comes in the form of shame and rejection, is totally unpleasant. It's downright miserable. Yet — and this is the center of the book, and as we know the Hebrews put the most central element right at the center — God will not reject forever because of who He is. He does not willingly afflict or grieve us. He does afflict and

grieve us, but His heart is not in it! He does it out of a sense of duty, we would say. He does it because we need it, not because it gratifies Him.

Brothers and sisters, do you believe the central truth of the book of Lamentations? After all the suffering that this book has chronicled, this mighty man expresses his hard-won faith in terms of God's motive behind all the suffering. He's not a sadist; it's not that He is detached and uncaring. Rather, the suffering He inflicts is strange to Him, and what His heart really loves is mercy. And so, that confession of faith takes shape in confessing that God does not approve of evil and yet that God ordains evil. The two perspectives are set side-by-side in the final two stanzas of the mighty man's confession. Good and evil come forth from the mouth of the most High. But He does not look with approval on the unjust behavior of wicked men. Not at all.

B. The Mighty Man's Act of Hope Frustrated, vv. 40-51

Brothers and sisters, the mighty man has talked himself into hope by this point in the chapter. He is ready to take whatever the Lord can throw at him. He knows who his God is that gives him hope. And in this confidence, he begins to exhort the people and lead them in prayer.

1. Corporate Prayer of Confession, vv. 40-47

This corporate prayer of confession details the people's sin and God's response to it. One commentator talked about how this is the darkest moment in the book, because it says "We repented and God did not forgive us." But that's not what the text says. It says "We have sinned and you did not forgive us." God has not forgiven; true enough! And yet why has He not forgiven? Well, apparently because they haven't asked! They have told God all about their suffering, but in that suffering they forgot to say "Please forgive us; we are sorry for our sins." Has this ever happened to you? Have you been in full cry, documenting your miseries, when someone says to you "But wait — didn't you bring that on yourself?" Have you ever realized that you've complained for an hour rather than praying about your problem for a single minute?

2. Prayer Interrupted by Grief, vv. 48-51

Yet this prayer of confession gets interrupted as the mighty man's grief overwhelms him once again. He has the right theology. He has the right approach. The character of God was his support in the pain of his overwhelming loss. And yet. He knows all the right answers, but he breaks down.

Brothers and sisters, *it's okay to mourn*. That's the point here. Orthodox theology is not an anti-tear device. It can comfort your heart and bring hope when you remember what God is like. But the grief and pain are real too, and you are absolutely allowed to feel them. In fact, you must feel them. Lamentations are going to hurt, and all the truth in the world is not going to change that. Brothers and sisters, that was the error of Job's friends. They wanted to tell him that truth would keep pain away. It wasn't true. The truth brought pain to Job, and it will bring pain to us as we look at the Covid disaster of 2020. You must seek God — but you will sometimes break down sobbing, overwhelmed by the reality of everything you've lost. That's okay. It's normal. We can say that it happened even to this Christ figure who's narrating the chapter. And yet, though he struggles with grief, it doesn't have the last word.

C. The Mighty Man's Testimony Retold, vv. 52-58

Instead, he circles back around to his testimony. We've already seen reason to see the parallels between this and the passion of our Savior. Notice how he was an innocent sufferer, silenced in the pit and walled in with a stone. Just like our Lord, who was cut off out of the land of the living, so this mighty man was cut off. But God heard his cry, drew near, and spoke the only divine words in the book: "Do not fear."

Brothers and sisters, this is the most common command in the Bible. God tells us this all the time. Why? Because we are overly given to fear, and to fearing the wrong things! Do not fear, brothers and sisters. Even when you are in trouble, even when you are facing disaster, you have no need to fear. God redeems life. He saved this mighty man. He saved the Lord Jesus Christ. And He will save you.

III. The Prayer of the Mighty Man, vv. 59-66

The chapter ends, like 1, 2, and 4, with a plea for God to take vengeance on His adversaries. Why does the mighty man pray like this, as Jerusalem does? Because, brothers and sisters, as you will understand if you go through intense and horrific suffering, there is a real element of hatred and enmity against those who did these horrific things to you. The wrong way to handle this pain is to lash out and attack your enemies. The right way to handle it is to give it over God. Brothers and sisters, in a nice safe middle-class suburban environment, where you are a comfortable part of the dominant group, you think it's child's play to have no enemies and to never wish harm on anyone. But in an ugly, unsafe, poverty-stricken environment where you are an uncomfortable part of a powerless group, it's only too easy to have enemies and to have the destruction of the oppressors as your heart's dearest wish. Lamentations models for us the right way to pray about that. God will vindicate His people. He will pursue in anger and destroy the malefactors from under His heavens. That means you and I don't have to. We are freed to forgive, freed to break the cycle of violence, because God has taken over and will set things right.

That was the confidence of the mighty man, based on his own personal experience. That testimony of hope is for God's people of old, and it's for God's people today.

Why do you have hope? Because of God's general character of lovingkindness, expressed in the particular action of delivering this mighty man from the pit of death and the mightier action of delivering our Lord Jesus Christ from the pit of death.

Are you excited about that? Yes, it doesn't change your pain, certainly not immediately. But it does relativize it, put it in context, and put an expiration date on it. So brothers and sisters, listen to this mighty man's testimony and live in hope. And when you do, even the worst pain can't win. Amen.