**Tears**

Lamentations 3

Jeremiah is known as ***the weeping prophet*** because his role was not only to predict the suffering of Israel but to experience it. Listen to Jeremiah’s cries in Lamentations 3:

“I am the man who has seen affliction under the rod of his wrath… He has made my flesh and my skin waste away… He has made me well in darkness… He turned aside my steps and tore me to pieces… He has filled me with bitterness… He has made my teeth grind on gravel…” Lamentations 3:1,4,6,15-16

Here is a man of God – ***a righteous preacher of God’s Word*** – **suffering under God’s wrath**. Sometimes in the Old Testament you have to look for a while to see how a section points to Jesus. But here we see it right away: **Jeremiah was a man of sorrows**, familiar with grief, despised and rejected by men, smitten by God and afflicted.

You expect the prophet of God to face persecution from the enemies of God. But here the faithful prophet comes under ***judgment directly from God*** – this is the hand of God directly against Jeremiah. “HE has made my flesh waste away… HE tore me to pieces… HE made my teeth grind on gravel.” All of this under the “rod of His wrath.”

Jeremiahs shows us first what suffering looks like and then how to find hope in the midst of terrible suffering.

**The Suffering of God’s Servant**

“I am the man who has seen affliction under the rod of his wrath; he has driven me and brought me into darkness without any light; surely against me he turns his hand again and again the whole day long.” Lamentations 1:1-3

Here is a picture of **ultimate suffering**. This is not just the pain of a broken man in a fallen world. This is the very judgment of God. Jeremiah is feeling the rod of God’s wrath. **Why?** Why is this righteous man who has faithfully served the Lord being punished by the Lord?

Clearly ***Jeremiah was suffering and being punished for the sins of God’s people***. For hundreds of years bad kings had led the nation of Israel and Judah into increasing rebellion and idolatry. Other prophets like Elijah and Isaiah had repeatedly confronted this sin but the Jewish people persisted in their evil and finally God’s judgment arrived.

We’ll see with Daniel in a couple of weeks how God protects His people from His wrath. And we saw last week that God did promise through Jeremiah to restore His people after their time of exile. But Jeremiah plays a very Christ-like role through which he feels the fury of God’s righteous judgment like the flogging Jesus would endure six hundred years later. Blow after blow fell upon him. He felt the punishment that he did not deserve. But he accepted it, he bowed before the Lord, bearing the wrath for those who did deserve it.

**Ultimate Suffering** – Darkness, agony, bitterness

“He has driven and brought me into darkness… He has broken my bones… He has besieged and enveloped me with bitterness and tribulation.” Lamentations 3:2,4-5

Jeremiah piles up ***vivid descriptions of what real, ultimate suffering looks like***. Darkness represents confusion, disorientation and fear. To be cut off from light is to be lost, directionless and terrified. Jeremiah experienced a great deal of physical pain as part of his assignment from the Lord. He was thrown in a dark well, fed just enough to stay alive. Again, like Jesus, Jeremiah suffered at the hands of God’s sinful people who were actively rejecting God’s Word.

And so Jeremiah was enveloped with bitterness. Everything in his life turned sour. All happiness was removed and replaced with sorrow and pain. ***What a dramatic and horrific picture of the just wrath of God.*** And he’s just getting started.

**Ultimate Suffering** – Bondage, isolation, shame

“He has walled me about so that I cannot escape; he has made my chains heavy… he shuts out my prayer… I have become the laughingstock of all peoples.” Lamentations 3:7,8,14

Jeremiah was literally walled in, literally chained up at different points in his long ministry. But here he is feeling this **bondage from God Himself** – inescapably locked away. This is what sin does – it binds people, chaining them up with the never-ending contamination of their own wickedness. The essence of hell is being stuck with YOURSELF forever.

**C.S. Lewis** says if we only lived 70 or 80 years our little vices wouldn’t be that big a deal. But you take a little selfishness, a little anger and irritability and draw that character trajectory out to INFINITE and, he says, ***that would be hell indeed***. Jeremiah feels the chains of God’s justice upon him and feels cut off in isolation. The Lord would not even listen to his prayers.

This was ***the ultimate moment of Jesus’ suffering for us*** – being cut off from relationship with the Father. Jeremiah experienced that due to the evil of God’s people. And he was mocked and scorned – as Jesus was – by both the Jews and people of other nations – “a laughingstock of all peoples.”

“Aren’t you the prophet of the Almighty God? Where is your God now? Why is your city being assaulted? Why are your gates being knocked down? ***Why is your temple reduced to nothing but smoking ruins?***” The city that was supposed to house the glory of God – like a beacon of light shining the righteousness of God for all to see – the holy city of Jerusalem was rubble, the people taken away as slaves. Still Jeremiah is not done.

**Ultimate Suffering** – Restless, exhausted depression

“My soul is bereft of peace; I have forgotten what happiness is… ‘My endurance has perished; so has my hope from the Lord…’ Remember my affliction and my wanderings…” Lamentations 3:17-19

Peace means more than the absence of tension – it means wholeness, unity, health, purpose. Shalom in Scripture is a big word with layers of meaning. To be utterly cut off from peace is to descend into misery. And ***peace is connected with REST*** – with that feeling of safety that allows you to really let go. There was none of that for Jeremiah as he was worn out, his endurance exhausted in all of his wanderings and exertions.

Finally depression overwhelmed him as his hope was extinguished. In verse 54 it said it was like water closing in over his head and that feeling of being totally lost. Some of you can relate to that picture very personally – **feeling hopelessly lost in darkness**, sadness and pain. Jeremiah can. And his experience is just a small window into the infinite suffering of Jesus – the true Man of Sorrows.

***Why did Jeremiah, the faithful prophet, have to suffer?*** Not for his own sins – but for the many sins of the people. Their evil and rebellion piled up year after year, generation after generation until God could stand it no more and finally let them sink under the filth and wickedness of their sin. Jeremiah was swept away in the flood of God’s judgment – just as Jesus was on the cross, 600 years later. **The servant of God suffered for the people of God.**

That is what ultimate suffering looks like. And this shows us how to find hope even in the midst of terrible suffering – **focus on the One who suffered for you**.

* The ultimate servant of God endured a darkness and agony beyond what any of us can imagine.
* He drank the bitter wine of God’s righteous fury.
* He was chained to our sin, driven from the presence of the Father, mocked and reviled by everyone.
* And as Jesus died on the cross He descended into the restless depression and hopeless exhaustion of hell.

The Servant of God suffered all of this for us. Now let’s see how Jeremiah found hope in the midst of his suffering.

**Finding Hope in the Midst of Suffering**

1. ***Focus on God’s Faithfulness***

“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.” Lamentations 3:21-23

What is the lifeline you can grab onto when you feel like you are drowning in pain? “This I call to mind.” Remember the truth. ***Hold on in the darkness to the truth you learned in the light.*** Cling to the character of God – focus on His enduring faithfulness and steadfast love.

Brothers and sisters, God is faithful. The whole reason for the judgment Jeremiah endured was God’s faithfulness to keep His Word. Jeremiah himself foretold this judgment. ***The exile was no surprise to students of God’s Word*** who were paying attention.

The same thing is true of the end times – if you know your Bible you will not be surprised when the world begins to fall apart. Persecution of Christians will increase 1,000 fold. Natural disasters and wars will increase exponentially like birth pains that move from periodic aggravations into active labor. One day – possibly very soon – an articulate leader will arise who will unite the whole world under the banner of peace and security. The nations will flock to him – but before long he will demand worship and begin to execute any who refuse to take his mark.

***All of this is clearly foretold in God’s Word.*** Just as Jeremiah knew exactly what was happening as the Babylonians encircled Jerusalem, so believers should not be caught off guard when our little tribulations grow into the Great Tribulation. God’s wrath is growing against a world filled with evil, violence and idolatry. Eventually the cauldron of God’s righteous fury will boil over and fall on the world, consuming everything. We are living in the last days as God’s patience runs out. Now is the time of God’s favor when He calls all people to repent, but the opportunity to repent will soon close, like the door on Noah’s ark. And then the seven bowls of God’s wrath will be poured out on the earth.

**God is FAITHFUL to keep His Word.** He kept His promise to punish Israel, and He will keep His promise to bring perfect justice to all people. Every single person will reap exactly what they have sown. Every single person will stand before God’s great white throne of judgment and be held responsible for everything they have ever done, said or thought. Everything that is currently in darkness will be brought into the light and every sin will be paid for. Every single one.

Thankfully God is faithful to keep His promises to judge the world and ***He is also faithful to keep His promises to save*** all who call on Him in faith. His steadfast love never ceases. His mercies are new every morning. Here is Jeremiah in the darkest, most painful depression of his life – and this is what he calls to mind – this is where his thoughts come to rest.

**What do you focus on when you get depressed?** Where does your mind come to rest? If we dwell on our pain that is a toilet bowl that will keep us locked into sadness. But if we take hold of this lifeline, God will gradually lift us out. You have to be realistic – grieving is a process and you cannot rush through suffering and loss. But you can hold on to hope in the midst of even the deepest sadness. ***Here is the light to run to*** – focus on the FAITHFULNESS of God. Though we are unfaithful, though we deserve nothing but His judgment, the man of Sorrows took that judgment for us so that we could experience God’s mercy.

We spent a lot of time reflecting on ultimate suffering under God’s just wrath – because that shows us the fullness of what Jesus suffered for us. He drank every drop of the wine of God’s fury. He took that blazing justice INTO HIMSELF so that we could drink in the cool, refreshing water of His grace and forgiveness.

And that’s the second step to finding hope in our suffering:

**Finding Hope in the Midst of Suffering**

2. ***Rest Quietly in God’s Grace***

“‘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.” Lamentations 3:24-25

God’s judgment feels like restlessness, exhaustion and the absence of peace. God’s grace brings us into His peace where we can rest. He is our good shepherd who leads us into green pastures and guides us to still waters so He can restore our souls.

**Is your hope fixed in the Lord Himself?** Suffering tests this. Do we truly love the GIVER or do we only love His GIFTS? Do we love the Lord for who He is or only for what He gives us? Can we truly say, “The LORD is my portion”? Or do we really want the WORLD for our portion? **The test of an idol is how we respond when we lose it.**

Tim Keller says, ***“If you lose something important you are sad. But if you lose something ultimate you are lost.”*** Obviously if your husband or wife dies or if you lost a child, you will be sad and you’ll have a long season of grieving and putting the pieces of your life back together. But if that person was an idol to you, you will feel like you have no life to reassemble. Do you see the difference?

Anything we elevate from a good thing in our lives to **become a GOD THING is an idol to us** – we have made it ULTIMATE. You know that because deep in your heart you say, “Without that person or without that job or without that thing my life would not be worth living. I simply could not live without… that.” Wait and see when something in your life is threatened or suddenly removed and you will see if the Lord truly is your portion – if your hope was truly in Him.

Kristin and I have been with people through ***some very deep and dark valleys.*** We have been involved with dozens of funerals – both for old, long time believers who go home to the Lord leaving a wonderful legacy behind them and for very small children. I once held a 19 week old – premature baby boy in my hand for the twenty minutes it took for his little heart to stop beating because his lungs were not formed enough. He was a perfect, little tiny one pound baby – all of his little fingers and toes – but he was born too early so he had not chance to survive. We grieved with his parents. We wept with them there in the hospital. We took his little body in a miniature casket and helped them bury him in this premie section of the cemetery.

We’ve seen people, like that couple, **grieve loss well**. And we’ve seen others grieve very poorly – crawling into a hole, withdrawing from relationships and just laying in bed. Tim Keller has a helpful book called, ***“Walking with God through Pain and Suffering.”*** The title is well chosen. We have to WALK with God through our suffering. He says, “You can’t run through the grieving process but you don’t need to lay down in it either. We have to keep walking, day by day, moment by moment WITH the Lord.” And that’s what we find when we do that – is that the Lord is faithful to walk with us if we will just seek Him in our pain.

**Finding Hope in the Midst of Suffering**

2. ***Rest Quietly in God’s Grace***

“It is good that one should wait quietly for the salvation of the Lord… Let him sit alone in silence… Why should a living man complain, a man, about the punishment of his sins?” Lamentations 3:26-28,39

Sometimes the best thing we can do is **be quiet**. Sometimes the most dangerous thing we can do is open our mouths. Remember when Job’s friends came and sat with him after he lost everything? For a whole week they just sat with him, weeping with him in silence. And that was a wonderful ministry – ***the ministry of PRESENCE, the ministry of tears, the ministry of silence.***

When we have walked with people through suffering, **the best thing is just being there**. It’s not about having the right words to say – often the more you say the worse it is. It’s just about being there. In the hospital that day with the couple who lost their baby another mom came who had had three miscarriages. Her tears meant even more because she was re-living a pain that she had personally endured. She could truly say, “I’ve been right where you are. I know that pain. I know that sadness.”

**Job’s friends did well that first week**. But then they opened their mouths and it was all downhill after that. ***“It is good to wait QUIETLY for the salvation of the Lord.”*** Now, this whole book of Lamentations is Jeremiah expressing himself to the Lord. So obviously the point is not to just be quiet and never say anything. The Bible is filled with passages like this and most of the Psalms, through which God’s people pour out their sadness, their fear, their anger, their confusion. God invites us to express everything we think and feel to him. TO A POINT.

Job was righteous in his suffering – to a point. Eventually, in protesting his innocence over and over, ***Job came to question the justice of God.*** And that crossed the line. God is totally fine with us spouting our sadness to Him – but be very careful to sit in judgment on God. Job demanded his day in court with the Lord and eventually he got it. The result of that encounter was Job covering his mouth and repenting in sackcloth and ashes.

Listen to verse 39: “***Why should a living man complain***, a man, about the punishment of his sins?” All of us suffer – at least in part – as a consequence of our own sin. Jeremiah was not perfect. He points to Jesus but he was not perfect like Jesus. Jeremiah had a share – even if a small one – in the judgment of God poured out on Israel.

When we COMPLAIN, ***we question the justice of God.*** We elevate our own understanding and bring God into the courtroom of our opinions. On what possible basis could we – finite, ignorant, sinful people that we are – how could we dare to judge the Lord of all righteousness and the God of perfect faithfulness? No.

2. ***Rest Quietly in God’s Grace***

Don’t complain of the “injustice” God gave you, but rejoice in the justice Jesus took for you

“It is good that one should wait quietly for the salvation of the Lord.” Lamentations 3:26

Wait QUIETLY. For Jeremiah the salvation of the Lord was in the future. For us it is in the past. The salvation of the Lord came in Jesus – who endured the cross and the full wrath of God for us. The only One who could complain of INJUSTICE was Jesus – for He was the only sinless person to ever live. So we should not complain of injustice. Rather ***we should rejoice in the INJUSTICE Jesus joyfully accepted so that we would NOT GET JUSTICE*** from God but could instead experience His salvation.

May we learn to REST in His grace – finding peace and hope in the Lord and His limitless love for us. This brings us to the third step:

**Finding Hope in the Midst of Suffering**

3. ***Humbly Acknowledge God’s Justice***

“Let us test and examine our ways, and return to the Lord! …We have transgressed and rebelled, and you have not forgiven.” Lamentations 3:40,42

When things go wrong it is important that we trust in God’s justice and sovereign plan rather than question Him. “Let us test and examine **OUR** ways.” It is not for us to test and examine GOD.

In Jeremiah’s case the reason for his suffering was very clear – it was the sin of the nation of Israel. Jeremiah includes himself in that sin saying, “Let US test and examine our ways, and return to the Lord!”

Let me be clear – ***not all suffering we experience is because of our sin.*** But some of our suffering certainly is.

* If you drink too much and your liver gets damaged, that suffering is a result of your sin.
* If you work too much and your family falls apart, that suffering is the result of your sin.
* If you eat too much and end up with high cholesterol and heart problems, that suffering is the result of your sin.

But some of our suffering is simply ***because this world is fallen***. Illness, disasters, broken down cars, car accidents – many of the bad things that happen to us are just part of life in a broken world. But it struck in this passage how Jeremiah sees God’s hand directly involved in the suffering of Israel. Listen to verse 43:

**Finding Hope in the Midst of Suffering**

3. ***Humbly Acknowledge God’s Justice***

“You have wrapped yourself with anger and pursued us, killing without pity… you have made us scum and garbage among the peoples… panic and pitfall have come upon us, devastation and destruction.” Lamentations 3:43,45,47

God promised to judge His people. He warned them over and over about their sin and idolatry. Finally God’s patience ran out and the judgment came upon them. God is not unjust to punish sinners. ***God would be unjust NOT TO punish sinners.*** Listen to where the justice of God intersects with His mercy in verse 31:

**Finding Hope in the Midst of Suffering**

3. ***Humbly Acknowledge God’s Justice***

“For the Lord will not cast off forever, but, though he cause grief, he will have compassion according to the abundance of his steadfast love.” Lamentations 3:31-32

Though God’s hand turned against Jeremiah and the people, still the prophet humbly bowed before the justice of God and held fast to his hope in the coming mercy of God.

Oh brother, sister, ***do you feel like God has caused you grief?*** Do you feel like He has cast you aside? Do not question the justice of God – hold on to the truth that God is absolutely righteous and His perfect plan for us does use suffering and sorrow and loss to shape us more and more into the image of Christ. And hold on to this hope – that though there is pain in the night, joy comes in the morning. For the God of all justice is also the God of all mercy. “He will have compassion, according to the abundance of his steadfast love.”

Step four:

**Finding Hope in the Midst of Suffering**

4. ***Grieve over the things that grieve God***

“My eyes flow with rivers of tears because of the destruction of the daughter of my people. My eyes flow without ceasing…” Lamentations 3:48-49

This is why Jeremiah is called the ***“weeping prophet.”*** He enters into the sadness of God. God was not happy to punish Israel – He was brokenhearted about it. God did not want to send His people away into exile in a foreign land. Their sin and persistent rebellion forced Him to it. God does not delight in judgment. He “wills that NONE SHOULD PERISH but that all should come to repentance.”

Judgment is the necessary expression of God’s righteousness to ensure that justice is done in the end. God is like a good father who punishes his young child but sincerely says, “this is going to hurt me more than it hurts you.” My dad had a belt when we were young and the only line my brother and I feared more than that one was “I’ll give you something to cry about.” You don’t understand how discipline does hurt the parent more than the child until you have a child of your own. Then you get it.

God punished His people – and it was very real, severe punishment. The Babylonians were no joke. Slavery and exile may sound like abstract concepts for us 2600 years later but being marched away from your home in chains and living out your days in a distant land was profoundly difficult.

***Do we grieve over the things that grieve God?*** Of course we weep over the things that hurt US. And that is certainly ok as well. But do our hearts break for the things that break God’s heart?

Several of us from the youth group went down toward the city last Monday night to help give **food and supplies to local homeless people**. I’d say 100 or so hungry and pretty bedraggled people were there, gratefully receiving a plate of food and some basic resources like deodorant, soap, socks and underwear. I love that our youth group has a heart to serve like this.

***Do we see the needs in our city*** and have compassion for people as God does? Do we really love our neighbors? Do our hearts break for the widows and orphans here in Tampa?

Part of walking through suffering ourselves is ***realizing that we are not the only ones who are suffering.*** Everyone has a story and every story includes pain and loss. Are we paying attention to the pain and loss around us or are we so caught up in our own issues that we don’t even see the needs of others?

**Finding Hope in the Midst of Suffering**

4. ***Grieve over the things that grieve God***

“My eyes cause me grief at the fate of all the daughters of my city.” Lamentations 3:51

Jeremiah saw what was happening, particularly to the young women in Jerusalem. The most vulnerable in slavery situations are young girls. And that issue is not just an ancient one. Millions upon millions of young girls (and boys) are bought and sold all over the world still today. Even right here in our city the slave trade is very active.

Do our eyes cause us grief at the fate of the daughters of our city?

All of this should lead us to the fifth step in finding hope:

**Finding Hope in the Midst of Suffering**

5. ***Call on the Lord in faith***

“I called on your name, O Lord, from the depths of the pit; you heard my plea.” Lamentations 3:55

God sees everything we are going through. He hears our cries for help. Trust in His plan, hold on to His love. Be like Jeremiah and pour out your plea to the God of all mercy and grace. Call on the Lord in FAITH. Trust in Him.

**Finding Hope in the Midst of Suffering**

5. ***Call on the Lord in faith***

“You came near when I called on you; you said, ***‘Do not fear!’*** You have taken up my cause, O Lord; you have redeemed my life.” Lamentations 3:57-58

***Our God is the God of redemption.*** He takes the worst things and turns them into good in our lives. The exile was a terrible season for Israel but God used it to refine them and purify them. He used this horrific time to speak His word through Jeremiah so we would have this book of Lamentations as a guidebook for our times of suffering and loss.

Let’s conclude where we started today. Jeremiah was a man of sorrows who endured great suffering because of the sin of the people. **Jesus was the ultimate man of sorrows** who endured ultimate suffering because of your sin and mine. When we think about justice may we focus on the just punishment for sin that God poured out on His only Son on the cross. That was the necessary price of our redemption. That is how God took up our cause and redeemed our lives.

Let’s find hope in JESUS as we walk through this broken world and face seasons of suffering and loss. And remember that He is always with you, always holding on to you – no matter what.

NO MATTER WHAT.