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## Your Hope in the Midst of Suffering

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TEXT: Lamentations 3:19-26 (NRSV)

The thought of my affliction and my homelessness is wormwood and gall! My soul continually thinks of it and is bowed down within me. But this I call to mind, and therefore I have hope: The steadfast love of the Lord never ceases, his mercies never come to an end; they are new every morning; great is your faithfulness. "The Lord is my portion," says my soul, "therefore I will hope in him." The Lord is good to those who wait for him, to the soul that seeks him. It is good that one should wait quietly for the salvation of the Lord.

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My mother suffered greatly most of her life. She had a crippling disease called lupus, which whittled away at her body, restricting her mobility, leaving open painful wounds at her joints. It disfigured her fingers so that they wouldn't work properly. She was in continual pain, always fatigued. She eventually even lost a limb to the disease, and it was the culprit behind having her life cut short at age 59. It was painful to observe this happening to her and brought suffering to those close to her, like my dad, who did everything in his power to keep her comfortable and keep her going and enjoying life as much as possible. He suffered right along with her. I remember him asking me one evening, though, as the two of us were driving somewhere, "Why is this happening to her? It doesn't seem fair that a good Christian woman like her should have to suffer like this."

What I've described here is not an uncommon scenario, is it? Suffering happens. It's everywhere. It's unavoidable, and its scope often overwhelms us. It's a part of living in a broken, imperfect world. It comes in all kinds of shapes and sizes to all kinds of people. Sometimes it comes about as a result of our poor decisions and actions on our part or from outside of ourselves through no fault of our own. And we deal with it in a

variety of ways: sometimes silently and stoically, sometimes crying out, protesting our innocence. Sometimes we become angry and bitter towards life, towards others, and even towards God. We're oftentimes driven to despair, depression, and hopelessness. And we typically will ask "Why?" Thinking maybe we could handle this better or fix it if we just knew the reasoning behind it. But more often than not, there is no specific reason, and it typically won't fix things anyway.

We're better off actually moving from the intellectual question of "Why" to the survival question, "How?" "How do I get through this?" Well, today's passage has a valuable truth to teach us in answer to that question. It comes from a time when God's people were experiencing great suffering as a nation, and behind this suffering was a long, disappointing story of their unfaithfulness and disobedience to God. God, again and again through the prophets, had pleaded with his people to turn away from their waywardness and disobedience and be faithful and obedient to him alone, or there would be serious consequences. But his people wouldn't listen. They would not return to him. So, he used the nation of Babylon as his instrument of judgment upon them and wrath. Interestingly, he still promised that someday he would bring them back home to serve him as his rescued people. But they experienced the wrath of God. The Babylonians captured Jerusalem, destroying everything, including the temple. There was nothing but rubble and ruins when they were done with it. Many were killed, and most of the survivors, including their leaders, were deported to Babylon with nothing but the clothes on their back. It looked like God had disowned them once and for all, for their unfaithfulness. And now they had lost their precious land. And the future looked hopeless and without purpose for them. And without God, they'd lost everything. They were suffering greatly. Dark days.

It was in the context of this time in history that the book of Lamentations originated. It's a long lament describing the aftermath of this national disaster and the physical and emotional and spiritual suffering of God's people. It's a communal calling out to God for help. Tradition attributes this book to Jeremiah the Prophet. Well, the passage before us today is actually a personal lament of Jeremiah's, which describes his own suffering and how he is getting through it as one of God's people. In the first 19 verses of chapter three, he describes the experience of his suffering under God's punishment as living in darkness. It's painful, filled with horrors, humiliation, homelessness, helplessness, and loneliness. He's suffering greatly, he says, "because God has become like my enemy. I've lost all peace and happiness and hope. It's a bitter experience for me, wormwood,

and gall.” And as he reflects on all this, he says it's a heavy weight upon his soul. Jeremiah is hurting inside and out. Have you ever been there yourself? Had you had those moments when everything's caved in upon you and you feel so bad that you can barely stand the thought of facing another day? Body, mind, and spirit suffering, wondering about God. Well, that's where Jeremiah is as this lament opens. He's lamenting, admitting out loud to God his misery, which, by the way, is a good thing for us to do. Get it out there.

But then there comes a change of mood in verse 21 of this lament – a movement, a movement from despair to hopefulness. Listen to this statement. “But this I call to mind, Jeremiah says. And therefore, I have hope.” He calls something to mind. And it gives him hope to keep him going. What is this something? Well, it's actually some things in the plural that he he's learned about God from the past. God's character and nature, which has never changed throughout history. There are three things in which God's suffering people can confidently hope as they consider their future. Jeremiah first reflects on the steadfast love of God that never ceases. His love is not fickle. It's reliable, constant, consistent, unwavering. No matter what is happening and no matter how unfaithful you and I might be. Jeremiah is saying, “My God is a loving God who still loves me. He has never stopped loving me and never will. He will still act lovingly all my life, and that gives me hope. Yes, I'm suffering. But he loves me and will lovingly take care of me.” Jeremiah could very well be remembering God's description of himself that he gave to his people after saving them from slavery in Egypt. He said this about himself, “The Lord, a God, merciful and gracious, slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love and faithfulness, keeping steadfast love for the thousandth generation.” That's a lot of love for a long time. And Jeremiah is probably also remembering his past personal experiences of God's steadfast love in his own life as he served him. We know that he suffered greatly at the hands of his own people, but God was always with him, getting him through all of it.

The second thing Jeremiah remembers is God's mercy. He says God's mercies never come to an end. Now some English translations use the word compassion instead of mercies. The Hebrew word actually reflects an affectionate side of love in the Old Testament. It's sometimes used in referring to a mother's affection and tender care for her unborn child in her womb. She does everything possible to see to the health and safe arrival of that little one. So, like an affectionate mother, God goes the second mile, Jeremiah saying, mercifully, compassionately taking care of his own, providing tender

mercies, which, according to his word, never come to an end. They're new every morning, he says, so we have nothing to fear as we face each day. The present circumstances may look bad, but each new day God will be there, providing new mercies for me. Life, breath, strength, forgiveness, grace, sufficient blessings along the way. His mercies never end.

Finally, the third characteristic is God's faithfulness. Jeremiah declares to God, "Great is your faithfulness." He's referring to God's loyalty to the covenants that he made with his people over their long history with him, beginning with Abraham, and then to Moses and Israel at Mount Sinai, and then to David in Jerusalem, up to the very time of Jeremiah. God never turned his back on his people or destroyed them. He always kept his word, no matter how unfaithful they were to him. The whole of the Old Testament, from Genesis to Malachi, is about the great faithfulness and loyalty of our God. And this is a cause for hope instead of despair in Jeremiah's life.

He's remained remembering these three wonderful things about God: his steadfast love, His compassionate daily mercies, his faithfulness, and loyalty to his own. That is, he has a hope ignited within him, a confident expectation for his future. This isn't wishful thinking. This is confident hope even in the midst of suffering. He has a solid rock – God – to stand on. So, he announces "The Lord is my portion," meaning my faithful provider, preserver and protector. "And therefore, I will hope in him – I'm going to keep the faith." He's making a statement of his faith in God, which says basically this:

I believe God has both the will and the means to take care of me and redeem every situation I'm in, no matter how grim life appears at the time. He has not abandoned me and never will. He has not left me to fend for myself. I am his and he is mine. I may not know exactly what my future holds, but I know the one who holds my future. And this is my hope.

By now, you've probably figured out that all these wonderful descriptions of God are found in a beloved hymn that we love to sing:

Great is thy faithfulness, O God, my father.  
There is no shadow of turning with thee.  
Thou changest not, thy compassions they fail not,  
As thou hast been, Thou forever will be.  
Great is thy faithfulness, great is thy faithfulness.  
Morning by morning new mercies I see.

All I have needed Thy hand hath provided,  
Great is thy faithfulness, Lord, unto me.

Now we need to ask: was Jeremiah's hope mistaken? Absolutely not. God did not desert his own. But after a period of time, he brought his exiled people back to Jerusalem, still calling them his own, with the purpose of being a blessing and a light to the nations of the world, just as God had promised Abraham. And the fulfillment of that promise of Israel's being a blessing for the nations would one day come to pass in a stable in Bethlehem: Jesus the Savior would be born. He would grow up and become the Lamb of God, who would take away the sin of the world and provide forgiveness for all sinners. He's Jesus the Lord and promised King from the lineage of David, the wonderful counselor, mighty God, everlasting Father, Prince of Peace, who would bring peace with God for all sinners who trust in Him. Great is thy faithfulness, Lord.

So, I want to stop here and ask you a personal question. How do you live with suffering when it comes your way? What do you do? There are two things in this lament that I recommend you to act upon. First, in light of Jeremiah's experience, I encourage you to always be calling to mind in good times and bad, daily, God's steadfast love for you, which never changes – His unfailing mercies towards you and his faithfulness to those who trust in him. These things must be called to mind daily; be in our hearts. And then second, act upon these final words of counsel from Jeremiah in the 25th and 26 verses, they hold great wisdom for sufferers. Here they are. “The Lord is good to those who wait for Him, to the soul that seeks Him. It is good that one should wait quietly for the salvation of the Lord.” Now that word “wait for him” is talking about calling upon him, praying to him, turning to him in Scripture to be reminded of his greatness, his promises he's given to us, and his consistent faithfulness towards his own. It's there you will find hope to confidently face each new day and what it holds. It is good to wait for him, that our souls seek him. As a New Testament believer. I can't help but think of God's steadfast love, mercies and faithfulness given to us through His Son, Jesus Christ. The suffering under God's wrath, which Jeremiah describes, brings to mind the very suffering and anguish that was experienced by the Son of God at the Cross. His suffering had the purpose of serving as the perfect atoning sacrifice for the forgiveness of sins. Our sins. He suffered the punishment that we deserve to suffer. And behind the pain, the humiliation, the loneliness, and darkness that Jesus, a son of God went through was the steadfast love and mercy and faithfulness of God toward His broken,

sinful world. Trusting in Jesus, the last verse of that earlier hymn I quoted to you becomes yours joyfully to claim –

Pardon for sin, and a peace that endureth  
Thine own dear presence, to cheer and to guide.  
Strength for today and bright hope for tomorrow.  
Blessings all mine with 10,000 beside.

Now the apostle Paul writes of this steadfast, faithful love in the book of Romans when he says “God shows his love for us, in that while we were still sinners, Christ died for us.” That’s love. And then Paul goes on to reason for those of us who are suffering believers in Christ,

If God is for us, who can be against us? He who did not spare his own son but gave him up for us all, how will he not also give us all things? I’m convinced that neither death nor life, nor angels, nor rulers, nor things present, nor things to come, nor powers, nor height, nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ, Jesus, our Lord.

So I want to end this message back where I started: with my mother. Someone interviewed her a few months before she went to her heavenly home. My father sent me a copy of that interview. One of the questions the interviewer asked her was: “How does your faith in God affect your everyday life?” And my mom’s answer testifies to this truth that we’ve been looking at in today’s text. She said this: “It’s gotten me through a lot of difficult times. I couldn’t have done it without faith. I know that. You just can’t do these things alone. I’ve been sick most of my life. I’ve learned to rely on God. He’s all I’ve got. And it’s great to have him.”

We are now going to use our next hymn as our closing prayer for the day: *Great is Thy Faithfulness*.