

## The Faithfulness of God

By John Ulrich, Lead Pastor

Lamentations 3:21-26

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Sometimes the message you bring doesn't seem to relate to the moment you are addressing. Sometimes the text doesn't seem to fit the occasion. What you thought was appropriate suddenly doesn't fit.

I saw some good examples of that this week on the Internet. I read a blog about people who got the wrong greeting card. They were sending a message to mark one type of special occasion only to discover that the card they had was for a different occasion, so they tried to make it fit. I saw one example where someone needed a Christmas card, but they had mistakenly bought a birthday card, so where it said "Happy Birthday" they added "Jesus." I saw another one where someone needed a card for a medical procedure, so where it said "Have the best birthday ever," they had crossed out birthday and written "brain surgery." I saw one where someone had turned a humorous birthday card into a sympathy card. The card said "Is that a lot of candles or is your cake on fire?" Underneath it they had written "Sorry your house burned down." Finally, I saw that one card that I'm not sure what the card was for. It had a picture of Fonzie from Happy Days with his thumbs up going "aaay!" Underneath it, they had simply written "Sorry you got stabbed." The text of the card did not fit the occasion they were marking.

I mention that because today my text doesn't seem to fit the occasion. Today is our sixth anniversary! Woohoo! So I wanted something light, and encouraging, and celebratory. I actually decided that I was going to preach on the faithfulness of God. I selected a text that I thought fit the occasion beautifully. It says:

*The steadfast love of the Lord never ceases; his mercies never come to an end; they are new every morning; great is your faithfulness.*

*- Lamentations 3:22-23*

Doesn't that seem like a good anniversary text? It's like the outside of the card said "Wishing you a Happy Anniversary"

I chose that text three weeks ago. But then when I studied it this week, I found out that this was actually a passage about the lowest point in Israel's history. This passage is actually a lament (an expression of grief) that was written about the exile, a time when Jerusalem was conquered and invaded by the nation of Babylon. The temple was destroyed, the city was ransacked, and Israelites were forcibly deported to other nations. That's what this text is about. It's like the card said "Happy Anniversary" on the outside, but when I opened it up to sign it, it said "It is the anniversary of the most miserable day of your life. Hope it gets better, but it probably won't." The text did not seem to fit the occasion!

I had to decide what do I do? Do I pick another passage? (No time for that!) Do I try to make it fit? (Cross out “birthday” and write “brain surgery”?) Or do I just preach the passage? Well if you know me, you know I’m going to just preach the passage every time, because the Bible is alive, it speaks to us, and it’s always relevant. Any Bible passage can speak to our hearts and our lives.

So today we’re going to talk about the faithfulness of God in hard times, in times of suffering, in times of lament, in times when our faith is tested. This may not be the anniversary passage we expected, but let me say that some of us really need the truth of this passage. I’ve spoken to some of you and I know the things you’re going through. Some of you are facing a big crisis in your life right now, and you’re wondering how that crisis relates to God’s faithfulness. What can you expect? Some of you have been dealing with grief, and it seems like it’s never going to end. Some of you have been carrying a heavy load, wrestling with difficult circumstances, for a long time, some of you for years. It’s like you’ve been in this marathon of difficulty. You’ve been asking and not receiving. You’ve been marking one fallback position after another and maybe you’re wondering “How does God’s faithfulness relate to me?” Some of you are overwhelmed by your emotions. Maybe you don’t know why. Maybe you tell yourself “I don’t have it that bad I shouldn’t be struggling with my emotions,” but you are. You’re wondering if God has anything for you. Many of us need the truth of this passage. In fact, this passage is not as irrelevant to this day as it may seem, because Palm Sunday is not just our anniversary. It also marks the beginning of Holy Week, the week that we remember Jesus’ time of testing, the time he faced crisis, and grief, and hardship and overwhelming sadness, the time when he asked the Father to remove the cup of suffering and the Father said “No,” a time when he had to believe in the Father’s faithfulness.

So today we are going to talk about this topic of God’s faithfulness in hard times. Let me invite you to turn in your Bibles to Lamentations 3:21-26. Today we’re going to see five important truths about hard times, five truths that help us see God’s faithfulness when we face difficult times, times of pain, times of lament. I want to encourage each and every one of you to take notes on what we’re going to look at today. I promise you: If you don’t need this now, you’re going to need it soon enough. So grab a pen and a connection card, or piece of paper, or inside flap of your Bible and write down these five truths about hard times.

Let’s read our passage. We’ll talk about the context in a minute, but our actual text today from Lamentations 3:21-26. It’s written by the prophet Jeremiah, and it says this:

*But this I call to mind, and therefore I have hope: The steadfast love of the Lord never ceases; his mercies never come to an end; they are new every morning; great is your faithfulness. “The Lord is my portion,” says my soul, “therefore I will hope in him.” The LORD is good to those who wait for him, to the soul who seeks him. It is good that one should wait quietly for the salvation of the LORD.*

- Lamentations 3:21-26

We are going to see five truths about hard times today, five truths that enable us to see God's faithfulness in hard times, and the first truth is this:

## **LAMENT IS A PART OF LIFE**

Lament, which means grieving, feeling those hard times, feeling pain and loss and suffering, is a part of life. As you can tell, I was surprised to find Lament in our passage. I know I should have had a clue because it's in a book called "Lamentations." But our passage was so beautiful and upbeat that I was shocked as I read the context to find out how dark this piece of Scripture really is! I mean just listen to some of the words Jeremiah writes in the verses leading up to our passage. Listen to this:

*I am the man who has seen affliction under the rod of God's wrath; he has driven and brought me into darkness without any light; surely against me he turns his hand again and again the whole day long.*

- Lamentations 3:1-3

*He has walled me about so that I cannot escape; he has made my chains heavy; though I call and cry for help, he shuts out my prayer; he has blocked my ways with blocks of stones; he has made my paths crooked. To me, he is like a bear lying in ambush, like a lion, stalking its prey. He dragged me from the path, and mangled me, and left me without help; he bent his bow and set me as a target for his arrow.*

- Lamentations 3:7-12

*My soul is bereft of peace; I have forgotten what happiness is; so I say, "My endurance has perished; so has my hope from the LORD."*

- Lamentations 3:17-18

OK, now that is Lament. That is an expression of pain and suffering, and it's not like our passage resolves the issue. Jeremiah goes on to say:

*It is good for a man to bear the yoke while he is young. Let him sit alone in silence, for the LORD has laid it on him. Let him bury his face in the dust—there may yet be hope.*

- Lamentations 3:27-29

Listen, this was not the anniversary text I had hoped for! There is Lament!

Sometimes life is like that. We're expecting a nice anniversary card. We're expecting it to be a bowl of cherries, and we're shocked when what we get instead is Lament, and brokenness and pain. It shocks us. I think we are especially prone to this as modern Americans. We can fix just about anything in America. We have a pill or a procedure for most things, so we can kind of think there ought to be a pill or procedure for everything. We can start to believe that this world is fixable at its core. We can start to believe we don't deserve to face lament. We can

think we are entitled to our dream job, to a perfect marital partner, to a perfect family, to perfect health. We can think we will never grieve.

But lament is a part of life. Eventually, it catches up to each of us. The Bible doesn't make any secret of this. It tells us to expect lament. The book of Psalms was Israel's hymn book. It was the songs they sang every Sabbath, but the most common theme in Psalms by far is lament. If you read the stories of the Bible, you will see that the Bible points out that every patriarch in Genesis, every Hero in the Old Testament, every prophet, every Apostle suffered. The Bible goes to great lengths to let us know that Lament is part of life.

So if you came in today carrying a burden, if you came in with a crisis in your life or grief or carrying a heavy load or struggling with your emotions, you need to know that that's not unusual. It's OK. It's what the Bible teaches us to expect. Lament is a part of life.

In fact if you follow God wholeheartedly for a long time, there may be times in your life when you feel like Jeremiah. Think about it: Jeremiah was a prophet. He was righteous. He followed God wholeheartedly. But after hundreds of years of warning, God had judged the nation of Israel for their disobedience. He had brought in the Babylonians, who had wiped them out with utter destruction, and God didn't spare Jeremiah, prophet though he was. Jeremiah lost his city and family and loved ones, just like the unrighteous did.

If you read this chapter, you can see that Jeremiah's saying "I don't understand, God. It's like I'm experiencing the opposite of everything I have ever come to expect from you. Where I expected light, I got darkness. Where I expected answered prayer, I got silence. Where I expected you to make my path straight (that's a promise from the Bible), you made my path crooked. Where I expected Shalom (peace, wholeness), all I got was unrest. Jeremiah is confused and his lament reaches a climax in verses 10-12 where he says

*God, I feel like you're a bear or a lion, that knocked me off the path but you didn't even bother to eat me you just mangled me and left me in the bush. He drew his bow and made me the target for his arrows.*

*- Lamentations 3:10-12*

He literally says "God, sometimes it feels like you're just using me for target practice."

Let me ask you a question: Have you ever felt that way? Have you ever felt like God is kind of using you for target practice? Maybe many of you have never felt like that, but I suspect some of you have. You've tried to do what is right, but one thing after another seems to go wrong. You can get to the point where you feel like you can't figure God out at all. It can seem like all your little formulas for obedience and blessing just stop working, and you stand in this place of confusion.

If that's you today, you just need to know that you're not alone. That happens. It happened to prophets like Jeremiah. It happens to Christians who walk faithfully with God. It even happened

to Jesus, when he said on the cross “My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?” Lament is a part of life.

So the first thing this passage teaches us about hard times is that lament is a part of life. Now the second thing it teaches us is this:

### **GOD IS IN THE MIDST OF OUR LAMENT**

We will find God present, and we will find him caring in the midst of our lament. This is so important for us to realize. Lamentations lays this out for us in an amazing, beautiful way. Let me show you what I mean. The book of Lamentations is laid out in a very intentional way. Lamentations has five chapters and each chapter is a separate Hebrew poem about suffering that is written from a different perspective. So five poems. Four of these five poems are acrostics, meaning that each stanza of the poem starts with a different letter of the Hebrew alphabet. In English it would go “A, B, C all the way to the letter Z.” In other words, Lamentations is almost like a dictionary of suffering.

The entire book is very dark and it’s unresolved. The situation doesn’t turn around at the end of the book, and there’s no clear answers to the questions it asks. In fact, listen to the last two verses of the book. It says:

*Restore us to yourself, O LORD, that we may return; renew our days as of old unless you have utterly rejected us and are angry with us beyond measure.*

- Lamentations 5:21-22

That’s it! That’s how the book closes! So Lamentations is like this dark, unresolved dictionary of suffering.

In the very middle of the book (third poem) comes our passage, a passage that is completely unlike the rest of the book:

*The steadfast love of the Lord never ceases.*

- Lamentations 3:22

It is uncharacteristically positive. It is optimistic. It’s one of those verses you cross-stitch and put up on your wall. In fact, it’s so upbeat that it tricks pastors into using it on anniversary Sundays! Seriously, our passage is a strong contrast with the rest of the book: darkness with light in the middle.

Jeremiah’s point is quite clear. In the midst of our darkness, in the midst of our suffering, in the midst of our confused lament, we will find God. He’s there in the middle of it with us. We may not find resolution to our problem, just like the book of Lamentations doesn’t find resolution. We may not find an explanation for our problem. We may not know why it happened to us, but we will find God. He’s there. He cares. He’s there in your grief. The grief may not feel better, but he’s still there. He’s there in your broken marriage. You may be able to resolve your

differences. You may not, but I can promise you God is there for you. He's there in your exhaustion. When you're so tired you can't see straight and rest doesn't seem to be coming, God is there. He's there in your loneliness and in your emotional pain. He's there.

Jeremiah is not making promises in our passage of God fixing all our problems. He's not saying we're always going to live in victory. That God is going to put a nice bow on the end of our earthly story. He's simply reminding Israel and reminding us that God is with his people God is in the midst of our Lament.

So the first truth we see is that 1) Lament is part of life, and 2) God is in the midst of our lament. Now the third truth we see in this passage is this:

### **BECAUSE GOD IS WITH US, OUR SUFFERING IS PURPOSEFUL**

So in the midst of his suffering, Jeremiah does something that each and every one of us should learn to do. He chooses to turn his attention to the God who is there. Look at what he says:

*But this I call to mind, and therefore I have hope.*

- Lamentations 3:21

Literally, Jeremiah says "This I cause to return to my heart." He's saying as an act of will I call something to mind, and here's what he calls to mind:

*The steadfast love of the Lord never ceases.*

- Lamentations 3:22

Now to us, reading in English that line kind of flies right past us. We might think it's a beautiful phrase "The steadfast love of the Lord never ceases." It sounds nice, but it doesn't knock us off our feet. But to an Israelite of Jeremiah's day, that phrase would have really caught their attention. It would have jumped out as if it were written in bold neon script! Because the word Jeremiah uses for "love" there is the word "hesed." Hesed was a word that referred specifically to God's covenant love, to the special kind of love that God had for Israel as his covenant people. Jeremiah uses this word for covenant love. As we read the rest of the chapter and of the book, we can see that Jeremiah is saying something very interesting.

Israel had a covenant relationship with God. That's what the Old Testament Law (the Mosaic Law) is. It's a covenant between God and Israel. Just like any Ancient Near East covenant, that covenant had very clear consequences. It had blessings for obedience and curses for disobedience. In fact, in Deuteronomy 28 when the Israelites first ratified this covenant, God had half the tribes of Israel stand on one mountain and half the tribes of Israel stand on another mountain that was right beside it. Those on the one mountain recited the blessings of obedience, and those on the other mountain recited the curses of disobedience, back and forth to make sure they understood. When they finished doing that, Moses said to Israel "After you

have experienced the blessings of obedience and the curses of disobedience, God will bring you back and restore you to the land.”

So they had these blessings promised and they had these curses. Let me ask you a question: Can you guess what some of the curses were? They were exactly what Israel was experiencing when Jeremiah wrote this. God had warned Israel that if they disobeyed him, they would be besieged, and defeated by a foreign military power, that they would be deported to a foreign land, that their children would be forcibly given in marriage to foreigners, that their produce and their livestock and their houses would be taken by people who didn't speak their language. God had warned them about what they would suffer as part of the covenant.

Now what does all that have to do with God's loyal love? Simple: Jeremiah is saying “Yes, we experienced the blessings of the Covenant in the past and, yes, we are experiencing the curses of the Covenant now, but that means one very important thing: We are still in covenant with God. God still has hesed. He still has loyal love, covenant love for us.”

Yes, God has allowed us to experience horrific suffering, but the suffering is not random. It's a purposeful part of the covenant. Jeremiah is saying “We're not suffering because God has abandoned us. We are suffering because he hasn't.” God is using this suffering, this horrific suffering for good. It's the curse of the covenant. God said after we experience the blessing of obedience and the curse of disobedience God will bring us back. He will restore his people. Jeremiah is saying “the pain is purposeful.” In fact, look at what he says:

*For men are not 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 the children of men.*

- Lamentations 3:31-33

What Jeremiah is saying is “God doesn't waste pain.” I know it feels like he's a rampaging bear, a roaring lion. I know it feels like he's just using us for target practice, but he's not. He doesn't waste pain. It's not random. Our suffering is purposeful.

I need to tell you something today. Your suffering is purposeful. God doesn't waste pain. There's always a purpose for the pain we face. Now we don't have a list of specific blessings and curses like the Israelites did, but the New Testament tells us that if we belong to Jesus, we are in Covenant with God and, just like Israel, our pain is always purposeful. Lest we think this is just for the Old Testament in James 1, the Bible says this:

*Count it all joy, my brothers, when you meet trials of various kinds, for you know that the testing of your faith produces steadfastness. And let steadfastness have its full effect, that you may be perfect and complete, lacking in nothing.*

- James 1:1-4

James is telling us that the trials and suffering we face are necessary to produce the character that God desires for our own good. James tells us that suffering makes us complete. He's saying "There is a piece of the you that God wants you to be that is missing. And the only way to provide it is through trials and suffering." James is saying what Jeremiah is saying. He's saying our pain is purposeful.

We may not always understand the purpose, but Jeremiah is saying your suffering is not something God has failed to notice. It's not something he doesn't care about. He's not a rampaging bear or a roaring lion. He's not just using you for target practice. It's purposeful. It has a purpose. Maybe that purpose is to discipline you and teach you that disobedience hurts. Maybe that purpose is to prepare you for something that's coming. Maybe that purpose is to get you to loosen your grip on your assumptions about how life should go. Maybe that purpose is for someone else to see your faithfulness in suffering. Maybe that purpose is to teach you that you can actually experience suffering and still keep standing. I don't know what the purpose of your suffering is, but it has a purpose.

So 1) Lament is a part of life, 2) God is in the midst of our lament, and 3) Because God is present, our suffering is purposeful. Now the next thing Jeremiah tells us is something that I am extremely thankful for:

### **GOD SENDS NEW MERCIES IN OUR LAMENT**

Jeremiah goes on in this passage to say something very important:  
Look at verses 22-23

**The steadfast love of the Lord never ceases his mercies never come to an end; they are new every morning; great is your faithfulness**  
- *Lamentations 3:22-23*

I'm extremely thankful for this passage. I love the way Jeremiah says what he says. It's extremely important when you're going through hard times. Think about it:

First of all, notice the tense of the translation. It says "God's mercies ARE new." Present tense. Jeremiah is not saying "His new mercies will eventually get to you some time." He's not saying "You'll see the mercy when you get resolution to your situation or when you get the explanation of your situation." What he's talking about is present tense. If you are going through difficulty, this is something that you will receive in the "now".

Also notice that Jeremiah doesn't say "mercy." It's not singular. This isn't just about one big act of mercy at the end of times when we stand before God. Though we are thankful for the categorical forgiveness of our sin in the gospel and for our covenant relationship to God. That's not exactly what Jeremiah is talking about. It's plural "mercies," lots of mercies. These are small mercies, little gifts that we receive from God, little gifts that get us through the day.



It says "They are new every morning." When we read that, we are reminded of the Manna that was on the ground for Israel every morning in the Exodus. Do you remember that story? Israel had no idea what they were going to eat as they went through the desert. But every morning when they got up there was this sort of meal or grain on the ground that was edible. Nobody knows exactly what it was. In fact, the name "manna" means "what is it?" But it was God's mercy, and he provided it every morning. If they tried to get ahead and pick up enough for several days, it would spoil and stink! You just got it for that day (or two days on Sabbath). But it was new every morning. It was God's way of teaching Israel to depend on his mercy. Every day.

Jeremiah wants God's people to understand this and depend on it. Think of all that the Israelites were going through. Their capital was sacked and destroyed. The nation and the tribes and families were separated and deported. This was unlike anything they had ever experienced or that you or I have ever experienced. Jeremiah doesn't promise them resolution. He doesn't say "Hey, just hold on for a couple of months, and we'll be back in the land!" The book remains unresolved. He doesn't offer them explanation. He does say that nation has sinned, but he doesn't explain why each person is experiencing this exile in the way he or she is.

But Jeremiah still wants them to understand something and he wants them to depend on it. God will provide new mercies with each and every day, little mercies, little encouragements, little provisions, little reminders that there will be a tomorrow. God provides those each day. Jeremiah wants Israel to know this, and he wants us to know it.

I have to say that I have experienced this in my life. When I'm hurting and confused, when I enter a time of testing, when I'm going through big pain and I think God has to take it away, He often doesn't do what I'm asking him to do. I don't get resolution and I don't get explanation But I always without fail get new mercies. There's always something that God provides to get me through the day. It may be friends that reach out unexpectedly to say I'm praying for you.

I still have a card from Obbie Clemmons (years ago) where she wrote a prayer for me. I don't know how that woman knew what I was going through, but it was word for word the prayer I needed that day. It might be that, or it might be a kindness from my wife or one of my kids. It might be something that just brings joy and distraction to my life, a chance to go fishing, good news from a friend, your team winning the big game, just to remind me that the world is bigger than my crisis. Sometimes God's mercy is actually a crisis or another person that needs help. It disrupts my self-absorption. Sometimes it's a passage of Scripture that changes my thinking or an answer to prayer that lifts me up. God always sends new mercies.

I know that some of you know this. How many times have I spoken to some of you you're going through a real time of testing and you say to me "When I pray, I don't get the answer I'm looking for. I don't understand why this is happening and it keeps on happening, even though I've asked God to take it away." Then you say "I'm just getting little things," little mercies that give me just enough oxygen to make it through the day.

Jeremiah is saying “Look for this. Learn to depend on it, like the Israelites depended on God’s manna.” When you’re living in lament, learn to look for little mercies. God will provide.

So Jeremiah tells us 1) Lament is a part of life, 2) God is in the midst of our lament, 3) Because God is with us, our suffering is purposeful, and 4) God sends new mercies in our lament. Now there’s one last thing Jeremiah tells us, and it’s this:

## **WE SHOULD WAIT ON THE LORD**

Jeremiah closes our passage with a statement of resolve of determination:

*“The Lord is my portion,” says my soul, “therefore I will hope in him.” The LORD is good to those who wait for him, to the soul who seeks him. It is good that one should wait quietly for the salvation of the LORD.*

3:24-26

This is a statement of resolve. It’s a statement of determination. Jeremiah doesn’t give us the answer that we may want. He doesn’t give us resolution. He doesn’t say “At such and such a time, it will all be over.” He doesn’t give us explanation. He doesn’t say “By the way, this is why your suffering is completely fair.” He just gives us this statement.

Jeremiah is saying “God is my portion.” What he means by that is “I’ve thrown my lot in with God, completely. I’m with him. I believe in his goodness. I know right now I’m suffering. I know it doesn’t seem fair. I know I can’t explain it all. But God is my portion and I’m with him. Come what may, I’m going to walk this path of suffering as faithfully as I can and I’m going to wait for the salvation of the lord.”

As I wait, as I suffer through the brokenness of this earth, as I experience what the bible calls these “light and momentary afflictions,” it’s going to help me remember that God’s salvation, his ultimate salvation through his Son, is the one salvation that really matters in this life.” Jeremiah is saying “I’m going to wait on God for true salvation.”

That doesn't mean he's not going to try to improve his situation. He's going to work to make his circumstances better. He tells Israel to do that during the exile in the book of Jeremiah. So it doesn't mean that he's not going to try to improve his situation, but he's going to remember that improving his situation is not the same thing as salvation, because our hope is not in our circumstances. It's in God. It's His salvation that ultimately matters. That's the one lesson that all suffering, no matter what kind it is, no matter what its cause, no matter how deep it is, can teach us. It teaches us not to put our hope in this world, but in God's salvation.

Tim Keller, a pastor in New York City, gives an illustration that has really helped me at times understand how God uses suffering in our lives. He says it's like we're a bird that lives in a forest. There's a lumberjack in that forest, who knows that the trees are all going to be cut down. So every time the bird starts to build a nest in one of those trees, the lumberjack hits it

with the back of his axe. He shakes the tree so that it doesn't feel safe anymore. So we move to another tree and he shakes that one and the next and the next. It seems almost cruel, until finally, we build our nest on a cliff in the rock that cannot be shaken, and we realize that even though that lumberjack caused us so much distress, even though he made us so uncomfortable, he was never there to harm us. He was just teaching us where to put our hope.

Listen, that's how God is. He allows us to experience lament in this life. But if we look closely, as Jeremiah tells us to, we'll see that he is there in the midst of our lament. We'll see that because he's there, our lament is purposeful. We'll see that he provides new mercies every morning, and we'll see that he's teaching us to wait on him.