

Lamentations 3:21

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[0 : 0 0] Do you have hope on the threshold of 2015? Do we have hope? Do we have reason to hope?

Do we, as God's people, have a message of hope for a nation, a society that has in great measure lost its way? Tonight, I want us to learn from one who, in the most desperate of circumstances, is able to proclaim and testify with a quiet confidence, I have hope. In verse 21 of Lamentations chapter 3, yet this I call to mind, and therefore I have hope.

There, there is the testimony, that quiet confidence that we're calling it of the one who writes. I have hope. But it was not always so. Indeed, what does the very same man declare in a verse that precedes the one that we have read in verse 18? Just a couple of verses prior to this declaration, I have hope. What do we read?

So I say, my splendor is gone, and all that I had hoped from the Lord. Or that same language of the author in the starker translation of the English Standard Version, my endurance has perished, so has my hope from the Lord. Hope perished, hope extinguished, what is left when all hope is gone. But then, just two verses on, phoenix-like, hope is rekindled, hope is reborn, hope is resurrected.

Yet this I call to mind, and therefore I have hope. Now, my primary concern this evening is to focus on hope reborn. But we will be unable to appreciate the wonder or even the nature of hope reborn if we are ignorant of the reality of the reality of hope extinguished. And so what we'll do, first of all, is consider how it was that hope was extinguished, how it was that the writer can speak of his hope having perished before then moving on to consider, to celebrate, and indeed to learn from the reality of hope reborn. So let's first of all think just briefly about this matter of hope. Extinguished, my endurance has perished, so has my hope from the Lord. Now, in order to understand how it is that the one who writes expresses himself in this way and indeed describes his reality in this way, we need to take a step back and appreciate something of the big picture. Not all the big picture, but enough to locate ourselves in history and in the circumstances that the author finds himself.

[3 : 2 7] What is this book all about? The book of Lamentations, not a book that we often turn to. Well, in terms of what it's about, the clue is in the name, the book of Lamentations. The writer is an eyewitness of the most appalling chapter in the history of Israel, in the history of Judah, and particularly of Jerusalem, the destruction of Jerusalem, and the resulting exile at the hands of the Babylonians in 587 B.C.

Now, we know a great deal about that occasion. Many books of the Bible speak of it, prophesy about it, and then describe it. And this evening I'll desist from burdening you with the horror and the terror of all that this involved, the destruction of Jerusalem. It is not a pleasant picture that is painted by the biblical writers. Suffice it to say that the Hebrew name of the book, the book that we know as the book of Lamentations, is telling and poignant. And the Hebrew name is simply the word how. That's it, just how. The title, with a stark and striking economy of language, adopts the word with which the first, and indeed subsequent chapters, begin. Notice how the book begins. In verse 1 of chapter 1, how deserted lies the city. In chapter 2, it begins also, how the Lord has covered the daughter of Zion and with the cloud of Zion with the Lord. And we could go on. How? How Jerusalem has been raised to the ground. How dreadful the circumstances that God's people find themselves in. How grievous their pain.

How cruel their suffering. How desperate their circumstances. And indeed, how can all this be happening at all? A city razed to the ground. A people massacred. A nation all but extinguished.

And a man of God called to witness, but not only to witness all that is occurring, but to minister in the midst of the darkness. Who was that man of God? Well, the book itself, the book that we know as the book of Lamentations does not identify the author. But the translators of the Septuagint, that is the Greek translation of the Hebrew Old Testament, do give us an insight, indeed more than an insight.

They identify who they consider to be the author of the book. And the title that they give the book stands in stark contrast to the Hebrew title, which is simply How. It's a much larger title, clearly the work of a committee. And I'll just read what the title given to the book is in the Septuagint. And it came to pass after Israel had been taken away into captivity, and Jerusalem had been made waste, that Jeremiah sat weeping and lamented this lamentation over Jerusalem and said.

[7 : 01] And so, not as easy to remember as how, and not as dramatic as how, but it does give us more information. And certainly there, the translators identify Jeremiah as the author, and it's generally considered that he was indeed the author of the book, though we can't state that with absolute certainty. To get a sense of the personal despair of Jeremiah, that in addition to being a personal despair, I think also represents the despair of Jerusalem that he is part of, and as a prophet, in some senses represents even in his writings. But to get a sense of that despair, all we need to do is read his own words, and the words that begin the chapter where we find our text. Now, we didn't do that a few moments ago when we were reading our text, but we'll do so now. The verses that precede the verses that we'll be giving a little bit more thought to this evening. So, let's just read from chapter 3, the beginning of chapter 3, through to where our reading was earlier in the service, verse 21. So, we'll read from verse 1 through to verse 20. We're not going to be delving into all of these verses. Really, just in the reading of it, I hope that we get some sense, simply as we listen to what Jeremiah writes, get some sense of the depths to which the people have been brought, and Jeremiah himself finds himself in. I am the man who has seen affliction by the rod of his wrath. He has driven me away and made me walk in darkness rather than light. Indeed, he has turned his hand against me again and again all day long. He has made my skin and my flesh grow old and has broken my bones. He has besieged me and surrounded me with bitterness and hardship. He has made me dwell in darkness like those long dead. He has walled me in so that I cannot escape. He has weighed me down with chains. Even when I call out or cry for help, he shuts out my prayer. He has barred my way with blocks of stone.

He has made my paths crooked like a bear lying in wait, like a lion in hiding. He dragged me from the path and mangled me and left me without help. He drew his bow and made me the target for his arrows. He pierced my heart with arrows from his quiver. I became the laughingstock of all my people. They mocked me in song all day long. He has filled me with bitter herbs and sated me with gall. He has broken my teeth with gravel. He has trampled me in the dust. I have been deprived of peace. I have forgotten what prosperity is. So I say, my splendor is gone and all that I had hoped from the Lord. I remember my affliction and my wandering, the bitterness and the gall. I well remember them and my soul is downcast within me. Well, it's not a pretty picture that Jeremiah paints. Who is the author of such misery?

Are we to point our accusing finger in the direction of Nebuchadnezzar and his Babylonian generals? They, after all, were the ones who raised Jerusalem to the ground, who tortured the inhabitants so cruelly, who dragged them off into captivity? Well, Jeremiah looks elsewhere. We notice how time and time again, he uses these words, he has. He has driven me away. He has made my skin and my flesh grow old. He has besieged me. He has made me dwell in darkness. He has walled me. And he goes on. Well, you get the picture he has. But who is the he of he has? Does he have a name? Well, he is the Lord. All that Jeremiah laments is the hand of God, acting in just judgment. And as we shall discover in a moment, also gracious judgment, just but gracious judgment against his own people. And in so judging, in so acting, the Lord brings Jerusalem and Jeremiah to a dark, dark place where hope has been all but extinguished. We're back to verse 18. My splendor is gone and all that I had hoped from the Lord. All hope is gone. Hope, it would seem, is mortal after all. Hope has perished. And yet even in verse 18, when he speaks of hope perishing, there is a glimmer of, can we call it hope, as the very hope that is gone is hope that has a source.

Jeremiah identifies this hope that has gone as hope from the Lord. And so even in Jeremiah recognizing the source of the hope that has gone, might the one who has withdrawn his hope might also be the one who would grant it afresh. Jerusalem and Jeremiah is in a dark place, but it is a good place, which may seem a contradiction. How can a dark place be also a good place? Well, it is a good place for God's people, though a dark place, for it is in the womb of despair that hope may again be born. It is only in that dark place that light can shine in all its splendor. It is only from the depths that we can be lifted up to the heights. And it is only in our weakness and sinfulness that we can marvel at his strength and grace. Just listen to what the reformer Martin Luther says in this matter or in this regard, not particularly about this passage, as he ponders on this reality and compares it to the very creation of the universe. He expresses himself in this way, God made the world out of nothing, and it is only when we are nothing that he can make anything of us. Well, I don't want to delve into all that we might think of what he says there, but it ties in a little with the circumstances that Jerusalem finds itself in, that Jeremiah finds himself in, in the wake of the destruction of Jerusalem. Jerusalem was nothing.

Any passerby who would look on all that had been destroyed, he would have said, well, here there is nothing left, nothing at all. Even Jeremiah, I imagine, considered himself as being very close to being nothing. I wonder as we fast forward to our own lives and this year that is coming to an end, I don't know what 2014 has been like for you. Have there been dark days, maybe dark weeks, maybe even dark months, painful trials, grievous loss, unwelcome, a failure and frustration? Have you been brought face to face with the painful reality of your own inadequacy, maybe multiple inadequacies? Have you experienced something of what it is to lose hope? It is in the womb of despair that hope is reborn. And to that we want to turn now, in the time that we are going to turn now, we are going to turn now, we are going to turn now to hope to be a better place.

[14 : 49] We are going to turn now to hope to be a better place. We are going to turn now to hope to be a better place. Now, if it is the case that Jeremiah and Jerusalem were brought so low as he himself describes it, I wonder if in this matter of hope being reborn, Jeremiah and Jerusalem must be entirely passive and simply wait for this hope to be reborn, to be rekindled by another. It is, as Jeremiah himself recognizes in verse 18, it is hope that is from the Lord. If the Lord is the one who has extinguished that hope, or so it would appear, then surely all Jeremiah can do is wait for the Lord to once again rekindle that which had been extinguished. Simply wait on the Lord. But as we read what he declares, we find that that is not the case. Because in our text, Jeremiah testifies to what he has done to experience the rebirth of hope in his own life. Notice what he says there in verse 21, yet this I call to mind, and therefore I have hope. He describes something that he has done, something that he is doing. He is calling to mind. It's one thing that he does, and we want to think in a moment what that involved. But he does something. He calls to mind. But that's not all he does.

We carry on in the reading, and in verse 23, we find another thing that Jeremiah does. We read, I say to myself, the Lord is my portion, therefore I will wait for him. So he calls to mind. We'll see in a moment what it is he calls to mind. Then he says to himself, and we'll think about what he says to himself. But then I think there's something else that he does. I think once hope has been reborn, having his own mind, having spoken to his own soul, he then speaks to others. He speaks to you and me, and he shares something of what he has discovered. And we'll notice in a moment what that is. But let's think, first of all, what Jeremiah does then that results in hope being reborn. And the first thing that he does that we've identified is that he calls to mind. Yet this I call to mind, and therefore I have hope. What does Jeremiah call to mind? Well, he calls to mind the love of God, the compassion of God, and the faithfulness of God. That is what we read of in this very well-known passage. Interestingly, though not surprisingly, it tends to be just these verses that are familiar to us. And we know very little of the verses that come before or that follow, because these verses are so beautiful, so attractive, and we're drawn to them. But in actual fact, their value and their beauty is only emphasized by what has come before. Indeed, as we see what Jeremiah says, with the backdrop of what he has written, then they become all the more glorious, far from taking away from their value. Their value is emphasized by the circumstances in which he declares himself in the way that he does. But let's think, then, what it is that he calls to mind, the love of God, the compassion of God, and the faithfulness of God. There we read in verse 21, yet this I call to mind, and therefore I have hope, because of the

Lord's great love, we are not consumed. The Lord's great love. The word that is translated love there is a word that's familiar to us. It's sometimes translated as steadfast love or covenant love.

This is the love of God as our covenant God, as our covenant Father. This is the love that is always there. A love in all its intensity. Indeed, the word that Jeremiah uses here is in the plural, and there simply as a mechanism or a means of emphasizing the intensity of the love that he is speaking about. And it is because of this great love that Jeremiah rightly concludes that God's people are not altogether consumed. It might appear that all is lost, that the people have been altogether extinguished, but it is not so. They have not been altogether consumed. Jeremiah is still standing, perhaps on his knees, but certainly still with breath, and others also. The fire burns, but it does not altogether consumed. The storm blows, but the house is not altogether blown down. The rod chastens, but it does not destroy. The love of God that is evidenced in the very fact that all is not lost, that they are not consumed. Now, this matter of God's love being demonstrated by the reality that we are not consumed, that this is a truth that ultimately we can only understand, I wouldn't say fully understand, but understand in greater measure in the light of the cross, in the light of Calvary, because it is only in the light of Calvary that we can understand why it is that God's disobedient people are not consumed. And we know that we are not consumed because another was consumed in our place.

God's great love that Jeremiah celebrates and speaks of and testifies to, God's great love became flesh in the person of his son Jesus, and he was consumed in our place. Jeremiah calls to mind the love of God, demonstrated in the fact that he has not been, and God's people have not been, altogether consumed. The love of God, but he calls to mind also the compassion of God.

[21 : 09] God's compassion, if you wish, is the evidence or the outworking of his great love in the field of action. Love manifests itself in compassion. And we are told by Jeremiah that the Lord's compassions never fail. This is his experience. This is what he testifies to in the midst of the darkness.

His compassions never fail. What does that mean, that his compassions never fail? Well, his compassion is never absent, whatever the circumstance, never absent. His compassion is never found wanting. It's never insufficient for whatever circumstance might befall us. However dreadful, however painful, his compassion is never found wanting. And his compassion never runs dry.

We hear a lot in the context of disasters here and there and appeals for help and financial campaigns to raise money for those affected.

And that's all, of course, very worthy. We hear the phrase often in the news, or perhaps not often, but you hear the phrase compassion fatigue. When if people have been asked time and again to show compassion, there's fatigue sets in, and there's just a limit to how much compassion we can show, not show with God.

His compassions never fail. So Jeremiah calls to mind the love of God. He calls to mind the compassion of God. And he calls to mind the faithfulness of God, God's dependability, his steadfastness, his utter reliability, his unflinching commitment to his own, and the keeping of his every promise.

[22 : 52] And the evidence of his faithfulness is all around, says Jeremiah. It is new every morning. Now we can debate as to whether this expression, new every morning, is to be understood in reference to God's love and compassion, or in reference to his faithfulness, or indeed in reference to all three.

But certainly we can take it as being a reference to his faithfulness, that it's coupled with this reference and this talk of his faithfulness. They are new every morning. Great is your faithfulness.

New every morning. And note the deliberate and telling inclusion of the word every. Yes, every morning, declares and testifies Jeremiah. Every morning. On the morning, the walls of Jerusalem were breached by the Babylonian hordes. On the morning, the temple was razed to the ground. On the morning, that mothers wailed the loss of their sons. On the morning, the exiles, dragging their shackles, began their painful pilgrimage into captivity. Yes, on every morning, Jeremiah is able to declare that God's faithfulness that God's faithfulness is present. Even on those dark mornings, perhaps especially on those dark mornings, the faithfulness of God dawned with the rising sun. What about you?

What about me? The love and compassion and faithfulness of God are new every morning. In this year that is coming to an end, every morning that is dawned, has dawned together with and accompanied by the faithfulness of God. Yes, every morning. Those mornings of pain and despair and confusion and loss and doubt and failure, every morning. Maybe not visible, maybe not felt, maybe not recognized, but the faithfulness of God knew every morning. Jeremiah calls to mind, and we must do likewise. But in the darkness, we are to call to mind not only the compassionate and faithful presence of God, but perhaps even more importantly, the compassionate and faithful purpose of God. He's not only there for us, He is at work for our good.

Now, this is hinted at in what follows in the chapter. Notice what Jeremiah says from verse 31, For men are not cast off by the Lord forever. Though He brings grief, He will show compassion.

[25 : 37] So great is His unfailing love, for He does not willingly bring affliction or grief to the children of men. And behind these words, there is this hinting at a purpose in it. There is a reason for this suffering. There is a reason for the grief that the people of God are experiencing. And maybe it becomes clearer what that purpose is as we reread in verse 40, the call that Jeremiah makes to himself and to God's people. Let us examine our ways and test them, and let us return to the Lord. It's not simply a calling to mind the presence of God, precious though that is, but perhaps even more significantly, calling to mind the purpose of God in the midst of the darkness and of the pain. God is not only there, He is at work for our good. And so too, as it was for Jeremiah, so too for us, we call to mind God's presence in the darkness. But we also call to mind God's purpose for the darkness. And this we can only do adequately as we call to mind His saving work, as we call to mind the cross, as we call to mind a calvary. It is at calvary that we are confronted with the great love, the great compassion, and the great faithfulness of God. It is at calvary that we most powerfully discover God with us and God for us, God's presence and God's purpose. I called to mind. That is what Jeremiah did, and it was as he called to mind that hope was reborn. But then also, and much more briefly, we notice that

Jeremiah does something else. And of course, these things are very much interconnected. He says to himself, there in verse 24, I say to myself, what does he say to himself? Well, what he says to himself, what he says to his soul is both a conclusion and a resolve. First of all, he concludes on the grounds of what he has called to mind, on the grounds of God's great love, on the grounds of God's great compassion, on the grounds of God's permanent and unceasing faithfulness, he concludes that the Lord must be his portion. That is, none other he can turn to. I say to myself, the Lord is my portion.

The Lord who I have discovered to be so loving and compassionate and faithful, to whom else would I turn. This is his conclusion, a wise and reasonable conclusion. The Lord is my portion. The Lord is all he needs and all he must have. The Lord his is his all and in all. So as he speaks to himself, as he speaks to his soul, he concludes in the light of what he has been pondering on, on the light of what he has called to his mind, but he also resolves. Therefore, I will wait for him. I say to myself, the Lord is my portion. Therefore, I will wait for him. The word there translated wait is the same word translated hope in this declaration of Jeremiah, I have hope. Therefore, I will hope in him. And he resolves to hope in the Lord. This is deliberate and conscious resolve. It doesn't just happen. It is necessary.

It was necessary for Jeremiah to deliberately and consciously resolve to do this. I will hope in the Lord. At the dawn of a new year for us, this is something we must also resolve to do. I don't know if you're into new year resolutions. I think most of us have discovered that they're not very helpful.

But if you are to resolve anything, then resolve this. With Jeremiah, resolve this. I will hope in him. I will wait for him.

[29 : 43] Hope is reborn in the experience of Jeremiah as he calls to mind the great love of God, the compassion of God, the faithfulness of God. It is reborn as he says to himself, coming to this conclusion that none other than the Lord will be and can be his portion, and resolving anew to wait on him, to hope in him.

But then there's a final thing that I want to notice here that Jeremiah does, and that is that he speaks to us. He speaks to others. The words aren't in the text, but it's as if he would say to introduce verses 25 and 26, I say to you. I've called to mind in my own moments of private reflection. I've spoken to my own soul, but now I say to you. And what does he say to us? Well, what does the text say from verse 25?

The Lord is good to those whose hope is in him. To the one who seeks him, it is good to wait quietly for the salvation of the Lord. He declares to us what he has discovered for himself.

And this is also our conclusion. And this is also our message. We have discovered it to be true in our own experience what Jeremiah declares in these verses. The Lord is good to all those who hope in him, to the one who seeks him. We've discovered that it is good to wait, to hope quietly for the salvation of the Lord. And as we have discovered it, so now with Jeremiah, we have to declare it.

Have you discovered this to be true in this year that is coming to an end? Have you declared it to others that it is good to wait in the Lord, to hope in the Lord? Have you in the year that is ending?

[31 : 43] Will you in the year that is about to begin? Perhaps for you, 2014 has particularly been a year to discover the reality of God's presence and purpose in the darkness. And now as a new year dawns, it's time to declare it to be true in the light of God's presence. And I'm going to be in the light of God's dealings with us.

The Lord is good to those whose hope is in him, to the one who seeks him. May that be our conclusion, but may it also be our message as we embark on a new year. God grant that it would be so. Let's pray. Heavenly Father, we do thank you for your word. We thank you for what Jeremiah discovered in the midst of a darkness that most of us perhaps have never come close to experiencing.

Perhaps some closer than others, no doubt. But we thank you that in the midst of pain and suffering and cruelty and desperate circumstances, he was enabled to call to mind, to call to mind your great love and your great compassion and your great faithfulness.

And as he did so, he was able to declare, therefore, I have hope. We thank you that he was able to come to that very sound and wise conclusion. The Lord is my portion. He was able to resolve that he would deposit his hope in the Lord, that he would wait on him, that he would hope in him. We pray that all of this would be true of us also.

That we would be those who call to mind, especially as we come to the end of a year, that we would call to mind in all that is gone, in good times and bad, in times of joy and in times of pain, that we would call to mind your great love and compassion and faithfulness. And we thank you that we call to mind not only our own personal experiences, but we call to mind your saving work on our behalf in history and very especially in this ending of your Son, where we meet face to face the great love and compassion and faithfulness of God.

[33 : 58] We pray that as we experience that in ourselves, we would also be those who have that message to share with others, to invite others to also hope in you, for they also will discover that you are a God in whom they can place their hope and will never be disappointed.

Help us then so to share that message in this year that is about to begin. And we pray these things in Jesus' name. Amen. Amen. Let's sing now as we close our service this evening. We're going to sing from Psalm 62 on page 80.

On page 80 of our psalm books, we're going to sing from verse 5 through to the end of the psalm. Psalm 62 from verse 5. We'll sing to the tune, And singing on through to the end of the psalm, we'll stand to sing.

Psalm 63 from verse 5.

Psalm 63 from verse 5.

[36 : 05] Psalm 63 from verse 5.

Psalm 63 from verse 5.

Psalm 63 from verse 5.

And even though your goods increase, set not your heart on what is vain.

Psalm 63 from verse 5. That you are strong and loving, Lord.

[38 : 35] Now may the grace of the Lord Jesus Christ, the love of God and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit be with us all now and always. Amen.