



HELP! – My Questions, His Faithfulness
Lamentations 3

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Every year in the United States, 1,657,000 Americans are laid off from their jobs ... 900,000 women suffer miscarriage ... 876,000 marriages end in divorce ... 610,000 people die from heart attack ... 601,000 die from cancer ... 40,000 die in car accidents ... and 20,000 parents lose a child. These things happen to someone every day. And if it has happened to you, then you are part of the statistic. And you are probably one of those people who said, “Oh Lord, why?”

The question “Why?” comes from an aching heart. It’s not theory, it’s not theology; it’s personal. We ask “Why?” when life hurts. We ask “Why?” when life doesn’t make sense, and when God doesn’t make sense.

“Oh Lord, why?”¹ We’ve all said it. All of us have prayed for something and been confused by God’s response or confused by His delay. You may be feeling that today. Maybe you’re praying for the healing of a loved one, but healing has not come. Maybe you’re praying for God to salvage your marriage, but things are only getting worse. Maybe you’re praying for a job, but can’t even get an interview. And you’re asking, “Oh Lord, why?” Nothing is more confusing than when God doesn’t answer our prayers or respond to our cries or act like we think He ought to act. That’s why all of us at some point have said, “Oh Lord, why?”

We’re in a series called HELP! because all of us, at some point, cry out to God for help. We are also in this series to affirm our faith that God promises to show up when we need Him most. Psalm 46:1 is a promise of God’s help. ***“God is our refuge and strength, an ever-present help in trouble.”*** God gave His word that He would show up when we need Him most. He promises His comfort, His strength, His guidance, His help, and always His love. He promised! Each week, we’re looking at a promise from Scripture, learning how to pray that verse, and learning how to trust Him to help. So, whatever you’re going through, and whenever you cry out to Him for help, you can know that ***God promises to be there when you need Him most.***

But sometimes, He does not respond like we expect.

This morning, we’re going to look at the collision of faith and feelings in the life of Jeremiah. This is not going to be an easy message. I’m not going to quote a Bible verse and tell you to have a nice day. We’re going to talk trusting God when our prayers have yet to be answered, when our circumstances have yet to change, and when our pain is unbearable. We’re going to talk about trusting God with all our “Why?” questions. Throughout this series, we keep saying that God promises to show up when we need Him most. But what if He God doesn’t answer our prayers or respond to our cries or act like we think He ought to act?

JEREMIAH’S QUESTIONS AND YOURS

Can we really count on God to show up when we need Him most? That was Jeremiah’s question, and it may be your question too. Can we really count on God to show up when we need Him most? Here’s why Jeremiah asked that question.

In 586 BC, Jerusalem was attacked by the Babylonians. Much like the days of the Third Reich, thousands of Jews were deported and Jerusalem was left smoldering. How bad was it? Priests were assassinated in the temple. The streets were littered with dead bodies.² Starving mothers were driven to cannibalize their own children. The Babylonian king, Nebuchadnezzar, not only destroyed Jerusalem, he destroyed their faith as well.³

It was at that tragic moment in history that Jeremiah wrote the book of Lamentations. He is called the “weeping prophet” because of the great misery he witnessed.

Early on, as God’s prophet, Jeremiah was a man of faith and he obeyed God, boldly proclaiming all that God told him to say. And for his obedience, Jeremiah was beaten, placed in stocks, and left for dead in a well. Jeremiah preached faithfully for 40 years and no one listened. When he preached, a bunch of guys beat him up.

Jeremiah felt betrayed by God. “O Lord, You have deceived me” (Jeremiah 20:7). The word “deceived” is the same Hebrew word for seduction. Jeremiah accused God of seducing him to trust Him only to abandon him.⁴ Jeremiah “staked his life on God, and (felt like) God had let him down.”⁵ Lamentations 3 is Jeremiah’s complaint to God.

Lamentations 3 is an acrostic poem, like many other chapters in the Old Testament. Each verse begins with a successive letter of the Hebrew alphabet.⁶ Lamentations 3 is even more dramatic. Every three verses in the chapter begin with a successive letter of the Hebrew alphabet. This was very meticulous writing. Careful thought went into every phrase. Jeremiah had three complaints against God for every letter of the alphabet!

In Lamentations 3, Jeremiah struggles with faith. He bears his soul to God. He dares to complain to God.

- 3:1 – “I am the man who has seen affliction by the rod of his wrath.” God may have been punishing Israel, but Jeremiah took it personally. “I am the man.” He was miserable and he blamed God for it.
- 3:2 – “He has driven me away and made me walk in darkness rather than light.” Jeremiah felt like God had turned the lights out on his life.
- 3:3 – “He has turned his hand against me again and again.” Another translation reads, “He’s given me the back of his hand” (MSG). Jeremiah felt like God had slapped him in the face.
- 3:4 – “He has broken my bones.” Jeremiah felt beaten up ... by God!
- 3:5 – “He has besieged me and surrounded me with bitterness and hardship.” Jeremiah felt surrounded by God, by a bitter and hard God.
- 3:6 – “He has made me dwell in darkness like those long dead.” Jeremiah felt like a corpse sealed inside a tomb.
- 3:7 – “He has walled me in so that I cannot escape, he has weighed me down with chains.” Jeremiah felt imprisoned, as if God had thrown him into a dungeon and forgotten.

- 3:8 – “Even when I call out or cry for help, he shuts out my prayer.” Jeremiah felt like God had hung up the phone.
- 3:9 – “He barred my way with blocks of stone.” Jeremiah felt like God had put every obstacle in his way.
- 3:10 – “He is to me like a bear lying in wait, like a lion in secret places” (NAS). Do you hear what Jeremiah was saying? Jeremiah felt ambushed by God, like a bear or lion pouncing on its prey.
- 3:11 – “(He has) torn me to pieces.” Jeremiah felt mangled by God.
- 3:12 – “He drew his bow and made me the target for his arrows.” Jeremiah felt like he was on God’s hit list.
- 3:13 – “He pierced my heart with arrows from his quiver.” The wounds to his heart were fatal.
- 3:14 – “I became the laughingstock of all my people; they mock me in song all day long.” People were laughing at Jeremiah, even singing songs to mock him, and God did nothing to defend him.
- 3:15 – “He has filled me with bitter herbs.” Jeremiah felt like God had crammed bitterness down his throat.
- 3:16 – “He has broken my teeth with gravel.” Jeremiah felt like God had punched him in the mouth.
- 3:17 – “I have been deprived of peace” (NIV). “I have forgotten what happiness is” (ESV). Jeremiah felt like following God had only led to disaster.
- 3:18 – “My strength has perished, and so has my hope” (NAS). His strength had died and his hope had died.

What surprises me most about this chapter is that God did not censor Jeremiah, that He allowed it in His Bible. That means God won’t censor us either. That means we can pour our hearts out to God, cry, complain, question, and He will patiently and lovingly listen.

The same thing that happened to Jeremiah happened to Elie Wiesel. Elie Wiesel was a Holocaust survivor, recipient of the Nobel Peace Prize, and an international voice for the oppressed. He described life inside a concentration camp, and the impact it had on him, in his book *Night*.

“Never shall I forget that night, that first night in camp, which has turned my life into one long night ... Never shall I forget that smoke. Never shall I forget the little faces of the children, whose bodies I saw turned into wreaths of smoke beneath a silent blue sky.

“Never shall I forget those flames *which consumed my faith forever*.

“Never shall I forget those moments which murdered my God and my soul and turned my dreams to dust. Never shall I forget these things ... Never.”⁷

Recalling the pathetic nights of lying in crowded bunks, some tried to sing songs of faith, and “some talked of God, of his mysterious ways, of the sins of the Jewish people, and of their future deliverance. But I had ceased to pray ... I did not deny God’s existence, but I doubted His absolute justice.”⁸

The worst moment came when the Nazis hanged a Jewish boy, “a child with a refined and beautiful face,” Elie recalled.⁹ Thousands of prisoners were forced to march past the dangling child and look him in the face. In this cruel parade, Elie heard a voice behind him whisper, “Where is God now?” And Elie recalled, “I heard a voice within me answer him: ‘Where is He? Here He is – He is hanging on these gallows.’”¹⁰

Elie Wiesel survived the Holocaust, but his faith did not.¹¹

Elie Wiesel experienced the same thing Jeremiah experienced – Holocaust. What the Nazis did to the Jews in 1945, the Babylonians did to the Jews in 586 BC. But there’s a difference. For Elie Wiesel, God died at Auschwitz. For Jeremiah, somehow he was able to say, “I still have hope” (Lamentations 3:21).

When life knocks the breath out of us, we cry out to God and say, “Lord, where are You? How could You allow this to happen?” And nothing is more confusing than when God doesn’t come through like we hope.

James Dobson may describe what you’re going through. “A thousand unanswered questions have been recycling in your mind – most of them beginning with ‘*Why?*’ You want desperately to trust the Father and believe in his grace and goodness. But deep inside, you’re held captive by a sense of betrayal and abandonment.”¹²

Gordon MacDonald validates our state of confusion. “Rather than feel blessed, (we) feel let down, disappointed, and deflated.”¹³

Philip Yancey summarizes the sentiments of many Christians. “I have no trouble believing God is good. My question is more, What good is he? ... I cry out to God for help, and it’s hard to know just how he answers. Really, what can we count on God for?”¹⁴

Larry Crabb dares to say aloud what many are thinking. “When we need (God) the most, when we scream the loudest for Him to reveal Himself, He seems to pull away. When we most long to sense His presence, we instead feel His absence.”¹⁵

Asking “Why?” reveals our heartache, but it also reveals our disappointment with God. Asking “Why?” does not just reveal our confusion, asking “O Lord, why?” has the tone of accusation.

David felt that way. “O Lord, why do you stand so far away? Why do you hide when I am in trouble?” (Psalm 10:1, NLT). “O Lord, how long will you forget me? Forever? How long will you look the other way?” (Psalm 13:1, NLT). He prayed to the Lord, “Save me, O God, for the waters have threatened my life ... a flood overflows me. I am weary with my crying; my throat is parched; my eyes fail while I wait for my God” (Psalm 69:1-3). Do you hear that? “My throat is parched.” David is saying, “Lord, I’m hoarse from praying. I can’t even speak anymore. Where are You?”

David was not pointing his finger in God's face, but rather looking into his father's eyes like a little boy. "Why do you hold back your hand, your right hand? Take it from the folds of your garment" (Psalm 74:11, NIV). Do you hear David's confusion? "God, why are You standing there with Your hands in Your pockets?"

David and Jeremiah let us know that we're not alone in this. We can pour out our hearts to God, cry, complain, question, and He will patiently and lovingly listen ... and He promises to be there when we need Him most.

JEREMIAH'S HOPE AND YOURS

After railing against God for 20 verses and having three complaints for every letter in the Hebrew alphabet, the chapter takes a dramatic twist. As miserable as he felt, as betrayed as he felt, there was one thought that kept coming to Jeremiah's mind. There was one truth he could not deny.

"This I recall to my mind, therefore I have hope. The Lord's lovingkindnesses indeed never cease, for His compassions never fail. They are new every morning; **GREAT IS THY FAITHFULNESS**" (Lamentations 3:21-23, NAS).

At some point in life, all of us are going to experience a crisis of faith, a collision of faith and feelings. And just like Jeremiah, we have to decide if we trust God or not. When the grief is unbearable. When the pain is relentless. When we don't understand why God is allowing it. At that moment, each of us has to make up our mind. Will we say "Great is Thy faithfulness" or not?

And why should we?

Because God is faithful, and we can count on Him to love us. "The Lord's lovingkindnesses indeed never cease, for His compassions never fail" (Lamentations 3:22). His very nature is love and compassion, mercy and grace, goodness and kindness. He cannot act contrary to His nature. So, we can count on Him to love us. His love will "never cease." His love will never "fail." Even in the midst of your greatest struggle, God still loves you and He still cares about you.

Why should we trust Him?

Because God is faithful, and we can count on Him to show up when we need Him most. His lovingkindness and compassion "are new every morning; great is Thy faithfulness."¹⁶ Maybe you woke up this morning and didn't want to get out of bed. Maybe you didn't want to face that problem which looms over you. I understand that. But I also believe, as Jeremiah believed, that there is never a moment when God is not there. There is never a morning when you wake up and God is not committed to walk with you through your day. And that's especially true when you're hurting. "The Lord is near to the brokenhearted, and rescues those whose are crushed in spirit" (Psalm 34:18, NLT). He promises. He promises to show up when we need Him most.

One of the best-known verses in the Bible is Proverbs 3:5-6. It's more than a cross-stitched verse to hang over the toilet in the guest bathroom. Proverbs 3:5-6 is the simplest, clearest, and

deepest definition of faith in the Bible. “Trust in the Lord with all your heart and do not lean on your own understanding. In all your ways acknowledge Him, and He will make your paths straight” (Proverbs 3:5-6, NAS). “Trust in the Lord ... and do not lean on your own understanding.” In other words, trust WHO when you do not understand WHY. God does not always answer my prayers the way I want. He does not always respond the way I hope. But what I know and believe and have experienced of Him allows me to trust Him with the parts I do not understand. Trust WHO when you do not understand WHY.

In her little book simply entitled *Why?*, Anne Graham Lotz, the daughter of Billy Graham, writes this about trusting God when we want to ask why.

When there are no answers to your questions ...
Trust Him when you don't understand.
Trust His heart.
Trust His purpose.
Trust Him when it is your heart that's broken.
Trust His goodness.
Trust Him beyond the grave.
Trust Him to know best.
Trust His plan to be bigger than yours.
Trust Him to keep His Word.
Trust Him to be on time.
Trust Him to be enough.
Trust Him to set you free.
Trust Him – and Him alone!¹⁷

CONCLUSION

In the midst of great suffering and great confusion, Jeremiah said, “I still have hope.” In the midst of great suffering and great confusion, he still believed with all his heart, “The Lord’s lovingkindnesses indeed never cease, for His compassions never fail. They are new every morning; **GREAT IS THY FAITHFULNESS**” (Lamentations 3:21-23, NAS).

So, whatever you’re going through, and whenever you cry out to God for help, you can know that *He promises to be there when you need Him most.*

NOTES

¹ “A Desperate Prayer” – a prayer monologue written by Monty Watson, June 2012.

Oh God, I pray and pray and get nothing back.

I read the Bible, I read Your promises to hear me and to answer my prayers, but it’s not working. I’m not getting anything from You.

I’ve cried, I’ve begged, I’ve negotiated, I’ve demanded, but nothing.

I didn’t cause this situation. I don’t understand why You allowed this happen. What did I do to deserve this? What did I do wrong?

My friends keep telling me that You must be teaching me a lesson through all of this. But this just feels mean. God, this feels cruel.

I’ve confessed my sins. I’ve thanked You for all Your blessings. I’ve tried to praise You. I’ve played the prayer game hoping it would make a difference, but it hasn’t.

God, I’m tired. I’m hurting. I’m so angry.

You say, “Seek Me and you will find Me.” I have been seeking You, but I can’t find You. You say, “Call out to Me and I will listen.” I have been calling, I’ve been screaming, so why won’t You listen?

Another friend showed me a verse in Psalms that said, “They cried in their trouble, ‘Lord, help!’ and he rescued them from their distress.” I wanted that to happen for me so much I memorized it. But I’ve cried, “Lord, help!” and yet I’m still drowning in my distress. Why haven’t You come to rescue me?

I want to trust You because, frankly, there’s nowhere else to turn.

If a little boy was playing outside and fell down and scraped his knee and started crying, his dad would run out and scoop him up and make sure he was okay. God, I feel like that little boy. I just need a hug. I need to know that You love me and that everything’s going to be okay.

Oh God, why won’t You answer?

² See Lamentations 2:20-21.

³ John Bright, *A History of Israel*, Third Edition (Philadelphia, PA: Westminster Press, 1972, 1981), page 348.

⁴ “God, You seduced me into trusting You, and then left me hanging!” F. B. Huey, Jr., *Yesterday’s Prophets for Today’s World* (Nashville, TN: Broadman Press, 1980), page 122.

⁵ Philip Yancey, *Disappointment with God* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan Publishing House, 1988), page 34. Yancey writes this of another person, yet his statement sums up how Jeremiah must have felt.

⁶ Proverbs 31, the chapter on being a virtuous woman, is an acrostic poem. It was written by Solomon’s mother encouraging him to find a wife so admirable that he could compliment her with every letter of the Hebrew alphabet.

⁷ Elie Wiesel, *Night* (New York, NY: Bantam Books, reprint 1982), page 32.

⁸ *Ibid.*, page 42.

⁹ *Ibid.*, page 60.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, page 62.

¹¹ God died that day for Elie Wiesel. Or I should say, his faith in God died that day. Another survivor of the Holocaust declared with contempt, “The most important lesson one can learn from Auschwitz is that God does not exist ... We are on our own.” [Jonathan Wallace, “What I Learned from Auschwitz.”]

¹² James Dobson, *When God Doesn’t Make Sense* (Wheaton, IL: Tyndale House Publishers, Inc., 1993), page 232.

¹³ Gordon MacDonald, *The Life God Blesses* (Nashville, TN: Thomas Nelson Publishers, 1994), page xiv.

¹⁴ Philip Yancey, *Reaching for the Invisible God*, (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan Publishing House, 2000), page 21.

¹⁵ Larry Crabb, *Shattered Dreams: God’s Unexpected Pathway to Joy* (Colorado Springs, CO: Waterbrook Press, 2001), page 99.

¹⁶ TWOT, #613, *hadash*, meaning to repair, rebuild, or renew.

¹⁷ Anne Graham Lotz, *Why? Trusting God When You Don’t Understand* (Nashville, TN: Thomas Nelson, 2004), pages 16-17.