

The LORD is Our Portion through Our Lamentations

Lamentations 3:22-33 (NIV)

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. ²⁷ It is good for a man to bear the yoke while he is young. ²⁸ Let him sit alone in silence, for the LORD has laid it on him. ²⁹ Let him bury his face in the dust— there may yet be hope. ³⁰ Let him offer his cheek to one who would strike him, and let him be filled with disgrace. ³¹ For no one is cast off by the Lord forever. ³² Though he brings grief, he will show compassion, so great is his unfailing love. ³³ For he does not willingly bring affliction or grief to anyone.

The title "Lamentations" is not one that strikes a happy tone, does it? To lament means to mourn aloud or to cry out in grief, and this book has a lot of that. It was written by the prophet Jeremiah soon after 586 B.C. These are his reflections as the image of a destroyed Jerusalem is burned into his brain. Jerusalem was that special city where the Jews worshiped God, where God dwelled, where God accepted the sacrifices he commanded, where blood covered sins and people knew that they were right before God because the LORD pronounced forgiveness through his priests. Imagine if you had come to church today and found nothing but a pile of bricks, smoldering embers of timber, trees cut down, the parking lot ground into an uneven gravel pit, and then you begin to see what Jeremiah saw and understand why this book of Lamentations has also been called "The Tears of Jeremiah."

In the verses leading up to our portion of God's Word for today, Jeremiah lamented in vivid language. "[The LORD] has driven me away and made me walk in darkness rather than light." (verse 2) "He has turned his hand against me." (verse 3) He "has broken my bones." (verse 4) "He shuts out my prayer." (verse 8) He has "mangled me and left me without help." (verse 11) "He drew his bow and made me the target for his arrows." (verse 12) "He pierced my heart." (verse 13) "I became the laughingstock of all my people." (verse 14) "He has broken my teeth...trampled me in the dust." (verse 16) "I have been deprived of peace." (verse 17) "My soul is downcast within me." (verse 20)

Are Jeremiah's lamentations like anything you have said, what you have written down, what you have prayed? What causes you to lament, to cry out in grief like Jeremiah? In our Gospel reading, when Jesus came to the home of Jairus, people were crying and wailing loudly, lamenting the death of Jairus' little girl. You've been there too, that moment when all you can do is cry at the news, at the death of a father, a mother, a son, a daughter, a brother or sister-in-laws – pain like the breaking of bones or your heart being pierced by arrows. Your lament has come out in the form of bitter tears after hearing the diagnosis you have been praying and trying to avoid by doing all that you can health-wise, but there it is. You feel mangled and left by God without help as if his hand has turned against you and he has driven you away. The husband who bursts out in anger at his wife, depriving her of the peace of his unconditional love, a hate-filled rage that feels like a punch in the mouth, like someone knocking out your teeth and trampling you in the dust. I have thought, I have said, I have prayed the lament: "My soul is downcast within me." (verse 20)

All these lamentations are caused by the same source: sin. Jeremiah wept over the heap of rubble that was once the place where he had worshiped the LORD. But Jeremiah knew even as tears streamed down his cheeks that this was because of sin. The LORD did this because his people refused to turn away from their sin and trust only in the LORD, to worship him exclusively. Jeremiah himself proclaimed this message to them, but few listened. The LORD kept his Word and used a foreign nation – the Babylonians – to demolish Jerusalem and its Temple. At the same time, though, Jeremiah also saw the sin within himself, the times he rebelled against God, his imperfection, his short-comings, his idol of self-reliance. He was just as much to blame for the destruction of Jerusalem and the Temple as the rest of the Jews were.

Death. Disease. Fights. These things that cause us to lament, to cry out in grief, they are all products of sin. And not just nebulous, those other people who sin, but my sin. My instigating. My neglect. My disobedience. My rebellion. My hate. My idol of self-reliance. I am the sinner. I sin. I do what is wrong. I trust in myself sometimes more than I trust in God. And so I receive what is owed to a sinner: death, disease, fights. It's my fault. "My soul is downcast within me." (verse 20)

"Yet this I call to mind and therefore I have hope..." (verse 21) Jeremiah continued through his tears. "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 22-23) "For no one is cast off by the Lord forever. Though he brings grief, he will show compassion, so great is his unfailing love. For he does not willingly bring affliction or grief to anyone." (verses 31-33)

That sounds nice, refreshing. But, wait a minute. I love that you are bringing me compassions and new mercies every morning, but if I heard you right, God, you bring me grief. Why, LORD? Why would you bring me grief? I mean, we already established that we get what we get because we live in a sinful world. Because of sin, we lament through death, disease, and fights. The Jews, they deserved to have Jerusalem and their church destroyed because they wouldn't listen to you through Jeremiah. But what did I do to deserve this grief you have brought me? I don't deserve this, God! Why are you doing this to me?!

This is one of those hard truths that we wrestle with. Even if he brings it unwillingly, why does God bring grief to his people, people like Jeremiah, people like you and me? We love God. We do our best to serve him. Yet, he brings us grief?

Change perspective for a moment. As much as we don't want to admit it, we are self-centered and self-reliant by nature. We look at events and happenings first and foremost in the perspective of how it affects me, how I feel about it, what I think is right and fair and good. Try looking at it from God the Father's viewpoint. Look at it like a father, a parent. Think of the times when you have had to discipline your child, when you have had to deny them something that they wanted – not out of spite or inconvenience, but because you knew what was better for them. They looked at you with those sad eyes that pierced your heart for denying them what they wanted, what they asked for. You love 'em, you hug 'em, but you still can't give them what they want because it's not good for them. They yelled at you and slammed doors because you had to correct their sinful behavior and point out their wrong. You did what was right by denying them, but it feels like a punch in the mouth, a kick in the teeth. You brought grief to your child.

The LORD is a just God and Father who must punish sins. This is what he did to the Jews by destroying Jerusalem. We suffer grief because we are sinners living in a sinful world and this makes God look pretty unloving to us at times, as if we are cast aside by him, not loved by him. But no one is cast off by the LORD forever. Just as you hug your child while they cry because of your parental decision, so "the LORD is good to those whose hope is in him, to the one who seeks him." (verse 25) Just as you have to reassure your child that you are not doing this because you are angry with them (even though they totally don't believe you at the time), so God does the same for Jeremiah and for us through his lamentations.

The LORD does not hold his anger against you nor did he to Jeremiah. Why? Because he carried his justice out on my sins. He did this when God himself, Jesus Christ, hung on the cross. There, Jesus as both true God and true Man, carried on himself all of my sins and your sins – sins of self-reliance and selfishness. As God, he carried them all for us on his shoulders. As Man, he died, suffered the ultimate and final consequence and punishment for our sins. As God and Man, he experienced an eternity of hell for us in our place as he cried out, "My God, My God, why have you forsaken me?" By what Jesus did, our sins are completely paid for and satisfied.

Instead of holding anger against us because of our sins, God gives us great love, compassions that never fail, mercies that are new every morning. He did it all. He is everything I need to be loved, to be forgiven. So, even through all these lamentations, I can say with Jeremiah, "The LORD is my portion; therefore I will wait for him." (verse 24) He is my hope in hopeless times. He is a sure bet, a certainly because God is always faithful to his Word.

Jeremiah then comes to the conclusion that "it is good to wait quietly for the salvation of the LORD." (verse 26) Wait quietly? But it hurts! I still lament. I still cry out with grief with the deaths, diseases, and fights. Jeremiah, are you just telling me to shut my laments up because no one wants to hear me complain or throw a pity party? No. Absolutely not. When Jeremiah says that "it is good to wait quietly for the salvation of the LORD," (verse 26) he wants us to think about what we do say in our grief. It's not wrong to grieve, but it is wrong to grieve as if we have no hope. It is not wrong to lament, but it is not right in our lamentations to accuse God of not caring about us.

God may (and probably will) bring you grief. But he has also brought you everything you need to get through the grief. The LORD is your portion. He is complete satisfaction for your soul. If you want to know if God cares about you, look to the cross. See how he diverted his anger over your sins and took the payment out of himself and so cleared our debt of sin and gave us life eternal with him. To help you wait quietly through the grief the LORD has brought to you, remember the storms that he has stilled in your life. Look at how God brought his people back to Jerusalem, had it rebuilt including the Temple, and kept his Word, every single promise of the Christ, the Messiah, who took our sins on us and was crushed in our place for us so that the LORD would and does make his mercies new for us every morning.

The LORD is our portion through our lamentations. He is everything we need because he was pierced and crushed for our sins so that he does not cast us off forever. He may bring us grief, even unwillingly, but his mercies to us are new every morning. When you lament, seek the LORD. Hope in him. Wait quietly for his salvation. He will not let you down because he is your portion. Amen.