

Just Checking #136 MAY 2013

HOPE IN THE MIDST OF SUFFERING Lamentations 3:23

Psalm 39:12 "Hear my prayer, O Lord... for I am a 'pilgrim' with You..."

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I have continued my personal study of suffering in the scriptures over the past many months. Among the many passages that I return to again and again is this jewel in the midst of Jeremiah's tear stained lament over the horrific death and destruction of the Jews and Jerusalem in the final stage of the Babylonian captivity.

Lamentations 3:19-26

I remember my affliction and my wandering, the bitterness and the gall.

I well remember them, and my soul is downcast within me.

Yet this I call to mind and therefore I have hope:

Because of the LORD's great love we are not consumed, for his compassions never fail.

They are new every morning; great is your faithfulness.

I say to myself, "The LORD is my portion; therefore I will wait for him."

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.

(By the way, if any of you are interested in the present draft of the study guide entitled "Getting the Most From What We Like the Least", email me at ron@bbcpa.org and request it and I'll be glad to send you an electronic copy in PDF. It is intended for you to do the work, as it simply posits the questions and lists the scriptures from which to draw the answers for yourself.)

The "Weeping Prophet" gained his name out of the pit (literally and metaphorically) in which he found himself as he watched the death and destruction of the people and city he so loved. He labored a lifetime to call his people back to repentance and a seeking after the God of their fathers. Though earlier and later prophets would see revivals in the nation, he would not. His pleading words fell on deaf ears, and the longer he lived, the deeper his persecution and the darker his days would become. As the city was surrounded and cut off by the armies of Babylon, starvation and its accompanying horrors would fill the city. Unspeakable atrocities would become commonplace until the city was burned and the death of tens of thousands would fill the streets. The time for preaching was past. All that was left was the funeral song of lament over the death of the nation and the destruction of the city.

This song of lament we call "Lamentations", is just that. It gives vent to the bursting grief of a broken heart and the questions of a faithful man who saw none of his prayers answered with God's "yes".

Lamentations is a unique form of Hebrew poetry called an alphabetic acrostic. It is found in seven Psalms, one passage in Proverbs, and the book of Lamentations. See the note that follows. (Bold letters mine)

In the common form of acrostic found in Old Testament Poetry, each line or stanza begins with a letter of the Hebrew alphabet in order... likely it was *a poetic way of saying that a total coverage of the subject was being offered -- as we would say, 'from A to Z'* Acrostics occur in Psalms 111 and 112, where each letter begins a line; in Psalms 25, 34, and 145, where each letter begins a half-verse; in Psalm 37, Proverbs 31:10-31, and **Lamentations 1, 2, and 4, where each letter begins a whole verse; and in Lamentations 3, where each letter begins three verses.** Psalm 119 is the most elaborate demonstration of the acrostic method where, in each section of eight verses, the same opening letter is used, and the twenty-two sections of the psalm move through the Hebrew alphabet, letter after letter. --J.A. Motyer, "Acrostic," in *The New International Dictionary of the Bible* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1987), p. 12.

The first two and the last two chapters of Lamentations are each 22 verses, one for each letter of the Hebrew alphabet. The middle chapter is 66 verses, each strophe being a triplet of the alphabetic letter. This is to point special attention to the middle chapter as a weight and balance to all that is being said. To put it another way, **"the only words of hope are found in the middle of the middle of the grief."** And yes, I meant to say, "in the middle of the middle" of the grief.

HOPE IN THE MIDDLE OF THE MIDDLE

Grief and suffering become all consuming. They fill the heart, cloud the mind, and erase the memory from all but the bitter and the loss. But Jeremiah places “in the middle of the middle of the grief,” a jewel of hope and comfort. Let’s go to the mine and dig it out for ourselves. If you don’t need the jewel of hope today, someone you love does, and you will before long, too.

THE FIRST AND EFFORTLESS MEMORY - HOPELESSNESS

Lamentations 3:19-26

***“I remember my affliction and my wandering, the bitterness and the gall.
I well remember them, and my soul is downcast within me.”***

“I remember”.... Jeremiah takes us to the common experience of all sufferers: the personal memories of the substance of the suffering. He remembers the abandonment, the loneliness, the isolation, the pain, the fear, the rejection, the helplessness, the bitter consequences, and the lack of Divine intervention.

“I well remember them”... He has gone over them again and again, reliving the pain in his mind. His memory is well worn, and the scenes and sorrows play the same bitter notes again and again in his mind....
“why....why....why....?”

“My soul is downcast...” The deep and seemingly endless nature of his depression, anger, bitterness, and pain are constant. He can’t get away from it. No matter how much time has passed, it seems as fresh, as sharp, as bitter and as hopeless as it was in the beginning. It takes no effort to recall the bitterness. It is a well-worn path that he slips into as easily as a man falls on ice going downhill. The darkness seems inescapable.

THE SECOND AND PURPOSEFUL MEMORY - HOPE

“Yet this I call to mind and therefore I have hope:” Jeremiah “well remembers” the pain and sorrow. That takes no effort at all. But the Weeping Prophet makes a real and sustained effort to “call to mind” another memory.... The memory of God’s faithfulness. The key here is the word “call”. He calls it to mind. He calls out to bring it to him, just like you call out to your child in the middle of the playground to get his attention and make him come to where you are. Jeremiah “calls to mind” with effort, purpose, and determination another memory... and this is where hope comes from. ***Sorrow is effortless. Hope is work!***

“Because of the LORD's great love we are not consumed, for his compassions never fail.

They are new every morning; great is your faithfulness.” This is the substance of his intentional recall. He remembers on purpose that though he deserves God’s wrath, he is the recipient of God’s great love, unfailing and daily renewed compassions, and infinite faithfulness. Jeremiah purposefully reminds himself of the character and nature of His God based on His covenant promises, as in Exodus 34:5-6. The key to “hope” in the midst of suffering is to see suffering through the lens of God, not seeing God through the lens of suffering. Satan was certain, based on thousands of years of nearly 100% success, that if the suffering was severe, it would become the lens through which the sufferer would see God, and thus God would be cursed by the sufferer. Like Job, Jeremiah, by a supreme and self-disciplined effort, chooses to remind himself of God’s character through the clear lens of scripture and Divine history, and to choose hope through his tears.

“I say to myself, “The LORD is my portion; therefore I will wait for him.”

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.” In addition to choosing hope-filled memories, the prophet also chooses to preach himself a continual sermon. “I say to myself...” This is powerful. We find this same phrase in the Psalms repeatedly. In the midst of suffering and pain, we cannot wait for someone else to

come along and speak truth to us. We must take the initiative and speak to ourselves the truth! He says, "I may have lost so much, and the loss will never be returned in this life, and things will never be the same, but I still have the Lord. He is my portion." The idea of "portion" is inheritance. Jeremiah lost his earthly inheritance. He lost his family, his land, his home, his wealth, his friends, and ultimately would lose his life. But he would not lose his God! This inheritance is his now, tomorrow, and forever. And because the Lord is his, he will wait for his God; he will hope in his God; He will seek His God in worship; He will quietly wait for God's ultimate release from the prison of suffering. ***Of this he is sure: God is his. Hope is his. Release is his on that day! And that's enough for now.***

SELF CHECK:

- 1) What are the effortless negative memories and words that you hear in your suffering?
- 2) Are you making the effort to call truth to mind in your darkness? Remember the cross!
- 3) Are you working at filling your mind daily with the light of God's truth by reading and memorizing scripture?
- 4) Write yourself a sermon on hope, and preach it to yourself in view of God's character.

FOR FURTHER STUDY:

Self Talk: Psalm 42:5,11 Psalm 43:5 Psalm 62:5 Psalm 103:1,2,22 Psalm 116:7

Hope in the midst of suffering: 1 Peter 1:13; Romans 8:17-18; 2 Cor. 4:17-18; 1 Thess. 3:1-8; James 5:10-13;

"Lord God, You are faithful and true. You are sovereign and good. You ordain all things for your glory and my good. The fire that purifies my faith may be severe, but the outcome You determine is merciful and good. Give me the grace to call to mind Your promises in my pain, and the power to preach hope to myself when the noise of affliction drowns out the sweet songs of Zion. Grant me truth in the tumult, hope in the heartache, and power in the pain of the present. O Christ Jesus, Your suffering bought my salvation. May my suffering bring You glory. In Thy Name, O My Portion Forever I pray, Amen."

Remember, you are very special to us and we pray for you.

Living with leaving in view.... Jn 9:4 Ron & Val

Seeing The Invisible, embracing The Unapproachable, declaring The Unexplainable,
changed by The Immutable, running after The Irresistible
with inexhaustible joy in our inexpressible sorrows,
spending our time on eternity,
owning nothing yet possessing everything
that matters and lasts.
We are Pilgrims in Paradox.
Welcome to THE JOURNEY