

Love That Never Ends
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Lamentations 3:19-26

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

PAINFUL POEMS

Lamentations is a series of poems that commemorate the pain and sorrow suffered by God's people during the Babylonian captivity.

For the most part its a book we don't like to read.
 Even though this is an ancient book, the pain and sorrow expressed in these poems resonate with our own fears and pain.

Lamentations is a difficult book to read for the same reason we find it hard to look at news reports on the fighting in Syria. The pain and the sorrow and the anger are real.

We see pictures of parents and children caught in a medieval siege delivered by modern weapons of war.

It breaks our hearts.

Yet there seems to be nothing that we can do to stop the fighting and the suffering.

And so we turn away.

We don't want to look too much at the suffering.

It's too depressing.

The same was true for God's people in captivity.

The most famous example of their despair is found in Psalm 137.

"By the waters of Babylon, there we sat down and wept when we remembered Zion."

The Babylonian tormentors wanted God's people to sing them a song.

But, God's people didn't want to sing the old songs that reminded them of home.

It was just too painful.

And in defiance they hung their harps in the willow trees.

You see, not only were they homesick; they were also VERY angry.

The extent of their anger is evident in the last line of that Psalm.

Yes, they wanted their enemies to be destroyed...

but they also wanted the children of their enemies to be destroyed in the most horrible way.

Warfare creates a problem not only for today but also for tomorrow. The children of war can often perpetuate that hatred in the future.

This is certainly not the future we want for ourselves or for our children.

So how can we flip the script?

What can we do to get ourselves out of a way of life that is destructive not only for us but also for our children?

That's the question that God's people asked in a time of exile. And that's the question that we ask even today.

WORMWOOD AND GALL

Notice the metaphors used in verse 23.

When God's people thought of their affliction and their homelessness, it was like "wormwood and gall."

Wormwood was a shrub like plant with a very bitter taste. And it was commonly used as a metaphor for bitterness and sorrow.

For example, the prophet Amos chastised the social ills of his day when he prophesied,

"You have turned justice into poison and the fruit of righteousness into wormwood." (Amos 6:12)

In the New Testament book of Revelation a star named Wormwood falls from heaven.

A third of the inland water is poisoned and many die. (Revelation 8:10-11)

In the same vein, gall is also used as a metaphor for bitterness. It was not only bitter; it was also poisonous.

You may remember that gall is also mentioned in the New Testament.

When Jesus was on the cross, he was offered wine to drink that was mixed with gall.

But when he tasted it, he would not drink it. (Matthew 27:34)

I think these other passages give us good insight into the meaning of this passage.

Wormwood and gall represent the bitterness of evil and hate.

For those of you who read C.S. Lewis, you now know why he named one of the demons in his book, *The Screwtape Letters*, Wormwood. The work of the devil is accomplished through bitterness.

But, what did Jesus do when he was offered the drink of bitterness?

He refused it.

Jesus would not allow himself to be overcome by bitterness, even on the cross.

Jesus knew what was happening.
Bitterness was the work of the devil.

No one ever gets better by drinking wormwood and gall.

And that's true for us as well.

We cannot allow bitterness to take over our life.
We cannot allow angry words and the desire for revenge to dominate our thought process.

POOR THINKING

Indeed, the author of Lamentations eventually understands this. In verse 20 he realizes his problem.

He is continually thinking too much about what is wrong with his life.

He's thinking about what has been destroyed.
He's thinking about the people that are no longer with him.
He's thinking about the fact that he is a stranger in a strange land.

And what does this kind of thinking do to him?
He writes, "My soul is bowed down within me."
He is exhausted.

He is exhausted physically.
He is exhausted mentally.
And most of all ... he is exhausted spiritually.

Do you know someone like that?

Do you know someone who continually dwells on the losses of the past?

Do you know someone who always drinks their wine mixed with gall?

(In the south we would talk about crying in our beer to a sad country song, but it's the same thing.)

To be honest, sometimes all of us are like that.

And step one in the cure for bitterness is to recognize what is getting us down.

We have to take a hard look at ourselves in the mirror and realize that bitterness has taken over our life.

We recognize that our thinking has fallen into a rut.

That's step one, recognizing the problem.

But, what is step two?

What else can we do to cure the bitterness in our life?

What can we do when our mind just can't seem to focus on anything but the things that we have lost?

Step two is to focus on something (or to be more precise, someone) else.

We focus on the only One who can take away our bitterness. We focus on the Lord.

STEADFAST LOVE

In particular, the poet in our lesson for today suggests that we focus on the steadfast love of the Lord, love that lasts forever.

The phrase that the NRSV translates "steadfast love" is actually one Hebrew word, "hesed".

This is roughly the Old Testament equivalent of "agape".

This is a unique word reserved for God's love.

So, what is distinctive about God's love?

God takes special notice of those in need.

Jesus said, "Blessed are those who mourn for they shall be comforted."

It is not a good thing to mourn, but in our sadness we remember that the God who made heaven and earth does not abandon us.

God comforts us.
God blesses us in a way that no one else can.

The steadfast love of God reminds us that He is with us and for us in life and death.

We belong to God.
God's mercies never come to an end.
They are new every morning.

We may fail; the compassion of God does not fail.
God's love is abundant and everlasting.
God's love is a love that doesn't end.

SINGING THE HYMN

And then the poet uses the phrase that is the title for one of our hymns, "Great is Thy Faithfulness."

In fact, if you look at the words to that hymn, the first line is taken directly from our passage for today.
The hymn puts to music the precious promise that is ours. You can trust in the love and faithfulness of God.

There are some hymns that need to be sung more than others, and Great is Thy Faithfulness is one of those hymns. In fact just singing Great is Thy Faithfulness to start each day would be a very good devotional.

You see, each new day is an opportunity to reflect not about the horrors of the past or the troubles of the present. Each new day is an opportunity to reflect upon the character of God.

What is God like?
God is merciful.
God is just.

God is loving.
And God is for us.

THE LORD IS MY PORTION

The poet put it this way. "The Lord is my portion."

When God's people entered the Promised Land, most of them were given a portion of the land.

The land was a sign and a symbol of God's faithfulness.

But, what happens when the land is taken away?

That's what happened to God's people when they were taken into the Exile.

They were homeless.

Everything was new, strange, and frightening.

There was no sign or symbol of their faith.

The land, their portion of God's special blessing was gone.

Without the Temple and the Promised Land, God's people were adrift.

But, the poet remembers one group did not receive a portion of the Promised Land.

The priests from the tribe of Levi did not get a portion of the Promised Land because "the Lord was their portion."

Their access to the presence of God more than made up for what they lost.

Well, now that God's people are in exile, they all have access to the presence of God in a new way.

The Lord is their portion. They don't put their hope in all the trappings of the faith.

They put their faith in the presence of God.

Many of the great writers on the spiritual life speak about "practicing the presence of God" or "the pursuit of God."

We sometimes talk a lot about God.

We meticulously maintain our church buildings and the trappings of our faith.

But, do we actually seek the presence of God?
Do we claim the fact that God is our portion?

Our Promised Land is not a place.
Our Promised Land is a Person.

MARTHA AND MARY

You may remember a story in the New Testament about Mary and Martha.

Martha is working to serve her guests, but Mary is sitting at the feet of Jesus.

Martha gets fed up with her sister and asks Jesus, "Won't you tell my sister to help me?"

And Jesus replies, "Martha you're worried and distracted by many things, but there is need of only one thing. Mary has chosen the better *portion* that will not be taken away from her." (Luke 10:42)

Serving others is important.
But, sitting at the feet of the Lord is the better portion.

For Mary, the Lord, Jesus was her portion, and everything else paled in comparison.

And the Lord of life would indeed be with her forever.

FAITH IN THE WILDERNESS

A time of great trial can help us understand this truth.

God's people wandered in the wilderness for 40 years after the Exodus. In that harsh setting God's people learned to trust in the promises of God.

In the wilderness they had to trust God each day for food and water. They had to trust God for direction, being led by a cloud by day and a pillar of fire by night.

The wilderness was punishment for their lack of faith.

But, as God's people looked back on this time, they saw it as a golden age. In the wilderness they were closer to the presence of God than any other time in their history.

And now the writer of Lamentations realizes that this is also true of the Exile.

In their time of great need, God is closer than ever. Their portion of the Promised Land has been taken away, but now they are all like priests. They have access to the presence of God.

God is their portion.

And since God is their portion, they now have hope. There is no need to hang up their harps on the willow.

They can still sing the songs of home because even in a foreign land they are at home.

God is their portion.

Whenever I preach I know that a good number of my congregation are in the wilderness.

Whenever I preach I know that a good number of my congregation are in exile.

To those of you in exile, to those of you in the wilderness I say,

"The Lord is your portion. The Lord is your hope."
The steadfast love of the Lord never ends.

HOPING AND WAITING

In the Hebrew language hoping and waiting are related.

To hope is to wait on the Lord.
This does not mean that we are passive.

The second line of verse 25 makes this clear.
In verse 25 we read,

“The LORD is good to those who wait for him,
to the soul that seeks him.”

Waiting also involves seeking.

Waiting is about discernment.

We sincerely ask,
“What is God doing in this situation?
How can I discover the presence of God and become a part of God’s program in this particular place.”

One of my professors used to talk about waiting for the presence of God on tiptoe.

There is a sense of excitement and anticipation.
Even in exile the presence of God can give us hope.

On the other hand, do not think that faithfulness is measured by being worried and distracted by many things.

Faithfulness begins as sit at the feet of our Lord and listening.

That is the better portion that will not be taken away.

The writer of Lamentations expresses that thought this way in verse 26,

“It is good that one should wait quietly
for the salvation of the LORD.”

WAITING IN AN ANGRY WORLD

You know how some must have responded to those words of the poet.

“How can we wait quietly when our world is in such a terrible state?
How can we wait quietly when we are so angry and bitter?”

Today there are many who continue to spike our wine with anger and bitterness.

They encourage us to act out of fear.
But, often it is fear that lands us in exile in the first place.

If we recognize this, we come to our senses.
Instead of drinking wine spiked with gall, we drink the new wine of grace offered by our Lord, Jesus Christ.

You see, there is a connection between the promises of this passage and the promises of the Lord's Supper.

The elements of the Lord's Supper speak not only of salvation and forgiveness.
The elements of the Lord's Supper also speak of tragedy and defeat.

How do the words of institution begin?
"On the same night in which he was betrayed ..."
The story of salvation begins with betrayal by one of the disciples.

And then listen to what the elements represent.
This is my body which is broken for you.
This is my blood which is shed for you.

The power of the gospel lies in the fact that it is good news in the middle of a world that is broken.

Today is World Communion Sunday, and we remember this day that some of our brothers and sisters in the faith struggle mightily.

We pray for them.
We look forward to a day when God's will is done on earth as it is in heaven.

But, we do not despair.
We do not despair because we believe that when all is said and done the bitterness of evil will not win.
The bitterness of evil will not win in their lives nor will it win in our lives.

We put our hope in the faithfulness of the Lord.
We wait with confidence and expectation.

We don't know how.
We don't know when.

We just know that one day the exile will end, and we will make our way
back to the Promised Land.

But, until that day we rest our souls in this promise,

“The steadfast love of the Lord never ceases.
His mercies never come to an end. They are new every morning. Great is
Thy Faithfulness.”

Let us sing the hymn again and again and again.
It never gets old.

Or at least the promise never gets old.

Let us begin each day with the promise.
And let us live with a patience born of hope.