

Great is Your faithfulness! (Lam 3:19-49)

We've reflected these past two weeks on the way in which the church of God is crumbling away in many parts of Britain. It's rather like what Jeremiah was experiencing as he was Jerusalem destroyed and the people taken away into exile. It's certainly what we see as we observe the way in which the church has been overtaken in our land. It could be a picture too of our lives as we face the problems and difficulties of life. We realise the problem and lament.

Lamentations is a dismal book in many ways as Jeremiah weeps over the loss of Jerusalem and the land to the Babylonians. He recognises that the loss was due to the sin of the nation and laments. But in the darkness of a mournful book we get half way and suddenly it is all put into context in a shaft of light bringing hope.

The destruction of the nation was a man inspired thing that caused the judgement of God to burn. As we'll see later, God was long-suffering, giving the people the opportunity to repent. He gave it to them time after time. Jeremiah himself got himself into all sorts of trouble because he stood up to the various kings.

But a depressed Jeremiah had to witness a people who would not repent. They thought that what they were doing was right and believed the false prophets even though all the evidence was telling them something else.

And the punishment of God fell on that nation and the city of Jerusalem. Lamentations is depressing as Jeremiah looks at all the destruction. The destruction affected him even though he remained faithful. If you cast your mind back to last week we found that our sin affects others. Jeremiah mourned for his nation - he was affected by it.

As I've said, right in the middle of all his lament, this ray of light suddenly appears right in the middle of the book. Jeremiah at last sees things in context. Look again at verse 18. Here is his despair in full flight then:

18 So I say, "My splendour is gone and all that I had hoped from the LORD." 19 I remember my affliction and my wandering, the bitterness and the gall. 20 I well remember them, and my soul is downcast within me.

21 Yet this I call to mind and therefore I have hope: 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." 25 The LORD is good to those whose hope is in him, to the one who seeks him; 26 it is good to wait quietly for the salvation of the LORD.

Here's a man consumed by his problem and he then remembers what God is like in the midst of his problem.

I'm sure that we have all been through situations in life when we almost feel crushed by a situation. Perhaps everything seems to be going wrong, maybe we are pressurised by illness, maybe there are family problems. We almost feel like giving up. Then there is this shaft of hope as we remember our God.

In fact this passage is a good one always to remember when this seem to be a bit dark. If you remember last Sunday morning and this morning, we looked at the way in which the church is in massive decline. Like Jerusalem It's a state of judgement as we see church after church disappearing. And how far is that going to go?

Why? Why would God allow such a thing to happen? We don't have far to look because we are all responsible for it. It's not the sin of the nation that brought the church down, but the sin of the church. As I keep saying, the reasons for the decline were complicated, but the sin of God's people was clear - we were more interested in arguing amongst ourselves and resisting the need to move with where God was moving. And we let Satan rob so much from us from under our noses. And worse, we ignored those whom God was using to warn us. As many of you know I enjoy reading the works of A W Tozer. He was so prophetic in what he spoke and so much of it remains true today. And as we shall see later, we need to mourn, lament and repent like Jeremiah did.

As we look at our personal problems too, sometimes we can see they are the result of sin as well. But sometimes we can't see the source of our problems, only the stress and the difficulty something brings to our lives. Whatever the reason for our problem, this shaft of life that Jeremiah sees in chapter 3 applies equally to us. So what is that shaft of hope that Jeremiah saw?

⇒ Our God loves us - His compassions never fail

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.

The exciting thing about God is His love. We see His love for the Jews in the way that He never destroyed them even though they deserved it. They are still with us to this day. The truth was, because of their sin, the nation of Judah deserved to be consumed in the same way that the northern kingdom of Israel had been consumed some years before. They richly deserved it, but because of God's great love, they weren't. They went through a difficult period but God didn't consume them as a testimony to His mercy and faithfulness. Things were dire, but they were still alive and out of this huge calamity came 70 years later the rebirth of a nation, and a much more spiritual one than that which was destroyed in 587BC.

The same is true of God's love for us. God never lets go of those He has made His people. He may allow us to fall into all sorts of problem. We fall. We fail. But God wants to bring healing and restoration into our lives.

⇒ Our God is faithful - the compassions are new every morning

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.

However much we fail; God never fails us. If these words look familiar, then you won't need to think hard as they were the words that inspired Thomas Chisholm to write "*Great is Thy faithfulness*".

I've always found in my own life that deep down however low I feel that there is that basic core of faith and understanding of the fact that God remains faithful to me and what He has done in my life. He never fails. The fact that we got up this morning is testimony to His faithfulness.

What an amazing God. So as we face the fears and pressures of this world, how do we respond to our situation?

This morning I encouraged you to what God is going to do in the future not what is happening now. As we look towards the promises of the future - we see the harvest with the eye of faith but the statistics tell us that the church will be extinct by 2020 in

most parts of Britain. It's pretty extinct in many parts now. Our trawl of Narborough has so far discovered less than 10 believers. Ten in a village that size!

God is faithful to His people. He's working in so many places in the world right now. We even see a dawn occurring in parts of Britain. He never fails. His compassions never fail. It's rough now, but I believe that God brings better out of the ruins than there was there in the first place. That was true of Jerusalem. It will be true of Britain.

So how do we respond in the midst of a turbulent world? How do we respond when we realise that hope is there. Jeremiah helps us with that too

 *We wait on God*

24 I say to myself, "The LORD is my portion; therefore I will wait for him." 25 The LORD is good to those whose hope is in him, to the one who seeks him; 26 it is good to wait quietly for the salvation of the LORD.

God does things in His time and according to His purposes. God is sovereign in His purposes and we need to wait for His lead. I can give you the encouragement for going out to reap the harvest. But any farmer will tell you that you've got to pick the right day and the right field. The grain must be ripe, the crop must be dry enough and the rest of it. We see some verbs here which are useful - wait, hope, seek. It's what we're not good at here and it's what Christians in this country need to do too. It's again an extension of this morning. We need to be people who wait, hope and seek. To do that you've got to spend time in the presence of God. Do we want to see that harvest? Do we want to see that change? It doesn't start by us just going and trying to reach people. It starts by us reaching God and God reaching us first. We wait, we hope, we seek and God brings the salvation. Do you want to see the harvest our faithful God is going to inevitably bring? Wait, hope seek Him. Spend time with Him and start to walk at His pace. I believe we need to learn this one as a church if we are to see the harvest that we believe is coming. It comes in God's time to people are ready and waiting. Let me give you an illustration

For years William Wilberforce had pushed in Britian' s Parliament for the abolition of slavery. Discouraged, he was about to give up. His elderly friend, John Wesley, heard of it and from his deathbed called for pen and paper. With trembling hand Wesley wrote: "Unless God has raised you up for this very thing, you will be worn out by the opposition of men and devils. But if God be for you, who can be against you? Are all of them stronger than God? Oh be not weary of well-doing! Go on, in the name of God and in the power of His might, till even American slavery shall vanish away before it." Wesley died six days later. But Wilberforce fought for 45 more years and in 1833, three days before his own death, saw slavery abolished in Britian. Even the greatest have needed encouragement.

 *We need to be humble and submit to God*

27 It is good for a man to bear the yoke while he is young. 28 Let him sit alone in silence, for the LORD has laid it on him. 29 Let him bury his face in the dust-- there may yet be hope. 30 Let him offer his cheek to one who would strike him, and let him be filled with disgrace. 31 For men are not cast off by the Lord forever. 32 Though he brings grief, he will show compassion, so great is his unfailing love.

We should be waiting, hoping and seeking - submitted to the one we wait on. Things come in God's time. Jeremiah was looking over the ruins and looking forward. He couldn't see much other than the ruins. The hope was 70 years down the road. I believe that our harvest is closer than that. We are given in Lamentations the analogy

of the young man who is impatient and proud. He wants to do his own thing. Even as we perceive the purposes of God, we want to do our own thing. But in waiting for God we need to learn right from the start that we need to be yoked in the right way.

The young man needs to bear a yoke whilst he is young. What does that mean? The yoke made the cattle do what the farmer required of them. A yoke was the picture of one's life not being under their own control e.g. the yoke of the Egyptians. The suggestion here isn't the yoke of man but the Lord's. The calamity could have been avoided if men had obeyed God. Jesus seems to reflect this idea in : *Matt 11:29 Take my yoke upon you and learn from me, for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. 30 For my yoke is easy and my burden is light."*

To be a Christian in the crumbling church is not fashionable. The yoke of God in this day and age, like Jeremiah may not be a bundle of laughs. Men standing for God, young men even, in Jeremiah's day was not exactly fashionable. It brought them nothing but trouble. At least we don't get it that way. But the Christian life can be difficult. The trouble is that so many Christians have left, not to return. The church doesn't look appealing. The faith doesn't look appealing even though it's the greatest thing that ever was.

God wants people who are prepared to wait, hope, seek. *For men are not cast off by the Lord forever. 32 Though he brings grief, he will show compassion, so great is his unfailing love.*

We must be people who wait, hope, seek - be submitted to Him and never give up.

🕯️ We need to recognise our sin and repent

33 For he does not willingly bring affliction or grief to the children of men. 34 To crush underfoot all prisoners in the land, 35 to deny a man his rights before the Most High, 36 to deprive a man of justice-- would not the Lord see such things? 37 Who can speak and have it happen if the Lord has not decreed it? 38 Is it not from the mouth of the Most High that both calamities and good things come?

39 Why should any living man complain when punished for his sins? 40 Let us examine our ways and test them, and let us return to the LORD. 41 Let us lift up our hearts and our hands to God in heaven, and say: 42 "We have sinned and rebelled and you have not forgiven. 43 "You have covered yourself with anger and pursued us; you have slain without pity. 44 You have covered yourself with a cloud so that no prayer can get through. 45 You have made us scum and refuse among the nations. 46 "All our enemies have opened their mouths wide against us. 47 We have suffered terror and pitfalls, ruin and destruction."

48 Streams of tears flow from my eyes because my people are destroyed. 49 My eyes will flow unceasingly, without relief, 50 until the LORD looks down from heaven and sees.

This is a message of repentance. Jeremiah wept as he saw the consequences of sin. They weren't his sins - but he cried out anyway. *Streams of tears flow from my eyes because my people are destroyed. 49 My eyes will flow unceasingly, without relief, 50 until the LORD looks down from heaven and sees.* I'm not going to stop until God answers!

To see the new thing that God is ushering in we need to repent of what brought the ruins in the first place. It is one thing to wait, hope, seek. It is one thing to be prepared to take on God's yoke whatever the consequences. But we are called to recognise the past and come in repentance for those things which brought down God's people.

Repentance started not with the ones who were carried into exile, but it started with Jeremiah who had remained faithful and didn't have much to repent about. Repentance I believe always starts with those who see where the future is.

39 Why should any living man complain when punished for his sins? 40 Let us examine our ways and test them, and let us return to the LORD. Eventually the people did repent as is shown by such psalms as 137. They had nothing to complain about because they deserved it but it took long years of exile to stop blaming God and start blaming themselves. And they had to come to the point in their lives where they realised their sin.

What about us? We saw last week how sin destroyed Saul's life. But God always gives opportunity to repent. The Jews here had that opportunity and after judgement they still had that opportunity because life was still in their bodies. We have that option too. They found restoration - in fact, something better than they had. Strangely that was in a nation again that had no king. We can find it too as we repent of those things that keep us from God and seeing His blessings poured out.

I believe that revival starts when God's people repent and not try to spiritualise the loss of the church by blaming the lost, blaming others or even saying it is all something to do with the sovereign mysteries of God. God isn't all mysteries. He divulges the secrets of His heart to us. We need to understand our sin and come in repentance.

Repentance starts with the tears of those like Jeremiah who remained faithful when all around crumbled. The others will turn. It's what is sometimes called *identificational repentance*. We repent for our churches and our nation because we're part of it even though individually we may not be personally responsible. But we are corporately responsible because we've been part of it. Eventually the nation will turn as God's people repent. So what is involved in repentance? This passage helps us.

Repentance recognises

🕯 *that God has been long-suffering with us*

Repentance starts by recognising that we deserve the judgement of a righteous God and the only reason we are here is that He is long-suffering. 2 Pet 3:9. On a church level we're here when others have closed, not because we are superior but because God is long-suffering and by His grace we are still a light in Swaffham. Let's recognise His grace and move on.

🕯 *we need to lament*

What this tells us most of all is that repentance involves being sorry for our sins. This always applies at a personal level but at a church level it applies too. Jeremiah lamented the loss he saw around Him and recognised the truth - God's people had let Him down and the world in the shape of Babylon had overrun them. He was almost the lone voice at the end telling them of the need to repent when they were relying on the fact that they were the people of God to save them even though they continued to sin. He saw the ruins and lamented that loss because it was the people's own foolishness.

Whatever loss we suffer from unrepented of sin is our own foolishness. We need to recognise that just as in the church, we have unrepented of sin in our lives too and we need to lament how that has damaged our relationship with the Father and continues to do so as long as it is unconfessed and un-lamented of.

🕯 *that we need to truly turn our hearts towards God if there is to be change*

It's the fundamental idea in repentance. Being sorry involves going another way. God is doing a new thing. We need to see the future and therefore we see how the present has to change. And we find that God is faithful.

God wants to bring change in our lives. There is a sense in which you repented when you accepted Christ, but there are so many areas in our lives where Jesus is not in control. We looked at this last week and the message ends the same way this week.

God wants to do a new thing in our lives, in our church and in our nation. He's faithful. We need to be - to wait, hope and seek.



*Preached by Mark Reid, Swaffham Baptist Church, 16/5/04.
/Scripture Quotes NIV
© Mark Reid 2004*