

I Am A Man of Constant Sorrows
Lamentations 3

Intro:

Lamentations 3 is the crescendo of the book. In Lamentations 3 we will find one of the most beautiful set of verses in the whole Bible. Lamentations 3:21-24 is an often quoted and memorized passage and rightly so. It is a very comforting text.

Lamentations 3:21-24 is the turning point of the chapter and the whole book. We find *the man of constant sorrows* beginning to be changed. I say *beginning to change* because when you keep reading Lamentations 3 we find that even though he is returning and his faith is being reawakened, he still struggles with his grief, pain and loss.

This is how grief, pain and loss work. Just when you think you have gotten control of it, it blindsides you, it returns, it overcomes you as if you have been mugged in some back alley. Kubler-Ross wrote a book on the cycle of grief that has been a popular resource for therapists to help people cope with grief. However, Kubler-Ross reduces grief to a cycle or a process that a person goes through and really depersonalizes the grief a person experiences. I agree there is definitely a cycle or process that can be identified for the grieving person but grief is more than a process.

Grief is about the person not the process. What we find with grief is that people will often take one step forward and two-steps back. That is the reason people will have days or weeks or even periods of life where they seem to be fine and then all of the sudden they drift back into their struggle with grief and perhaps even depression.

Depending on the person and what they experienced their grief is never fully gone. People can be deeply marked by suffering and grief. Some people can be left with a measure of pain and melancholy for the rest of their lives. I am not saying they have no hope or have lost all joy but there is a measure of pain that never fully goes away.

And . . . you know what . . . that is okay. It is okay to not be okay. The church should be the place where it is okay to not be okay. We may have our hearts broken and the pain may remain for years or never go away.

I think we find this experience of the *man of constant sorrows* in Lamentations 3. It seems like he finally has a handle on his grief and suffering and even turns from his sin only to watch him fall back in the pit of despair in the latter part of the chapter and then in Lamentations 4.

However, even though he falls back into the pit of despair still Lamentations gives orderliness to grief. The cycle of grief is personal and God-centered. As the *man of constant sorrows* pours out his grief in alphabetical order just like he did in Lamentations 1 & 2 but Lamentations 3 is a triple acrostic. It is despair and a God-ward hope tripled.

I only have a one-point sermon this morning that we will unpack as we move through the text. Here is the point: *The grace of God meets us in our deepest, darkest grief and suffering*. While I only have one point there are four truths that will help us unpack this single point.

- I. The overcoming grace of God enables us to take a long hard look at our lives (vv. 1-18)
- II. The overcoming grace of God reminds us of His mercies (vv. 19-24)
- III. The overcoming grace of God teaches us wisdom in our suffering (vv. 25-39)
- IV. The overcoming grace of God teaches us to pray honest prayers (vv. 40-66)

Grace is infused throughout Lamentations 3 and not just Lamentations 3 but the whole book is about grace. Really it is; you just have to put your gospel glasses on to see it. So before we jump into Lamentations 3 I need to show you the bigger picture of what was going on. There is grace at work in these chapters and we need to be able to see it.

I want to refer you to Isaiah 57:17-19. In Isaiah 57:17, God punished His rebellious people for breaking His covenant, "Because of the iniquity of his unjust gain I was angry, I struck him; I hid my face and was angry, but he went on backsliding in the way of his own heart." So Israel sinned and kept on sinning. They resisted the grace of God working in their lives. The grace was seen in the call by the prophet Isaiah to return to the Lord but they were hardhearted and would not listen.

What Yahweh does next is a work of grace. Verses 18 & 19 says, "I have seen his ways, but I will heal him; I will lead him and restore comfort to him and his mourners, ¹⁹ creating the fruit of the lips. Peace, peace, to the far and to the near," says the Lord, "and I will heal him." What God's grace does next is to overcome the hardness of heart, to overcome the grace-resisting backsliding ways of His people.

If you remember in Lamentations 2, the Poet said Israel was beyond healing and they were beyond the healing of any human. They needed to be healed and restored by God. This was going to take a greater work of grace to overcome their hardheartedness. It was going to require divine healing to actually raise the dead and changes hearts of stone to hearts of flesh. What we find in Lamentations is that grace working, changing, softening and creating the fruit of lips that come from a soft heart toward God. We begin to see the change in Lamentations 3 but it will not be fully realized until Lamentations 5.

I. The overcoming grace of God enables us to a long hard look at our lives (vv. 1-18)

- As we begin Lamentations 3, we finally meet the author; he is the man of constant sorrows and afflictions. In first 39 verses of Lamentations 3 we find his sorrows, hope and memories are all mingled together.
- We cannot see it so clearly in the English but in *the root of many of the Hebrew words* in vv. 1-39 carry the idea of expectant hope. This is significant because Lamentations 1 and 2 almost seem hopeless. But now in Lamentations 3 we find the *man of constant sorrows* examining his life and he is ever so slowly being changed.
- In vv. 1-18 *the constant man of sorrows* teaches us that we must have robust understanding of God's sovereignty. He is able to look at his afflictions and see that God is the author of his suffering. Babylon may have attacked Jerusalem and carried the people off in captivity, destroyed the city and the temple but God is the author of his suffering. This is a God-ward view of suffering we all need. It will infuse hope as we suffer.
- Verses 1-18 are a summary of Lamentations 1 & 2 and in these verses the Poet is reflecting on his life and all that has happened. He speaks in past tense and is recounting all that God has done to get his attention. Let's look at vv. 1-18 very quickly:
 - Verses 1-3: He is remembering all the affliction he has experienced. He says he has been under the *rod of God's wrath*. In Psalm 23, King David says that the Lord is his Shepherd and His *rod* and His staff comforted him. Yet here in Lamentations 3:1 the *man of constant sorrows* says God's *rod* has punished him. It did not comfort him but drove him into darkness and that God is constantly against him.
 - Verse 7: In v. 7 we see that God has blocked every path of escape. The Poet told us this in Lamentations 2 and now he says it again as he reflects on his life.
 - Verse 12: In v. 12 he feels like God is hunting down his life to kill him and devour him.
 - Verse 14: Israel has become the laughingstock of the world. They are humiliated.
 - Verses 16-18: Finally to add to their humiliation they eat a diet of dirt and more humiliation. We usually say when someone who is arrogant has been cut down to size that they have been served a slice of humble pie but this is worse because it is not pie but the poet compares their humiliation to eating gravel.

Application: Believe it or not, this lament is a grace-infused assessment by the *man of constant sorrows*.

- The overcoming grace of God enables you to take a good look at your life. Where do you see God at work in your life? God often uses suffering to knock the props out from under our lives. For the man of sorrows he had nowhere else to turn because every possible security had been removed and he was left with only God. There is nowhere else to turn except back to the Lord.

Perhaps you have heard someone give their testimony about how they came to faith in Christ and it was one of those testimonies where they were very rebellious. There is usually a place where they say something to the effect of, “*That was when I hit bottom.*” This is what we are seeing in the *man of constant sorrows*. He is a man who has finally hit bottom and he knows it.

Hitting bottom is a good place to be. You may be here this morning and you read vv. 1-18 and this sounds like your story. Perhaps you have thought that your life is at the bottom and now what do you do. You turn to Christ—that is what you do.

- The second thing we see is that the overcoming grace of God enables us to come to terms with the fact that God is the author of our suffering. This is Father-filtered suffering. Often when we are experiencing affliction we want to blame God instead of taking it to God or seeing God at work. Has God been using the affliction in your life to bring you back to Him? It takes faith working by grace to see that.

Let me encourage you that when you are going through affliction to make an honest assessment of your life and strive to see God’s hand guiding it for His good purposes. You may not know those purposes at the moment but rest assured—Jesus is for you.

II. The overcoming grace of God reminds us of His mercies (vv. 19-24)

- Verses 19-24 are the continuation of the thought from vv. 1-18. The Poet is still communicating expectant hope in these verses but now it is very clear. Now we see how the grace of God restored the *man of constant sorrows*. And although it is in first person singular, it is still a communal confession of faith.
- Let’s work through these verses:
 - Verse 21: The work of grace in the heart of the *man of constant sorrows* brought on by the affliction of God has caused him to recall truth.
 - The word of *mind* in the Hebrew is the same word for *heart*. This is not just a nostalgic remembrance but the deep work of grace in the control center of the person. His heart, will and mind are not engaged and thinking about the mercies of God.
 - The word *this* (v. 21) points back to the afflictions of vv. 1-18 but also points forward to the expectant mercies of God in vv. 21-24 and gives him hope. He has assurance that God is for him.
 - Verses 22-23: What is the expectant mercy he remembered? He remembered the covenant of God. Although he has broken the covenant and was experiencing the consequences of walking away from God he also knew the grace of the covenant was the God would bring him back and heal him because he belongs to God.
 - The words *steadfast love* is the Hebrew word *hesed*. This is the word for the covenant love of God. The covenant the *man of sorrows* thinking of the covenant of promise. The promise that God would be his God and they would be God’s people, in God’s land, under God’s rule. He remembers that God will save His people. His heart has been drawn back to

truth. Up to this point it has been a long time since he had had much hope. Now TRUTH has been recalled it drives the clouds of darkness away.

- Even in the darkness and affliction, he is able to say these mercies are new every morning. They are as sure as the sunshine. He can finally see the sun in his troubles and is able to confess—GREAT IS YOUR FAITHFULNESS O LORD MY FATHER THERE IS NO SHADOW OF TURNING WITH THEE.
- Verse 24: Verse 24 concludes this section with a confession of faith. None of his circumstances have changed. He is still in the pit but his heart has changed. His grace and truth are moving him toward God. Hope has found a place and he needs to keep reminding himself of the truth so his heart and mind will be transformed by the truth.

Application:

- The application of this text is priceless because it hits us right where we live and is applicable on a daily basis. Just as the sun rises each morning you and I need to be reminding ourselves of the gospel as we begin each day.
- We find the fulfillment of the *hesed of God, the steadfast love of the Lord* in the person and work of Jesus Christ. The covenant love of is fulfilled in Christ. When you see this phrase *the steadfast love of the Lord* in the Old Testament you need to take that forward to the cross for this is where it is ultimately pointing. So for us this is where we need to eventually wind up.
- The implications of this text are clear.
 - First to be able to recall the truth of the gospel, you must first know the gospel. You must know it not in some cultural or nostalgic way but know it as ultimate truth. What are you doing to learn the gospel? How are you learning to deepen your understanding of the person and work of Christ?
 - Second you and I will eventually walk through the valley of the shadow of death. We all at some point wind up in the pit of despair where the cloud of darkness seems to never lift and if you have not experience vv. 1-18, you may definitely feel that way and it will be in that moment you will need the truth of the good news of the person and work of Christ called to mind. You will need to call it to mind because life will not slow down for you to call time and so you can walk over the sidelines and make a call. I can remember specific moments in my life where what I have and done and still do is preach the gospel to myself.
 - This leads me to my third application. Nobody talks to you as much as you do so when you get to this moment you will need to preach the gospel to yourself. This is exactly what we find in these verses. The *man of constant sorrows* is preaching to himself the gospel that was found in the Old Testament. We need to remind ourselves of the gospel. Here are some questions to consider with your small group or when you are having conversations with someone who is struggling:
 1. How does the gospel bring good news to this situation?
 2. What about the gospel do we need to hear right now?
 3. What about the gospel have we forgotten or failed to believe?
 4. How is Jesus better than what we have or what we want?¹
 - My fourth application is this. Lamentations is a communal book. You also need a local church home where you have committed brothers and sisters in Christ to remind you of the gospel. Sure you can do it with any Christian and that is

¹ Jeff Vanderstelt, *Gospel Fluency: Speaking the Truths of Jesus into the Everyday Stuff of Life*, 148-150. Venderstelt has written a very helpful book for thinking of and working the gospel into everyday life conversations.

good but one of the things about being a member of a church is that we are committed to one another and one of our responsibilities is to preach the gospel to one another.

- Finally we carry out this commitment to preach the gospel to one another in two ways. One by disciplining one another. So when you get together for coffee or lunch or in your small group or one of the small groups for our Mark study, we preach the gospel to one another as our lives rub against one another. The other way is here on Sunday mornings. As we work our way through the gospel each and every Sunday and we hear one another speak out loud the gospel in our call to worship, lament, confession and then remember the gospel we are reminding each other of the person and work of Christ. As we sing the gospel in our songs. As we pray the gospel in our prayers. All of this is aimed at putting truth deep down into our hearts so that in the dark places we will have the light of the gospel.
- Illst: In Luke 15:11-32, Jesus gives the parable of the prodigal son. In v.17 it says, "*But when he came to himself.*" This is when truth has been called to mind. The rebellious son has had grace work on his mind and heart and truth was recalled. What was the truth, "*How many of my father's hands have more than enough bread, but I perish with hunger.*" He "*called to mind*" the kindness of his father and it gave him hope so he returned to his father.

III. The overcoming grace of God teaches us wisdom in our suffering (vv. 25-39)

- When we get to vv. 25-39, we see that grace has taught the *man of constant sorrows* wisdom. Actually grace has enabled him to remember the wisdom of God. He is now preaching more and more truth to himself.
- Let's consider what he has learned from his suffering:
 - Verses 25-26: Grace teaches us to wait on the Lord
 - Verses 27-30: Grace teaches us humility
 - Verses 31-33: Grace teaches us to rest in the steadfast love of God
 - Verses 34-36: Grace teaches us to rest in the justice of God
 - Verses 37-39: Grace teaches us rest in the sovereignty of God

Application:

- Don't waste your suffering. Get wisdom! Wisdom enables us to wait on the Lord when we are suffering. There is nothing we need more than to wait on the Lord when we suffer for no eye has seen or ear has heard of any God who acts on behalf of those who wait for Him. To wait for the Lord means we will have to humble ourselves under God's mighty hand and trust that in His sovereign control He is always doing what is best and acting in justice.
- Wisdom teaches us that our assurance is found by looking at the cross of Christ. This is the display of the steadfast love of God for us. The Creator died for those whom He created. He took on flesh and blood and lived the life we should have lived and died the death we should have died. He was buried and three days later He conquered death by rising from the dead. All who trust in Him belong to Him and will be saved.
- Wisdom teaches us that just because we belong to Christ does not mean we will not suffer in this life. As a matter of fact it means if you belong to Christ you might suffer even more. It might mean that life gets harder and not easier but we learn to wait on Him, trust in His sovereign plan, know that His steadfast love is seen most clearly in the person and work of Christ so we know that justice was served on the cross. We can trust Him for we do not get what we deserve for Christ received what we deserved. We only receive His kindness. But we have to keep in mind that it is still His kindness that leads us to repent. It is His kindness that overcomes our resistance to the grace of God.

IV. The overcoming grace of God teaches us to pray honest prayers (vv. 40-66)

We finally get to the last section of Lamentations 3. In vv. 40-66, we find the cycle of grief beginning work on the *man of constant sorrows*. This is why he is *the man of constant sorrows*.

The fact is we never fully eliminate our struggles in this life. *For example* if someone has offended you and you forgive them today you will probably have to forgive them again tomorrow for the same anger and offense will come back and you will want to hold on to that grudge. Instead you have to forgive again. What we find in the last section of Lamentations 3 is the struggle resurfacing but he takes it to God in prayer and he calls the community of God's people to do the same.

- Verses 40-41: Grace calls us to pray
- Verse 42: Grace enables us to confess our sin in prayer (note in this verse that he seems to think God has not forgiven them. Why would he think that? Well perhaps because nothing has changed. The circumstances are the same. Also asking for forgiveness and repentance are not the same things. Repentance means to turn to God and obey him. We do not know if this has happened yet.)
- Verses 42-47: Grace enables us to confess our struggles in prayer
- Verses 48-51: Grace enables us confess our grief in prayer
- Verses 52-56: Grace enables us to confess our doubt in prayer
- Verses 57-66: Grace enables us to confess our anger in prayer

The last part of this prayer, vv. 57-66, is what is called an imprecatory prayer. It is a prayer crying out for justice. Justice is a good thing to pray for but the destruction of our enemies is not what we usually think of as Christians since we are called to love our enemies and turn the other cheek. And actually just a few verses earlier the Poet said this was basically what we needed to do BUT now he calls on the Lord to repay them by cursing them.

This is not the prayer we usually make to God. You may want to at times but what this shows in us and we see it in the Poet, that there is still need for sanctification.

This is what grief and suffering often does to us. It washes over us in waves and we hurt all over and get angry all over and then cycles over and over in our lives. Just when we think we have gotten hold of the chaos of grief and found light in the darkness a cold blast of wind comes along and knocks us down and we feel the coldness of pain and grief all over.

The man of constant sorrows was no different. It is not until Lamentations 5:21 that we see the transformation in his heart where he asks the Lord to restore his people without punishing their enemies. What happens in Lamentations 5:21 is what Yahweh said He would do in Isaiah 57:18; He healed His people. The healing overcame the hurt and restored the years the locust has eaten away. He removed the humiliation of the people.

Conclusion

Let me bring this all together for us and help us make application to Lamentations 3 as we close. When we are wearing the garment of suffering and grief for any reason we need to remember we have a Savior who has suffered, died and risen from the dead and there is grace for us as we suffer. His death and resurrection purchased grace and hope when we are in the darkness. We can be assured that He is working all things for our good.

You see Jesus is the *Ultimate Man of Sorrows* and He brings overcoming grace in our lives by His Holy Spirit. His work on the cross infuses powerful, prevailing grace into our lives when we suffer.

So what do we learn from Him in Lamentations 3? We need to . . .

1. Take an honest assessment of our lives. We can take our pain and hurts to Him but we must realize that while we may taste the pains in Lamentations 3:1-18, Jesus drank the cup of Lamentations 3:1-20 for us.
2. Preach the gospel to ourselves on a daily basis. Lamentations 3:19-24 reminds us of the mercies of God that were purchased on the cross for us. When we preach the gospel to ourselves on a daily basis we experience the grace to take up our cross on a daily basis and follow Him. The covenant has been kept and we can rest assured in the person and work of Christ on our behalf. He is our portion, great is His faithfulness—hope in the risen Savior.
3. Learn the wisdom of God when we are suffering. We forget that our suffering is not simply for us. We learn wisdom when we suffer and we apply it but we also receive it so we can pass it along to others who are suffering.
4. Pray honest prayers in the name of Jesus. It was Christ in the Garden before He went to the cross that asked God *to let this cup pass from Him yet, He said, not my will but your will be done Father*. Christ in His darkest moment, before going through the beatings, humiliation and crucifixion asked God to take it away but submitted to the Father's sovereign will for His life.