

GREAT IS YOUR FAITHFULNESS – dipping into Lamentations 3 (by Peter Anderson)

A news reporter was speaking with a friend from Syria who was on a brief visit to the UK. The Syrian man was from the ancient city of Aleppo, which as you know has been devastated by the civil war raging in Syria. Wanting to be sensitive about how his friend might be feeling, the news reporter did not bring up the situation in Syria. They talked about other things. His Syrian friend seemed happy and when asked how he was, he insisted that he was fine. The next day however, in the middle of a conversation, the Syrian man suddenly burst into tears. His whole body shook with convulsive, uncontrollable weeping. His face was contorted with pain as he cried out, “My people, my country,” “My people, my country.” The pain and suffering inside came tumbling out.

In the Bible the prophet Jeremiah must have felt just like this about his people and his country. Jeremiah is often called the ‘weeping prophet’. The two books written by him both focus on one major event – the destruction of Jerusalem by Babylon in 586 BC. The book of Jeremiah predicts the fall of Jerusalem and the book of Lamentations looks back at those tragic events.

Lamentations is only 5 chapters long. It is a deeply emotional book and is written as poetry with the rhythm and style of a Jewish funeral song. The first 4 chapters are arranged into 22 stanzas (verses or group of verses), each starting with a different letter of the Hebrew alphabet. If it was in English, for example, the first stanza would begin with the letter ‘a’, the second with the letter ‘b’, the third with the letter ‘c’, and so on. Chapter 5 does not use this style but also has 22 verses.

Lamentations is a book of lament. It speaks of weeping, of desolation, of suffering, persecution, mocking, groaning, hunger and grief. And yet there is much to encourage us in this book. In the midst of all the pain and suffering a ray of hope shines. Right in the middle of Lamentations, in chapter 3, we come across a powerful statement about God’s love and faithfulness and about the blessing of putting our trust in Him. Today we are going to dip into this chapter.

Our first heading is:

1. **CRUSHED AND BROKEN** 3:1-20

Let us read the first stanza, vrs 1-3.

“I am the man who has seen affliction by the rod of the LORD’s wrath. ² He has driven me away & made me walk in darkness rather than light; ³ indeed, He has turned His hand against me again & again, all day long.”

Notice the phrases “**seen affliction**”, “**made me walk in darkness**”. Jeremiah had been faithfully serving the Lord as His prophets, warning the people and their leaders about the coming judgement and their need to turn back to God. Yet despite his service, Jeremiah felt as if the Lord had afflicted him & made him walk in darkness. He felt as if the Lord had been fighting against him.

In the next stanza, vrs 4-6, notice phrases like “**broken my bones**”, “**surrounded me with bitterness & hardship**”, and “**living in darkness.**” And in the third stanza, vrs 7-9, Jeremiah says the Lord had allowed him to be “**walled in**” and “**weighed down**”. He felt as if God was deliberately ignoring his prayers. In vrs 10-12, he talks of being “**dragged from the path & mangled**”, “**left without hope**”.

In the fifth stanza, vrs 13-15, we can see the deep emotional hurt Jeremiah experienced. People had laughed at him & mocked him. No wonder he says in v.20, “**...my soul is downcast within me.**” Yes, Jeremiah feels crushed & broken. He had faithfully and courageously proclaimed God’s Word to the people but they refused to listen. Rather than thanking him for speaking the truth, they attacked & persecuted him. They called him a traitor.

Evan Mawarire is a pastor in Zimbabwe who appeared in short videos with a Zimbabwean flag draped over his shoulders. In the videos he spoke about the need for change in his country. He was eventually arrested but when brought to trial thousands of people gathered to support him singing and praying outside the court. He was set free but warned to leave the country as his life was in danger. After six months overseas Ps Mawarire returned to Zimbabwe on February 1 this year only to be arrested at the airport. Ps Mawarire is a brave man speaking the truth but called a traitor & a criminal by those in power. Recently too in Malaysia, another brave

pastor Raymond Koh was abducted in broad daylight in early February. His 'crime' seems to be that he helped the poor & loved to share the Gospel with everyone, including Malay people.

We cannot compare our situations to those of Jeremiah in the Bible, or Ps Mawarire in Zimbabwe or Ps Raymond in Malaysia. However there may have been times in your life when you felt crushed and broken. There may have been times when you felt God was not listening to your prayers or was treating you unfairly. Another well-known example in the Bible is Job. Job suffered terribly through no fault of his own. He had no idea why he was suffering. We know why Job was suffering because the Bible itself explains all that was going on in the unseen spiritual realm – things that Job himself did not know. You may have gone through times of suffering. Maybe you have asked, “Why, Lord?” There may have been times when you felt deeply hurt, discouraged, deserted. There may have been times when your tears flowed and your heart was breaking.

Earlier in vrs 19 & 20 Jeremiah wrote, “**I remember my affliction & my wandering, the bitterness & the gall. ²⁰ I well remember them.**” However not only did Jeremiah remember all these terrible things, he remembered something else, and it proved a turning point in his experience. In v. 21 he says, “**Yet this I call to mind & therefore I have hope:**” Despite his terrible circumstances, Jeremiah recalled, he remembered, he brought to mind, something else, and an amazing thing happened. What was it? Yes, Jeremiah discovered hope. The circumstances hadn't changed but Jeremiah was lifted above those circumstances. Like a plane rising above the turbulence of the dark clouds below, he found peace of heart and mind. What was it that Jeremiah called to mind? What was it that he remembered? What enabled him to rise above those dark clouds? We find the answer in the next stanza, and this is our second point for today:

2. LOVED AND BLESSED 3:21-33

Let us read together vrs 22-24: “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.'**”

Jeremiah stopped dwelling upon (thinking about, focussing on) his circumstances, his sorrows, his troubles. He started thinking about the Lord and all the Lord had done for him. His circumstances had not changed but when he stopped focussing on his troubles and heartaches and focussed instead on the Lord and all the Lord had done, his heart was changed. Hope began to rise in his heart.

It is so easy for us to keep going over in our minds all the negative things, all the bad things, the nasty things people have done or said, the troubles, the setbacks, the trials – but when we do that we too end up feeling more & more discouraged. We too feel crushed and broken. Like Jeremiah, we need to turn our thoughts away from ourselves and our circumstances and think instead about our wonderful Lord & Saviour. Let us remember how amazing and wonderful it is that, despite our unworthiness, He loves us and has forgiven us and made us His children.

God's people in Judah & in Jerusalem had rebelled against the Lord. They had deliberately turned their backs on Him. Society was filled with immorality, idolatry, corruption & violence. Yes, they deserved the judgment of God but as Jeremiah says, it was due only to the Lord's great love that they were not totally wiped out.

The Bible makes clear that we too are sinners who deserve nothing but God's righteous judgment. Romans 3:23 says, “**for all have sinned & fall short of the glory of God.**” God is just and holy and must punish sin. Yet the amazing truth of the Gospel is that God is also a God of love. As Jeremiah says, “**Because of the LORD's great love we are not consumed...**” Although Jerusalem was defeated by the Babylonians and many were killed or taken into exile, God was not finished with His people. He still loved them & wanted to bless & restore them. And the same is true for us. God loves each one of us.

Ezekiel, a younger contemporary of Jeremiah writes, “**As surely as I live, declares the Sovereign Lord, I take no pleasure in the death of the wicked, but rather that they turn from their ways & live.**” (Ezekiel 33:11) This is the message of the Bible, as John 3:16 says, “**For God so loved the world that He gave His one and only Son that whoever believes in Him shall not perish but have eternal life.**”

Jesus took the punishment we deserve. He died in our place. When you are tempted to despair or to feel God doesn't love you or care about you, remember what He has done. Remember what He did in history on the cross for you, and look back in your own history too and remember all the things He has done for you. This is what Jeremiah says, "...His compassions never fail. ²³They are new every morning; great is your faithfulness." God's compassions, His mercies, His kindnesses, His blessings never fail. They are new every morning.

The phrase "**new every morning**" reminds us that each day's mercies or kindnesses or blessings are given for that day. Yesterday's mercies were for yesterday. Today's mercies are for today. They are new every morning and God gives us all we need for each day. And we need not worry about what tomorrow holds either for when tomorrow comes, God's new mercies, will be there for us tomorrow.

When I was a ten-year-old boy I attended a missionary meeting in my hometown of Bulawayo in Zimbabwe. Two Kiwis visitors were speaking – Oswald Sanders, General Director of the CIM (OMF) and China-missionary, Hayden Mellsop. At that meeting I sensed God was calling me to be a missionary. I think, however, that the exciting (& scary) stories Mr Mellsop told about his time in China during the Japanese occupation must have worried me a little because after the meeting I asked Mr Mellsop, "If God calls me to be a missionary, will I get killed?" Mr Mellsop replied, "You don't have to worry about that. If God calls you, what happens to you is up to Him." That was not much comfort to me at the time but Mr Mellsop was right. It is almost 60 years since God called me to serve Him and from my own experience too I can say His mercies are new every morning and we do not need to worry about the future. We need simply to live each day depending upon God's mercies knowing that whatever the future does hold we can trust Him. Oh that we had eyes to see the many mercies of God in our lives! How we would thank Him, and trust Him with our future.

After reminding himself of the Lord's unfailing compassions, His 'new-every-morning' mercies and blessings, Jeremiah exclaims, "**Great is your faithfulness!**" Yes, God is faithful. He keeps His promises. He never lets us down.

Yesterday was Elizabeth and my 17th wedding anniversary. One of the songs we sang at our wedding was the old favourite: *Great is Thy Faithfulness*. The chorus goes:

*Great is thy faithfulness! Great is thy faithfulness!
Morning by morning new mercies I see;
All I have needed your hand has provided;
Great is thy faithfulness, Lord, unto me!*

The writer of this hymn was American Thomas Chisholm (1866-1960). He was never rich or famous, he worked in an ordinary office job and did not enjoy the best of health – although he did live into his nineties! Chisholm wrote nearly 1200 poems and hymns, including this one *Great is Thy Faithfulness*. Near the end of his life he wrote, "I must not fail to record here the unfailing faithfulness of a covenant-keeping God and that He has given me many wonderful displays of His providing care, for which I am filled with astonishing gratefulness." How true! In all the ups and downs of life, in the big things and in the little things, day after day, we know that our God is totally trustworthy. We can rely upon Him for He is faithful to the promises in His Word.

Not only could Jeremiah say the Lord was totally faithful, he goes on to say, "**The LORD is my portion; therefore I will wait for Him.**" What does it mean to say "**the Lord is my portion**"? When we hear the word "**portion**" we normally think about food. When I was growing up my four brothers and I always watched carefully as our father or mother divided up the food at meal times. We wanted to make sure we each got our fair share or portion. In the Bible this word *portion* not only refers to someone's share in a meal, it also refers to someone's inheritance. And when the word is used to describe God, it takes on an even deeper meaning. In Psalm 73, for example, the Psalmist writes, "**Whom have I in heaven but you? And earth has nothing I desire besides you. My flesh and my heart may fail, but God is the strength of my heart and my portion forever.**" (Psalm 73:25-26) The Psalmist had been getting jealous of the seeming prosperity of wicked people. But then, like Jeremiah, he remembers something. He remembers that he has an inheritance – a portion – that is greater than any worldly wealth. His portion is God Himself. Jeremiah remembers the same truth here in Lamentations 3:24. He remembers that God is his portion. When we have the Lord, we really have all we need for life and for eternity.

We may not have all the answers, but we can learn to trust the Lord. As Jeremiah says in v.25, we know that **“The LORD is good to those whose hope is in Him, to the one who seeks Him.”** When we are convinced of God’s goodness we can wait confidently & expectantly, knowing that in His time and in His way He will answer. Waiting confidently or expectantly does not mean we just sit back & do nothing. We need to actively seek the Lord. As we set aside time to read His Word, to pray and to have fellowship with other believers, we come to know the Lord better. We become more confident of His goodness and love, for we experience it firsthand.

So then if the Lord allows us to suffer trials or setbacks, and if we are ever tempted to think He doesn’t love us or has been unfair to us, let us remember that we are loved and blessed by our faithful God. As Jeremiah writes in vrs 31-33, **“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.”**

Our first heading was *“Crushed and Broken”*. Our second was *“Loved and Blessed”*. Now finally and briefly: **3. RESTORED AND FORGIVEN 3:34-66**

In the final section of chapter 3 in v. 39 Jeremiah asks, **“Why should the living complain when punished for their sins?”** Of course the answer is we have no right to complain. Instead, as Jeremiah says in v 40, **“Let us examine our ways & test them, & let us return to the LORD.”**

Jesus told a story about a young man who made a big mess of his life. A key moment in the story is when the young man realises the mess he is in and decides to return home to his father and ask for his forgiveness. The incredible thing is that **“...while he was still a long way off, his father saw him & was filled with compassion for him; ran to his son, threw his arms around him & kissed him.”** (Luke 15:20) That is how the heavenly Father treats you & me when we repent and come back to Him. Amazing, isn’t it!

Jeremiah repented on behalf of the people. He wept for his nation. **“Streams of tears flow from my eyes because my people are destroyed.”** (v.48) I think this is remarkable when I think of all Jeremiah suffered. He says in vrs 52 & 53, **“Those who were my enemies without cause hunted me like a bird. They tried to end my life in a pit & threw stones at me...”** One time Jeremiah was thrown down a pit & his feet were sinking in the mud at the bottom. He refers to this in v 55ff, **“I called on your name, LORD, from the depths of the pit. ⁵⁶ You heard my plea: ‘Do not close your ears to my cry for relief.’ ⁵⁷ You came near when I called you, & you said, ‘Do not fear.’”** In the midst of his suffering Jeremiah heard the Lord say **“Do not fear.”**

Despite what he suffered, Jeremiah knew the Lord would take care of him. He says, **“⁵⁸ You, Lord, took up my case; you redeemed my life. ⁵⁹ LORD, you have seen the wrong done to me. Uphold my cause!”** The Lord vindicated Jeremiah. The Lord brought to pass all that Jeremiah had prophesied. Jeremiah knew God was a God of mercy & forgiveness. He knew the Lord wanted to bless His people, to heal and restore them. As it says in John 3:17, the verse that comes after the famous John 3:16, **“God did not send His Son into the world to condemn the world, but to save the world through Him.”**

God does not want us to be lost. No, He wants us to repent and be saved. He is ready to forgive. This is such good news for NZ and for all nations but it is also good news for us as individuals. When feeling crushed and without hope, call to mind (remember) the great love of the Saviour, rejoice in His daily blessings and wait patiently for Him. He is all you need. He loves you and wants to bless you. Come back to the Lord today. Put your trust in Him. He will never let you down for great is His faithfulness.