

BECAUSE OF THIS

SERIES: LAMENTATIONS: THERE
MAY YET BE HOPE



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Lamentations 3
Third Message
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Lamentations 3

Does the pandemic represent the judgment of God?

Before answering the question, let's consider the historical context of the book of Lamentations. According to the Scriptures, the destruction of Jerusalem in 586 B.C. by the Babylonians and the subsequent exile of people of God represented the judgment of God.

The people were warned in Deuteronomy 28 and other Scriptures that God's judgment would fall on them if they persisted in idolatry. The prophets, not least Jeremiah, the author of the book of Lamentations, also issued warnings and then, once God's judgment fell, confirmed that the destruction of Jerusalem and the exile represented God's judgment.

The Lord has done what he purposed;
he has carried out his word,
which he commanded long ago;
he has thrown down without pity;
he has made the enemy rejoice over you
and exalted the might of your foes.
(Lamentations 2:17)

Inasmuch as God's judgment is on the world because the world has by and large turned its back on him to worship other gods, we can say that the pandemic, much like everything else that is wrong with the world, represents God's judgment on the world. Beyond that, I don't know whether we can be more specific, because the Scriptures aren't more specific.

In any event, whether the pandemic represents the judgment of God simply in a general sense or also in some specific sense, it represents an opportunity for us, just like the destruction of Jerusalem represented an opportunity for the Israelites.

Hope has perished

In the first two chapters of Lamentations, Jeremiah wrote about Jerusalem and he quoted Jerusalem, declaring that Jerusalem's affliction is deserved because

of her rebellion against the Lord (Lamentations 1:5, 8, 18, 20). In Lamentations 3, he uses the first-person singular "I." Jerusalem has seen affliction, but now Jeremiah says, "I am the man who has seen affliction / under the rod of his wrath" (Lamentations 3:1). He has been afflicted along with Jerusalem under the rod of the Lord's wrath.

In Lamentations 3:1-18, Jeremiah goes on to say, in vivid, anguished language, what the Lord has done to him. He's been brutalized, and he's been brutalized by the Lord.

Jeremiah concludes, "My endurance has perished; / so has my hope from the Lord" (Lamentations 3:18). Jeremiah, after sixty verses of excruciating poetry, has reached the point of total despair. Because of what the Lord has done to him, his "hope from the Lord" has perished. He has no hope.

It's hard to live without hope, without anything to look forward to. You can survive without hope, but you cannot thrive without hope.

Even though Jeremiah has reached the point of total despair, he has also reached one of the major turning points in Lamentations. He concluded verse 18 with the covenant name of the Lord, "YHWH," translated "the Lord." His hope from the Lord has perished, but if he is to recover hope, it must come from the Lord.

The French novelist George Bernanos writes, "In order to be prepared to hope in what does not deceive, we must first lose hope in everything that does deceive."¹

Having poured out his soul, is Jeremiah ready to see things a little differently? Are you ready to see things a little differently?

New every morning

After petitioning the Lord in Lamentations 3:19, asking the Lord to "remember" his affliction and his wanderings, Jeremiah writes, "But this I call to mind / and therefore I have hope" (Lamentations 3:21). Because he calls "this" to mind, he has hope. Astoundingly, after

writing that his hope from the Lord has perished, he declares that he now has hope. What is “this”?

Lamentations 3:22-24:

**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.”**

The word translated “steadfast love” is the plural of the Hebrew word *hesed*, which was used to convey the Lord’s covenant love for his people. The plural means that the Lord’s steadfast love has multiple expressions. The Lord bound himself to Israel in his covenant, and Jeremiah has become convinced that whatever else ceases, the Lord’s steadfast love for his people—even his steadfast loves—will never cease. Yes, the Lord has judged his people, but he has loved them throughout.

Specifically, in view of the affliction that the Lord has visited upon Jerusalem and Jeremiah, the Lord’s mercies, expressions of the Lord’s steadfast love, never come to an end. Again, Jeremiah uses the plural. In view of Jerusalem’s rebellion against the Lord, she needs not only the Lord’s mercy but also his mercies: multiple expressions of his mercy. The Lord’s mercies have been in effect throughout, and they will continue to be in effect.

The steadfast loves and mercies of the Lord are “new every morning”: the dawning of a new day is a reminder that the steadfast loves and mercies of the Lord are still in effect. In fact, the dawning of each new day is an opportunity to renew one’s confidence in his steadfast loves and mercies and to see new aspects of them.

Indeed, Jeremiah declares, “[G]reat is your faithfulness”—that is, the Lord’s faithfulness to his people. The word translated “great” conveys abundance. The Lord has visited his people with affliction, but he is still faithful to them—abundantly so. In fact, it must be said that in his abundant faithfulness to them, he visited affliction upon them when they persisted in worshipping other gods.

Hope in the Lord

The land was considered Israel’s “portion.” But the land has been devastated. Nevertheless, the steadfast loves of the Lord never cease. His mercies never come to an end. Great is his faithfulness. Jeremiah concludes,

like David before him, “The Lord is my portion” (Psalm 142:5). Losing everything has helped him appreciate that he hasn’t lost the Lord—and that the Lord, not the land or anything else, is what he needs.

At the conclusion of the stanza, Jeremiah literally writes, “On this I will hope in him.” Remember, at the conclusion of the previous stanza, Jeremiah wrote, “But this I call to mind, / and therefore I have hope.”

“This” is Lamentations 3:22-24. Jeremiah has hope because of the steadfast loves, mercies, and abundant faithfulness of the Lord, all of which lead him to conclude that the Lord is his portion. Jeremiah calls “this” to mind: the Lord is his portion. Therefore he has hope. More specifically, now, Jeremiah has hope “in” the Lord. His hope “from” the Lord had perished; now, once again, the Lord has given him hope, but this time his hope is “in” the Lord. The hope he has from the Lord is in the Lord, in the knowledge that the Lord—and nothing else—is his portion. The Lord gives Jeremiah himself.

The Lord’s wrath does not negate his steadfast loves, his mercies, or his faithfulness, for his steadfast loves never cease, his mercies never come to an end, and his faithfulness is abundant.

Having arrived at a place where he hopes in the Lord, Jeremiah now seems content to wait for the Lord even as the Lord is afflicting him and his people (Lamentations 3:25-27). If the Lord is his portion, he believes that there is a future worth waiting for.

The beloved hymn “Great is Thy Faithfulness” comes from these verses. The hymn conveys the powerful words of these verses even if it gives no context for the anguish that gave birth to them. The same can be said for the hymn “The Steadfast Love of the Lord.” Also, neither song mentions the point of the stanza they quote: “The Lord is my portion.” The next time you sing one of those hymns, remember the anguish from which the words came and the point of the stanza.

The Lord is your portion

Call this to mind:

The Lord’s steadfast loves, which never cease, and his mercies, which never come to an end, and his faithfulness, which is abundant, mean this: the Lord is your portion. You may lose everything, but if you believe in Jesus, you can’t lose the Lord. Especially when you have suffered loss and when your hope perishes, call

this to mind: The Lord is your portion. The Lord gives you himself. This is your hope: the Lord is your portion, now and forever. You can look forward to knowing more of him.

If the Lord is your portion, then you can say with David, “The lines have fallen for me in pleasant places” and, “I have a beautiful inheritance” (Psalm 16:6). If the Lord is your portion, then it is “a good and broad land, a land flowing with milk and honey,” “running over,” “the most glorious of all lands,” for in his presence “there is fullness of joy” and “pleasures forevermore” (Exodus 3:8, Luke 6:38, Ezekiel 20:6, Psalm 16:11).

Scholar Christopher Wright tells the story of a man in Rwanda who lost his home and his whole family in the genocide. Although he was destitute, he told a visitor, “I never knew Jesus was all I needed until Jesus was all I had.”²

The Lord is your portion.

There is usually something for me to look forward to, if only a fishing trip or a round of golf with my brothers or some friends. So in a way, I always have hope. But if all I’m looking forward to about fishing or golfing, then the fishing or the golfing is an idol. But if I appreciate it as a gift of God, then I worship as I golf or fish, and fishing and golf are charged with the presence of God. “Every good gift and every perfect gift is from above, coming down from the Father of lights, with whom there is no variation or shadow due to change” (James 1:17). I encounter him on the stream or on the golf course. A trout stream is not my portion. A golf course is not my portion.

The Lord is my portion.

It is the burden of my life to understand as best I can the greatness of knowing the Lord and to communicate that understanding as best I can.

There may yet be hope

Having declared that he has hope and that his hope is in the Lord, Jeremiah now seems to backpedal a bit, conjecturing that “there may yet be hope” (Lamentations 3:29). First, he had no hope. Then, he had hope. Now, he sort of has hope.

Lamentations 3:31-33:

For the Lord will not
cast off forever,

32 but, though he cause grief, he will have compassion
according to the abundance of his steadfast love;
33 for he does not afflict from his heart
or grieve the children of men.

Having backpedaled somewhat, Jeremiah returns to the themes he mined in Lamentations 3:22-24. The verb translated “will have compassion” is related to the noun translated “mercies” in verse 22. Again, the word translated “steadfast love” appears in the plural and would be more literally translated “steadfast loves.” If the Lord afflicts his people and therefore causes them grief, Jeremiah is convinced that the Lord, out of his abundant and steadfast loves, will have compassion on—or show mercy to—his people.

If the Lord afflicts his people, he doesn’t do so “from his heart.” It’s something he has to do, not something he wants to do. He has to do it, in fact, because of the steadfast loves and mercies—because he wants the best for his people, not the worst.

Wright observes, “God’s anger against evil is a terrible reality. It is the negative outworking of God’s goodness in rejecting and repelling all that is contrary to his nature and will, but it is not eternally definitive of his character *God is love. God is not anger.*”³

We deserve worse

In the beginning of Lamentations 3, Jeremiah said he was “the man” who had seen affliction because of the Lord’s wrath. Now he asks, “Why should a living man complain, / a man, about the punishment of his sins?” (Lamentations 3:39) The words “about the punishment” would be better translated “in view of.” Jeremiah, though he laments in all five of his poems in Lamentations, questions whether anyone, even the most morally upright, has a right to complain about suffering in view of his or her sins.

If the Lord afflicts men and women for their sins, the problem is not with the Lord; the problem is with men and women who sin. The problem is sin, which begins with turning away from the Lord and worshiping other gods.

Whatever suffering we have endured or are enduring, we need to understand that we deserve worse. We have all rebelled against God to whom after other gods that we think will satisfy us. “None is righteous, no, not one” (Romans 3:10).

King Lear, in Shakespeare's play, proclaims, "I am a man more sinned against than sinning." Are you King Lear? I know I am. Most of us tend to see ourselves more as sinned against than sinning, more as victims than victimizers. We tend to see that problem as being more out there, with other people, than in here, in our own hearts. We tend to think other people need to change more than we do. Thus, we let ourselves off the hook and feel justified in our anger.

Do we deserve a pandemic? Of course we do. We deserve a worldwide flood that kills all of us. The fact that we have only suffered one worldwide flood is a testament to God's mercies—which are new every morning, by the way. We deserve a pandemic. We deserve a flood. We deserve hell.

What then should we do?

Examine your ways

If the problem is sin, and if the Lord is right to afflict people when they worship other gods, then Jeremiah writes, "Let us test and examine our ways, / and return to the Lord!" (Lamentations 3:40) The implication, in view of how the Lord has afflicted his people in his wrath, is that their ways are sinful. Jeremiah hopes that the people will realize that their ways are sinful if they test and examine them. Otherwise, why would he encourage them to "return to the Lord"?

The need is not so much to stop sinning per se but to "return to the Lord." Their first sin was to leave the Lord. Having left the Lord to worship other gods, they followed in the ways of those gods and not in the ways of the Lord. If they can see that their ways are not aligned with the ways of the Lord, then they can realize that they have left him and recognize their need to return to him—and recognize that he is their portion.

So, let us examine our ways. The fourth-step in Alcoholics Anonymous encourages us to "make a searching and fearless moral inventory of ourselves."

Ask the Spirit to search your heart. What false gods we have put our hope in? "In order to be prepared to hope in what does not deceive, we must first lose hope in everything that does deceive."

I try to look back on each day with the Spirit's help to try to understand when I cooperated with him and when I resisted him. It's not simply a matter of trying to

discern what you did right and what you did wrong; it's more a matter of going to the deep places in your heart to understand how you're seeking the Lord or running from the Lord. Try putting this into practice for about ten minutes one day this week in the evening or the morning.

"The purpose in a man's heart is like deep water, but a man of understanding will draw it out" (Proverbs 20:5). Often, strong emotions, especially anger, serve as invitations for us to examine our ways. If you find you are more concerned with the sins of others than your own sins, then that's a sign you need to do business with God.

Can you imagine what the world would look like if even a fraction of its population were more bothered by their own sins than the sins of others? Perhaps the world would look a little different if every time people posted something negative about, say, Nancy Pelosi or Mitch McConnell, they also confessed one of their own sins. Can you imagine what the world would look like if everyone was more interested in confessing his or her own sins than the sins of other people?

Years ago I was part of a church in which one of the worship songs was based on Psalm 139:23-24, which reads, "Search me, O God, and know my heart! / Try me and know my thoughts! / And see if there be any grievous way in me, / and lead me in the way everlasting!"

At that particular time, I was angry with someone—and felt completely justified in my anger. As I was nursing my anger one evening, the song that I had been singing Sunday mornings came back to me, and I realized that there was a grievous way in me. I could see that my ways were not in alignment with God's ways. That revelation was liberating. For holding a grudge—seeing yourself as a victim, as more sinned against than sinning—traps you in a vicious cycle of bondage.

If you can see that you're running from the Lord, then you do what Jeremiah wants you to do: return to the Lord. Remember, the Lord, and not anything you've been running to, is your portion. Suffering, whether you deem it deserved or undeserved, creates an opportunity to know God better. Isn't that what you need: to know God better? Isn't that what you want?

The pandemic presents us with an opportunity to examine our ways. When the pandemic ends, do you want everything to return to the way it was? Or are there some changes you'd like to make?

True to life

The rest of Lamentations 3 reads much like the first part. In fact the rest of Lamentations 3 reads much like Lamentations 1 and 2. Moreover, Lamentations 4 and 5 read much like Lamentations 1 and 2 and most of Lamentations 3. In other words, we hear mostly painful words in the book of Lamentations but few hopeful words. Consider the following:

—“You have wrapped yourself with anger and pursued us / killing without pity” (Lamentations 3:43).

—“You have made us scum and garbage / among the peoples” (Lamentations 3:45).

—“[M]y eyes flow with rivers of tears / because of the destruction of the daughter of my people” (Lamentations 3:48).

Despite the anguish of Lamentations 3:43-66, Jeremiah finds it within himself to ask the Lord to deliver him, especially in view the Lord’s prior deliverance of him (Lamentations 3:52-66).

Finally, Jeremiah writes of his enemies, who are also the enemies of God’s people and the enemies of God, “You will pursue them in anger and destroy them / from under your heavens, O Lord” (Lamentations 3:66).

Jeremiah has not abandoned the hope he found in Lamentations 3:22-24, but as he writes, it recedes into the background.

The book of Lamentations is different from most psalms of lament. Most psalms of lament follow this kind of pattern: the writer pours out his heart for most of the psalm, receives a new perspective toward the end. In the book of Lamentations, Jeremiah follows a similar pattern up to halfway through the third chapter. Then the rest of the book reads mostly like the beginning of the book: he pours out his heart.

Lamentations 3—indeed, the entire book of Lamentations—strikes me as true to life. We lament and somehow arrive at some place where we sing something like “Great is Thy Faithfulness” from our hearts and feel every syllable of it. And then, the moment fades, and we’re seemingly back where we started, and we have to start all over again. If that’s where you are today, start all over again.

Isn’t it better to have a few highs and lows, where you can readily encounter God, than the ever-present, mundane middle? You don’t want to be like the “desperado” in the Eagles’ song: “You’re losin’ all your highs and lows / Ain’t it funny how the feeling goes away?”⁴

Behold, the man!

Jeremiah says, “I am the man who has seen affliction / under the rod of his wrath.” His words foreshadow what would be said, centuries later, of another man, another prophet.

That man was flogged. A crown of thorns was placed on his head. Then Pilate, the Roman governor, introduced him to a crowd, saying, “Behold, the man!” (John 19:5). Indeed, Jesus could say, “I am the man who has seen affliction.”

Moreover, at that point, his affliction was only beginning, for a few moments later, he would be crucified—under the rod of God’s wrath, not just God’s wrath against the sin of one person or one nation at a particular time but against the sin of all people for all time. Talk about affliction! Nobody knows the trouble he’s seen.

What does that mean for us? The apostle Paul tells us, “Since, therefore, we have now been justified by his blood, much more shall we be saved by him from the wrath of God” (Romans 5:9). If there is none righteous, no not one, Peter informs us, “For Christ also suffered once for sins, the righteous for the unrighteous, that he might bring us to God . . .” (1 Peter 3:18).

“Why should a living man complain, / a man, about the punishment of his sins?” We deserve to be crucified; he didn’t. The only righteous man who ever lived was getting what we deserve. If anyone had a right to complain about what he suffered, Jesus did. But he didn’t.

Behold, the steadfast loves of the Lord, which never cease. Behold, his mercies, which never come to an end. Behold, his faithfulness, which is abundant. Behold, the man! Yes, behold the man, for that man embodies the Lord’s steadfast loves, mercies, and faithfulness.

Because of this—because of Christ—we have hope: the Lord is our portion, even and especially when we’re suffering, and he will create “a new heavens and a new earth in which righteousness dwells” (2 Peter 3:13).

If you do not yet know Jesus, can you now see that the problem isn't out there but in here, in your own heart? Can you see that on the cross, Jesus got what you deserve? Confess your sins and invite Jesus into your heart. He will cleanse you from your sins and give you hope that transcends this world.

In Christ alone my hope is found,
He is my light, my strength, my song
This Cornerstone, this solid ground
Firm through the fiercest drought and storm.⁵

Let us examine our ways, and let us return to the Lord.

Endnotes

- 1 Jaques Ellul, *Reason for Being: A Meditation on Ecclesiastes* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1990), 47.
2. Christopher Wright, *The Message of Lamentations* (Downers Grove, ILL: InterVarsity Press, 2015), 113.
- 3 Wright, 116.
- 4 Glenn Frey and Don Henley, "Desperado," 1973, on *Desperado*, Asylum Records.
5. Keith Getty and Stuart Townend, "In Christ Alone," 2001, Thankyou Music (Admin by EMI Christian Music Publishing), <https://www.stuarttownend.co.uk/song/in-christ-alone/>.