

Energising faith and sustaining hope

Lamentations 3

In Lamentations 1, a reporter details Lady Zion's plight. In Lamentations 2, he draws close and sees her pain. In the process of bearing witness to Lady Zion's suffering, the reporter is transformed. No longer a dispassionate reporter, he has become her advocate and comforter.

In Lamentations 3, a 'man who has seen affliction' (v. 1a) speaks to an assembly of Judah's remnant. The 'man' (Hebrew *geber* = a strong or valiant man) may or may not be the reporter of Lamentations 1 and 2, although it is traditionally accepted that he is the same person (i.e. possibly the prophet Jeremiah).

The valiant man commences his address with his own testimony, thereby establishing that he understands the remnant's suffering for he has suffered too, as one of them. As a survivor, he hopes to convince the remnant that he is worthy of their trust so that they will 'accept the benefit of his experience and move forward with him'.¹

He describes the violence inflicted on his body: his captivity/imprisonment, suffering, shame and sorrow. He describes torture (v. 16a, the breaking of his teeth) and terror (v. 16b, his cowering in ashes). As in Lamentations 1 and 2, all of these sufferings are attributed to Yahweh, and the valiant man admits that he was losing hope in the LORD.

Read: Lamentations 3:1–18.

Discuss:

- Recall a time when you endured terrible anxiety, fear, pain, grief or trauma. Do you think your experience might be of benefit to you when you find yourself ministering to someone struggling in a similar trial and/or with similar emotions? Why? How?
- How might such a ministry redeem and sanctify your own suffering?²

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The valiant man confesses that every memory of his affliction is painful and toxic. As he is constantly remembering, he is continuously hurting (vv. 19–20). To sustain hope, he reminds himself (v. 21) of a truth:

*The steadfast love of the LORD never ceases; his mercies never come to an end;
they are new every morning; great is your faithfulness (vv. 22–23).*

It is precisely *because this* LORD is *his* LORD, that the suffering man has reason for hope (v. 24).

Read: Lamentations 3:19–24.

Discuss: How does this truth sustain hope?

The phrase 'But this I call to mind' (v. 21) suggests that the valiant man is deliberately enacting a strategy of *remembering* for the purpose of energising his faith and sustaining hope.

Discuss:

- Are memories created automatically or does memory-creation require effort? Explain your answer.
- Is your memory bank full of biblical knowledge and practical experience of the LORDS's steadfast love, endless mercy and great faithfulness – accessible memories you could draw on/call to mind to energise your faith and sustain hope amidst testing times?
- What are you going to do to ensure your memory bank is well supplied with accessible faith-energising, hope-sustaining memories?

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The valiant man then gives the suffering Judean remnant some advice: be patient (not reactionary!) and wait for the LORD. Be grateful if you are young and strong. Do not take the law into your own hands. Wait, for

¹ Leslie C. Allan, *A Liturgy of Grief: A Pastoral Commentary on Lamentations*, Baker Academic, Grand Rapids MI, 2011, p. 91.

² 'Redeem' = enable you to reclaim ownership of; 'sanctify' = make holy (set apart for God).

the Lord will not cast you off forever, *for* ‘though he causes grief, he *will* have compassion according to the abundance of his steadfast love; for he does not willingly afflict or grieve the children of men’ (ESV).

Read: Lamentations 3:25–33.

Just as chapter 3 (the central chapter) is central to the interpretation of the book of Lamentations, verses 32–33 (the central verses) are central to the interpretation of this chapter. Here, the valiant man assures his audience that although God delivers judgment out of necessity – because justice, righteousness and the covenant demand it – *he finds no pleasure in it* (cf. Ez 18:30–32). Affliction and grief are *not* what our heavenly Father desires for us. So while his wrath might burst forth for a moment, it always passes, while his love remains constant, enduring forever. Consequently, there is always reason to hope. *Read verses 31–33 in various translations.*

God is righteous; he hates corruption and injustice. God is sovereign; we can trust him with our lives.

Read: Lamentations 3:34–39.

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The valiant man now addresses the congregation directly (v. 40: ‘Let us ...’), recommending personal reflection and a returning to the LORD, and acknowledging that no one is without sin. ‘Let us lift up our hearts and hands to God in heaven’, he entreats (v. 41). Fully aware that God has not yet forgiven them – for they have not yet repented – the valiant man leads the assembly in a prayer of confession and lament (vv. 42–47). However, as soon as he remembers Zion’s plight he breaks down in tears (vv. 48–51).

Read: Lamentations 3:40–51.

Today, multitudes of Christians weep ‘rivers of tears’ over the plight of their people in various places – for example, Syria, Iraq, the highlands of Vietnam and Laos, Pakistan, Burma, the Nuba Mountains of Sudan, Papua, Egypt, Iran and North Korea.

Read verses 48–51 again and **discuss:**

- How do you think the ‘rivers of tears’ that flow today from the persecuted church might impact God’s heart?
- Can we ignore this (like the passers-by of Lam 1:12)?

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Returning to his testimony, the valiant man now summarises the central message. Though he was hunted and thrown into a pit³ where death appeared imminent and inevitable (vv. 52–54), he cried out to the LORD, who heard his cry and answered ‘Do not fear!’ (v. 57b). The Lord *took up his cause* and *redeemed his life* in answer to prayer, having *seen* everything that was done to him; having *heard* everything that was said against him.

Read: Lamentations 3:52–63.

Discuss: Does (or should) knowing that the *just* and *righteous* King of all the earth *sees* every injustice done to you and *hears* every slander directed against you motivate you to pray? Explain your answer.

Read: Isaiah 35:3–4 (a call to encourage the persecuted and afflicted). *Discuss* the similarities.⁴

For all its power to sustain, hope does *not* make reality go away. After being delivered from the pit, the valiant man still had to struggle with the cruel realities of life in a devastated city under foreign occupation. While faith facilitates hope, and hope enables endurance, this needs to be renewed on a daily basis and nurtured diligently.

In closing, this valiant man – this survivor – erupts into a prayer for *justice*, prayed in confidence and full assurance that the LORD *will* do it; the LORD *will* have the last word!

Read: Lamentations 3:64–66.

Discuss: It is not insignificant that the last word of Lamentations 3 is *Yēhovah: LORD*. For not only will *Yēhovah* have the final word, he *is* the final word! *Yēhovah!* (cf. Rev 1:7–8; 22:12–13).

³ This can be a literal (Jer 38:6) or figurative pit (Ps 88:6).

⁴ For a detailed examination of this text, see Chapter 12 of Elizabeth Kendal’s book, *Turn Back the Battle: Isaiah Speaks to Christians Today* (Deror Books, 2012) www.turnbackthebattle.com