

Why Does God Preserve Me?

Lamentations 3:1-3, 19-26, 31-32 (NIV84)

¹ I am the man who has seen affliction by the rod of his wrath. ² He has driven me away and made me walk in darkness rather than light; ³ indeed, he has turned his hand against me again and again, all day long.

¹⁹ I remember my affliction and my wandering, the bitterness and the gall. ²⁰ I well remember them, and my soul is downcast within me. ²¹ Yet this I call to mind and therefore I have hope: ²² Because of the LORD's great love we are not consumed, for his compassions never fail. ²³ They are new every morning; great is your faithfulness. ²⁴ I say to myself, "The LORD is my portion; therefore I will wait for him." ²⁵ The LORD is good to those whose hope is in him, to the one who seeks him; ²⁶ it is good to wait quietly for the salvation of the LORD.

³¹ For men are not cast off by the Lord forever. ³² Though he brings grief, he will show compassion, so great is his unfailing love.

"They took my phone away. I can't believe Mom and Dad! I know I'm grounded because my grades started to slip, but really? And no internet time, no Facebook. My friends are going to wonder what happened to me. How can they do this to me???"

A child, a teenager is punished, and who is he mad at? He's mad at the parent for doling out the punishment, probably even as the parent was following through on the stated consequences if his grades started to decline. He has forgotten that the phone was a gift, a privilege. The parents bought the phone. They pay the bill. The kid has no right to it, but with continual use, he is convinced that it is his and his parents have no right to take it from him. He feels entitled to what he used to having.

Last week we heard that God was so gracious that immediately after Adam and Eve fell into sin, he clothed them. God's providence did not stop there. As we followed the promise of the Savior from person to person eventually following the whole Israelite nation, they had become used to God's blessings. The LORD had brought them to the promised land of Canaan, given them victory after victory over the current inhabitants, and allowed them to settle there. The LORD had gifted them this land.

Within a generation or two, they began to take the Promised Land for granted. Even when they didn't follow God's commands, they figured that the land belonged to them because they lived there. The Israelites became increasingly wicked, following other gods, ignoring the one true God. God warned them over and over again that if they did not turn from their ways, he would punish them by destroying Jerusalem and ripping them from the land. Generation after generation passed, and Jerusalem still stood.

Reality struck in 586 B.C. when God used a people called the Babylonians to destroy Jerusalem, including their precious temple. It is in the aftermath of that punishment that Jeremiah writes "Lamentations." He had spent much of his life dedicated to carrying God's message of repent or be destroyed. He was continually rejected by the people and the leadership, almost killed a few times. Now, against the thoughts of so many, the message he preached became true. They thought that God would never do it. "Jeremiah can't be right. No, God will restore us. We are his people. This is his dwelling. He will never let this fall. He threatened to do it so long ago, but we continued to thrive here for hundreds of years. Now it's all gone." Jeremiah's message to repent had failed. Even though he was faithful, he was punished along with the rest of the Israelites. He is "the man who has seen affliction by the rod of [the LORD's] wrath." (verse 1)

He said, "[The LORD] has driven me away and made me walk in darkness rather than light; indeed, he has turned his hand against me again and again, all day long." (verses 2-3) "This is too much, LORD. I understand that we need to be taught a lesson. I know that you had to keep your Word, but taking away Jerusalem, taking away our city, your temple. This is our identity. This has been ours for some 800 years. I thought that you would provide for us. Didn't you promise to preserve us by defending us against all danger, guarding and protecting us from all evil? Where is that protection now? You said that you would preserve us by richly and daily providing clothing and shoes, food and drink, house and home, spouse and children, land cattle, all I own, and all I need to keep my body and life. But look now, Lord! My home is a pile of rubble! How many spouses and children have died in this siege? I have nothing to my name except the clothes that I'm wearing. Where is your preservation now?"

Would any of us blame Jeremiah for making these kinds of accusations? Generation after generation God provided for sinful people. You can't take that away from me now! This is what you do. You preserve. You provide. You protect. Where are you now, God? You have taken everything from me when you should have been improving my life!

The Israelites expected that God would improve their lives or at least keep status quo. They felt entitled to these specific blessings. What about you? Do you feel as if God owes it to you to improve your life or at least maintain status quo?

I mean, it makes sense. How many times have we heard that God will protect my life and bless it? And if I'm doing the right things - like going to church, praying, doing good to other people - then I definitely should be blessed. Why, then, is my life filled with stress if I am supposed to have God on my side? Why do I keep losing if God is preserving me? Why do I keep getting wounded - emotionally, mentally, physically, spiritually - if God is protecting me? As much as we don't want to admit it, typically when we experience loss, we feel that this is undeserved. I deserve to have things go well for me.

What are we really entitled to? Were the Israelites entitled to their home land, to Jerusalem, to the temple? No. God didn't owe them a thing, just like he didn't owe Adam and Eve clothing after they fell into sin. In fact, for the Israelites, God promised to bring punishment to them, to destroy this land and take them away from it if they refused to obey him. God owed them nothing.

Why did God bless them for so long while they still sinned against him? As the explanation to the first part of the Apostles' Creed: "All this God does [- the preservation and the protection -] only because he is my good and merciful Father in heaven, and not because I have earned or deserved it." God does not owe me or you anything because of who I am and what I have done. If I am owed anything from God, it is affliction, it is suffering, it is to be a wanderer with no home and nothing to my name. I deserve to be cast off from God. I deserve the grief in my life. Why? Because I am a sinner!

It doesn't matter if I am a follower of Christ or an unbeliever, the world will keep turning as long as God decides to continue to do so. He will keep bringing winter, spring, summer, and fall year after year. He will keep causing crops to grow, houses to be built, clothing to be made and purchased by you. He doesn't owe us any of these things. He gives these to all people because he is good and he has mercy on all humankind.

Instead of demanding from God that he makes things go a certain way for you, that he blesses you with certain things or that he reduces the grief and stress in your life because, honestly, you think you deserve it, realize that God owes you nothing for you being you. He made you. He gave you everything. The clothes and shoes that you are wearing. The food and drink that you consumed today. The roof over your head right now, the roof over the place where you will sleep tonight. The very fact that you made it here safe and sound, that your body even works at all, all of this is done by God because he is our good and merciful Father in heaven, and not because we have earned or deserved it.

So, what do I do then when grief and stress are ruling my life and things are not going my way and I am struggling with the concept that God preserves my life? We recall as Jeremiah did: "Yet this I call to mind and therefore I have hope: Because of the LORD's great love we are not consumed, for his compassions never fail. They are new every morning; great is your faithfulness." (verses 21-23) My preservation and protection each and every moment of my life comes entirely from the LORD's great love for me. His compassion never fails us. He is faithful in loving us despite our sins. "Men are not cast off by the Lord forever. Though he brings grief, he will show compassion, so great is his unfailing love." (verses 31-32)

This is what God the Father does because it so pleases him to do. He protects and preserves us because that's the kind of God he is. I can't force him to. I can't command him to. He simply does it because that is what he wants to do. The LORD has mercy on whom he has mercy, compassion on whom he has compassion. He decides to do this under no obligation.

Therefore, I put my hope in the LORD's perseverance and protection. He is my portion. I will wait for him because he is my salvation. He renews his kindness to me every morning in spite of who I am and what I really deserve. This is the compassion of God, his unfailing love.

Each and every day, then, I thank the LORD for what he has given me. I count all these blessings that I don't deserve. All these things that I may take for granted, they are gifts from God. And when I feel like God is taking everything away from me, I hope as Jeremiah hoped. In this hope, I give thanks to God because he preserves me and protects me purely because he is good and merciful. "For all this I ought to thank and praise, to serve and obey him." I am not entitled to anything, but God richly blesses me. So, I live my life in thankful service to him. Amen.

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