

THE WORDS AND TEARS OF JEREMIAH
(5) THE FAITHFULNESS OF GOD

Lamentations 3:21-24

Jeffrey S. Carlson

September 23, 2018

PROLOGUE

Our Scripture reading is taken from the Book of Lamentations. The Book itself does not list the author but the oldest and best supported tradition attributes it to Jeremiah, who was also known as “the weeping prophet” (cf. 2 Chronicles 35:25). The lamentations of this book are songs of sorrow which lament the sacking of Jerusalem by the Babylonians under King Nebuchadnezzar in 587 BC. But in the midst of sorrow and ruin Jeremiah remembers the faithfulness of God and says:

SCRIPTURE

But this I call to mind, and therefore I have hope: {22} The steadfast love of the LORD never ceases, his mercies never come to an end; {23} they are new every morning; great is your faithfulness. {24} "The LORD is my portion," says my soul, "therefore I will hope in him" (Lamentations 3:21-24 NRSV).

INTRODUCTION

Jeremiah was a prophet active in Jerusalem in the years before the city’s fall. He was especially aware of how far God's people were from the kind of people God wanted them to be. Over a period of years, Jeremiah tried to persuade a succession of kings that God wanted obedience and not clever political solutions to Judah's problems. His warnings fell on deaf ears. In 587 B.C., Babylon made final conquest of Judah. Jerusalem was sacked, the temple was razed, and most of the people were carried off into exile.

The Book of Lamentations preserves the mourning over the fall of Jerusalem. It tells us of the horrible destruction and loss of life and starvation through siege. But in the middle of the book there is an astonishing affirmation of faith. Jeremiah had been dwelling on his woes and the woes of his people, but then he lifted his eyes to the Lord, and remembered that his hope, and the hope of his people, was in the faithfulness of God.

Our hope is also in the faithfulness of God. The word that is translated as “faithfulness” in verse 23 has to do with firmness and reliability. God is our rock. He is reliable. We can count on God.

1. WE CAN COUNT ON GOD’S PRESENCE

Jeremiah says:

“The steadfast love of the LORD never ceases” (22a).

“Steadfast love” is a translation of the Hebrew word *hesed*. *Hesed* is the kind of love which shows itself in loyalty and commitment. We sometimes refer to this as “covenant love.” Long ago, the Scottish preacher George Matheson defined it as the kind of love that never, ever lets go.¹

This means we can count on God’s presence. He will never leave or abandon his people. He is with us wherever we go. He has made an unconditional commitment to stand by us. The Apostle Paul tells us that even:

“If we are faithless, he remains faithful – for he cannot deny himself” (2 Tim 2:13).

But suffering and sorrow, especially on the scale that Jeremiah experienced, can make it difficult to believe God is with us. George Barna, the public opinion pollster, was commissioned to complete a survey of adults a few years back in which he was to ask, “If you could ask God one question and you knew he would answer, what would you ask?” The number one question that people wanted to ask was “Why is there pain and suffering in the world?”

There are no easy answers, of course. And no one has the last word. But there are clues.

The Scriptures make it clear that God is not the author of evil and suffering in the world. Jeremiah has declared, “[God] does not willingly afflict or grieve anyone” (Lam 3:33 NRSV), an assertion I have clung to more than once in my life.

The Scriptures also indicate that suffering is largely a symptom of living in a fallen and broken world and that this world is fallen and broken because evil has come into the world. In a sense, suffering is a kind of complex judgment on the world. But this raises another question. Why would God allow evil in the first place? Or to put it another way, could God have made a good world where the possibility of evil did not exist? I do not know the answer, but the question is near the top of my list of things I want to ask about when I get to the Pearly Gates!

In the meantime, as Christians, we look to Jesus for insight. In the suffering of Jesus we see suffering in a whole new light. Jesus never promised anyone a trouble-free life. He spoke plainly about affliction, hardship even persecution. He also spoke plainly about forgiveness, friendship with God and eternal life.

Christian philosopher Peter Kreeft in an interview with Lee Strobel said:

¹George Matheson penned the great hymn, “O Love That Wilt Not Let Me Go” in 1882.

"In the end, God has only given us partial explanations. Maybe that's because he saw that a better explanation wouldn't have been good for us. I don't know why. As a philosopher, I'm obviously curious. Humanly, I wish he had given us more information. But he knew Jesus was more than an explanation. He's what we really need. If your friend is sick and dying, the most important thing he wants is not an explanation; he wants you to sit with him. He's terrified of being alone more than anything else. So God has not left us alone. And for that I love him."

And so do I.

Matthew concludes his Gospel with a most wonderful promise from Jesus about his presence with us but sometimes this is misunderstood. A certain nun refused to fly but instead took a bus or train if she had to travel some distance. One day a friend chided her, "Why sister! Are you afraid to fly? The Lord promises to be with you always! Do you doubt it?" "Oh, I don't doubt the promise of the Lord," protested the nun, "but he did say, 'Low, I am with you always. So I'm staying on the ground!'"

The truth is, whether we are on the ground or in the air, God is with us. His steadfast love never ceases.

2. WE CAN COUNT ON GOD'S COMPASSION

Jeremiah says:

"[God's] mercies never come to an end; they are new every morning" (22b, 23a).

We can count on God's compassion. He is faithful to sympathize when we have burdens and problems. He is never too busy to listen or too tired to help. No experience in life is too difficult to be brought before God.

God's mercies are not only endless, they are also ageless – new each day. I know that some of you, when you get up in the morning check the local news, either online or in the newspaper, and go directly to the obituaries to see if your name is listed and if you do not find it you say a prayer of thanks! So if nothing else, the very fact of waking up to a new day is in itself a renewal of God's mercy.

But something more intimate is presented in this passage. The Hebrew word for mercy here is *rahamim* and it refers to a mother's womb (derived from *rehem* meaning "womb"). God is like a mother who cannot forget her own children.

You see, the ground of your hope is not in you remembering God, but in God remembering *you*. It is not a matter of you laying hold of God's love (as if that were even

possible) but God's love laying hold of you. Glory be to God! Even the *remembrance* of this promise is not left to our memories, for *we* might forget, but our Lord cannot forget. He says:

Can a woman forget her nursing child, or show no compassion for the child of her womb? Even these may forget, yet I will not forget you. See, I have inscribed you on the palms of my hands"(Isaiah 49:15-16 NRSV).

If *hesed* means God will never leave us, *rahamim* means he will never forget us. We can count on his presence. We can count on his compassion.

3. WE CAN COUNT ON GOD'S ABUNDANCE

We can also count on his abundance.

Jeremiah exclaims to God:

"Great is your faithfulness" (23b).²

The word "great" (*rab*) refers to something that is abundant in quantity and quality. God's supply of faithfulness is vast and rich. No stingy misanthrope is he.

I remember going for the first time and without an appointment to a certain auto repair shop. I knew I was in trouble when I saw a poster on a cabinet near the counter that said:

I can only please one person a day.
Today is not your day.
Tomorrow doesn't look good either.

Fortunately, this is not the way God treats us. If you trust in God, today is your day. Tomorrow is your day. There will never be a day when God is reluctant to help you, begrudging to care for you, or loathe to be with you. Every day is your day.

This does not mean that every day will go the way we want it to go. This is due, in part, to the fact we do not always want what is good for us. But God always wants what is good for us and therein lies the conflict. So how does God get us to pay attention to what he wants?

C. S. Lewis writes:

²Thomas Obediah Chisholm was inspired by the words of Jeremiah to write the well known hymn, "Great Is Thy Faithfulness" in 1923.

“God whispers to us in our pleasures, speaks in our conscience, but shouts in our pains. It is his megaphone to rouse a deaf world.”

God often uses the circumstances of life to help bring about a good end. Jonathan Droll, commenting on the self-help movement said, “I got a [kit] on ‘How to Handle Disappointment.’ I took it home and the box was empty.” Experience is a great teacher and God knows this.

It is God’s intent to claim us as his own and then shape us into the people he intended us to be. The result is a life-long process of becoming more like Christ in our daily living. And when I say become like Christ I am not referring to his outward appearance as though we all had to go around in tunics and sandals and speak Aramaic. I am referring to his humanity, his character and his harmonious relationship with God the Father.

This is a difficult process and one that human beings in their natural state would just as soon avoid. But even though we may want to give up, God never gives up. Perhaps this is why the greatest potential for growth often comes in the midst of the most difficult circumstances. James writes:

My brothers and sisters, whenever you face trials of any kind, consider it nothing but joy, because you know that the testing of your faith produces endurance; and let endurance have its full effect, so that you may be mature and complete, lacking in nothing (James 1:2-4 NRSV).

The purpose of our becoming like Christ is so we can glorify and enjoy God forever. If we do not become like Christ then we can neither glorify nor enjoy God ever. Fortunately, we can count on God’s faithfulness to complete what he has started in us. By becoming like Christ we enter into a new and abundant kind of life that prepares us for an eternal joy (cf. John 10:10).

4. WE CAN COUNT ON GOD’S GRACE

Jeremiah remarks:

"The LORD is my portion" (24a).

A “portion” was a smooth stone used to determine the outcome of a lottery. Sometimes the lottery was used to determine who had to do an unwanted task. The person who received the “winning” stone would bemoan the fact that their “lot” meant something unpleasant. This type of language is still with us today whenever someone speaks of their “lot in life.” It can even be found in galaxies far, far away. *Star Wars* fans may recall C3PO expressing his outlook on life to R2D2:

“We seem to be made to suffer. It's our lot in life.”

But the lottery in Jeremiah's day was also used to determine who would receive a portion of an unclaimed treasure. In such a case, the winning stone would evoke great delight, not unlike someone winning one of our state-sponsored lotteries.

Jeremiah had the temperament of C3PO, "Our lot in life is to suffer," but he had the faith of a lottery winner, "The Lord is my portion." He knew that this was not the result of anything he had done but was solely by the grace of God. And unlike state-sponsored lotteries, anyone can receive this undeserved treasure from God.

Grace refers to God's unmerited favor. Mark Twain has explained it this way, "Heaven goes by favor. If it went by merit, you would stay out, and your dog would go in."

All of God's gifts to us are undeserved, especially the gift of salvation. In spite of our sinfulness, God gave us his own Son to be the means by which we can be forgiven and made forever right with God. This is a gift of God to be received by faith in Jesus Christ. This is a promise that will never fail. We can count on God's grace.

CONCLUSION

The lamentations of Jeremiah remind us that this is a broken and hurting world. But they also remind us that no experience in life is too difficult to bring before God. Expressing our deepest sorrows to God is not merely acceptable, it is an act of faith in which we turn to God as our only source of comfort and hope.

God is at work in the world. But as Jeremiah, Job and others discovered, God seldom explains himself or his ways. When he does, people do not have the capacity to comprehend his answers, but they are overwhelmed with his power and love.

In the end, we may not know the answers to all our questions, but we can know God, and know that God remains faithful. Meanwhile, there is something we can take on faith as being completely true:

"Neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor rulers, nor things present, nor things to come, nor powers, nor height, nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord (Romans 8:38-39 NRSV).