



**Suffering Church Action
and Awareness Week**
2023 – 2024

Because of the LORD's great love **we are not consumed**

Lamentations 3:22

Eight daily devotions
focusing on Lamentations 3
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barnabasaid
bringing hope to suffering Christians

Introduction:

Jeremiah sat weeping

“And it came to pass that after Israel had been carried away captive, and Jerusalem made desolate, Jeremiah sat weeping, and lamented this lament over Jerusalem and said...”

These words are prefixed at the beginning of the book of Lamentations in the Septuagint (the earliest Greek translation of the Old Testament). So let us approach with awe, as a devoted servant of the Lord pours out his grief-laden heart, a prophet who has warned and urged and pleaded with his people, but in vain.

Despite Jeremiah's courageous prophesying over many years, Jerusalem has fallen, and her people have been taken away into captivity. The disaster he warned against has happened. He is overwhelmed with a double sorrow: he grieves for the sins of his people which brought about their downfall at the hand of God, and he grieves for their current suffering. We are shocked and shaken by the depth of his anguish.

Some of us come from cultures where the outward expression of sorrow is generally suppressed, because it is considered admirable not to “give way”. But in many parts of the world, a strong display of grief is expected, especially in bereavement.

Such lamentation (the Greek word means “crying aloud”) can include weeping, groaning, wailing, whimpering or other wordless sounds. But in Jeremiah's case it has words, which are preserved here in the Bible to help us. The five chapters of Lamentations are five separate poems. The third one, which we shall look at in the coming week, is an acrostic poem, consisting of groups of three lines, the lines in each group beginning with the same letter of the Hebrew alphabet.

Lamentations is a book rarely read or preached on in most churches today, although some use it during the last three days of Holy Week. Yet it is read annually in synagogues on the ninth day of the Jewish month of Av (which falls in July or August). This date (Tisha B'Av in Hebrew) is the saddest day of the Jewish calendar. It is a day of mourning for the destruction of the First Temple by the Babylonians in 587 or 586 BC, which Jeremiah experienced, and of the Second Temple by the Romans in AD 70. Other calamities for the Jewish people are also remembered, such as the expulsion of the Jews from England (1290), France (1306) and Spain (1492) and the Holocaust of World War Two.

Jeremiah's focus in Lamentations reminds us how Jesus wept over Jerusalem as He rode into the city on a donkey, a few days before He was crucified.

If you, even you, had only known on this day what would bring you peace – but now it is hidden from your eyes. The days will come upon you when your enemies will build an embankment against you and encircle you and hem you in on every side. They will dash you to the ground, you and the children within your walls. They will not leave one stone on another, because you did not recognise the time of God's coming to you. (Luke 19:42-44)

He had an almost maternal longing to comfort and protect the city's population:

Jerusalem, Jerusalem, you who kill the prophets and stone those sent to you, how often I have longed to gather your children together, as a hen gathers her chicks under her wings, and you were not willing. (Matthew 23:37)

Throughout her history, the Church has experienced humiliation, violence and destruction. In the Nile valley, three African Christian Nubian kingdoms (later unified as one kingdom) flourished for about a thousand years, having fought off invasion attempts by Arab Muslim armies. But by the early sixteenth century Christianity had died out there and Islam reigned supreme. Similarly, the Churches of North Africa (today's Morocco, Algeria, Tunisia and Libya) ceased to exist. By the end of the fourteenth century the Church that had existed in Afghanistan since at least the third century had been effectively eliminated by the fearsome Uzbek conqueror Timur (Tamerlane).

In the early 20th century, the Ottomans did their best to exterminate the Church in their empire, through an organised genocide of Christian minorities. Later the Churches behind the Iron Curtain and the Bamboo Curtain were almost destroyed by communist persecution in the Soviet Union and China. In the 21st century we have seen the city of Mosul (ancient Nineveh) emptied of its Christian population by the menacing advance of Islamic State (IS, also called ISIS, ISIL and Daesh), raping, enslaving and killing as they came. The genocidal anti-Christian violence that has grown in northern and Middle Belt Nigeria, especially since the founding of the Boko Haram terrorist group in 2002, has now reached the point where thousands of Christians are killed every year.

Suffering Church Action and Awareness Week 2023 focuses on the mass killings, even genocides, of God's people throughout the centuries and now. This makes Lamentations, with its accounts of desolation, destruction, despair and death, a supremely relevant text.



**Sunday 5
November 2023**
Lamentations 3:1-18

The lament of the afflicted

This central poem of the book sums up the whole of Lamentations, and its first verse gives us the essence of the reason for lamenting. Speaking for his whole people, Jeremiah declares that he has seen affliction, that is, experienced it personally. The word “affliction”, sometimes translated “misery” or “suffering”, is literally “humiliation” (Hebrew *oni*). What Jeremiah experienced was the conquest of the Lord’s holy city by pagan armies from Babylon, who besieged Jerusalem for more than a year, then broke through its walls, razed the buildings to the ground, including the Temple, slaughtered many of its starving inhabitants, and took most of the remainder into captivity.

Hunger is still used as a weapon against God’s people. At the time of writing, the Armenian Christians of Nagorno-Karabakh have been blockaded in their enclave by hostile Azerbaijan for seven months. In the 2020-2022 war in Ethiopia’s Tigray region famine-like conditions were deliberately created: out of an estimated 600,000 deaths, up to 200,000 died of starvation.

The anguish of Jeremiah’s experience is doubled and re-doubled because of its cause. Jeremiah, with the spiritual discernment of a prophet, does not hold the Babylonians responsible but recognises that the affliction has come from God Himself. Moreover, it is not random caprice but the “rod of his wrath” – a punishment, albeit long delayed while the Lord, both just and loving, waited and hoped for repentance. Ultimately, the covenant people of God brought their affliction on themselves by their persistent arrogance and disobedience.

Jeremiah feels abandoned, left to walk alone in darkness by a God who seems far away, who rejects his prayers (3:8). All hope is gone (3:18). His lament is expressed in extreme imagery, summed up as the bitter taste of plants like wormwood and gall (3:5,15).

The experience of God’s people is rooted in the experience of their Saviour who suffered affliction for them (Isaiah 53:7). As He hung on the cross, punished for our sins, He endured not only physical pain but also the spiritual agony of feeling forsaken by God (Matthew 27:46). We remember too that He was offered gall to drink, probably to dull the pain, but refused (Matthew 27:34).

Thank you, Lord Jesus, that however greatly we are afflicted it is never as much as You suffered when You carried our sins.



**Monday 6
November 2023**
Lamentations 3:19-21

I remember my affliction ... I have hope

Yesterday’s reading finished with a despairing cry from Jeremiah that both his strength and his hope have perished (3:18). All resources of body and soul are spent. He has reached the end. He sums up his suffering with a third reference to the horrible bitterness of plants such as wormwood and gall (3:5,15,19).

Let us imagine the colossal effort of will by which Jeremiah, at this lowest of all possible lows, in the depths of a dark pit, manages to re-ignite hope in his heart (3:21). By a deliberate effort he calls to mind the character of the LORD. He turns his thoughts away from the memories of violence, hunger, rape, destruction, humiliation and lawlessness which have been seething in his mind. He searches for other thoughts – for what he knows about the LORD.

Perhaps he reminded himself that the eternal God may be our Judge but He is also our Refuge and that underneath are the everlasting arms (Deuteronomy 33:27, a verse which Jeremiah would have known). Jeremiah probably also knew the ancient book of Job, focusing on God’s apparent punishment, and perhaps Job’s words about God, spoken in the depths of suffering, “Though he slay me, yet will I hope in him.” (Job 13:15)

However Jeremiah did it, he managed to seize hold again of the fact that, no matter what circumstances we fall into, our hope will ultimately rest upon the Almighty. This is true even – or, perhaps, especially – if we have brought our suffering on ourselves by our sin or pride.

Jeremiah did not bow before the altar of despair, but deliberately lifted his gaze upwards to God. He reached back into history and down into the very depths of his soul, and there he discovered hope: a hope that rests on God Himself, a God who would never betray him or let him down, a God who remains constant and true.

Lord God Almighty, sometimes we are overwhelmed by news of war, famine, weather extremes or the persecution of our brothers and sisters. Sometimes our own afflictions crush us, body and soul. Sometimes our sins weigh us down. Help us always to look to You and be radiant (Psalm 34:5).



**Tuesday 7
November 2023**
Lamentations 3:22-24

Because of the LORD's great love we are not consumed

In today's reading the purpose of the book of Lamentations is revealed: an affirmation of Divine love and mercy. For, despite the circumstances, we have not been consumed. We have not perished. We are still here to praise Him, to put our faith in His faithfulness, to choose Him as our portion. Therefore we wait, trustingly, for Him to act in compassion in His perfect time.

The Hebrew word translated here as "great love" (v.22) is *hesed* (also spelled *chesed*). This wonderful word, which occurs about 200 times in the Old Testament, has no exact English equivalent. The term "loving kindness" was invented by translator Myles Coverdale for the English Bible he published in 1535, to try to convey the amazing quality of God's love. For it is the type of love which is indicated, rather than the amount of love (amazing though that is, too). *Hesed* is the active, unwavering, steadfast love of our covenant-keeping God. The New English Bible calls it "true love". "See what kind of love the Father has given to us," marvelled the apostle John (1 John 3:1, ESV).

The Hebrew grammar of verse 22 is a challenge to translators. A word-for-word translation would indicate that it is we who are not consumed i.e. we do not come to an end. But it could also mean that the LORD's *hesed* does not come to an end. Thus the Jewish interpretation in the Targum is that I call to mind "the goodnesses of the Lord, for they cease not". It is similar in Syriac: "the mercies of the Lord, for they have no end". Many English translations follow the same idea, stating that the steadfast love of the Lord, or His lovingkindnesses, or His acts of mercy, never come to an end.

Both understandings teach the same simple lesson: "God is love" (1 John 4:16). It is "the deep, deep love of Jesus, vast, unmeasured, boundless free". It is the love that "wilt not let me go" in which we can rest our weary souls.

Thank you, Lord, for Your constant love, new every morning, which nothing can overcome or quench. As I awaken each morning in Your love, help me to abide in that love. Through all life's storms and sorrows, may Your love be the source of my strength and my hope.



**Wednesday 8
November 2023**
Lamentations 3:25-27

The LORD is good

We are near the heart of the book of Lamentations, both in terms of being halfway through the text and in terms of the essence of its message. The clouds have parted, the sun has broken through, all thoughts of affliction are gone, and we read "The LORD is good..." This affirmation is like the pearl of great price, which the merchant in Jesus's parable discovered and sold all to get (Matthew 13:45-46). The goodness of God is the secret of His Kingdom.

If we remember nothing else from Lamentations, let us remember that the LORD is good – good to those who hope in Him, who seek Him.

God is good, the supreme good, the highest good, the only true good. Goodness lies at the centre of His nature, for He Himself equated His goodness with His glory when He passed in front of Moses (Exodus 33:19,22). He prepared Moses for the experience, saying, "I will cause all my goodness to pass in front of you, and I will proclaim my name, the LORD, in your presence" So the LORD Himself seems to equate goodness with His Name, that is, with His character and person.

In Psalm 23:6 David speaks of how goodness and *hesed* will pursue the LORD's people like a pair of Divine hounds.

Just as Jeremiah used the metaphor of bitter-tasting plants to describe his anguish, so David elsewhere uses the idea of taste to describe his experience of the LORD's goodness.

Taste and see that the LORD is good. (Psalm 34:8)

Similarly, the apostle Peter writes of that first beautiful experience of salvation in Christ as tasting "that the Lord is good" (1 Peter 2:3).

The writer to the Hebrews solemnly warns those who have "tasted the goodness of the word of God" that they must not fall away through apostasy (Hebrews 6:4-6).

We praise and thank You, Lord God, for Your goodness, which You have graciously enabled us to taste. Keep us hoping in You. We know that it is good to wait quietly for Your salvation and good to endure hardship, especially in our youth. Whatever suffering we may experience, do not let it turn us away from You.



**Thursday 9
November 2023**
Lamentations 3:31-33

He will not cast us off forever

God in His sovereignty determines what shall happen to His people.

Referencing his experience of persecution, and writing from exile on Patmos, John describes a dazzling vision of Jesus standing among seven golden lampstands, a vision that John was commanded to write down and send to the churches in seven particular cities of Asia Minor. The lampstands (or candlesticks in some translations) are the seven churches (Revelation 1:9-12,20). The first message, to the church in Ephesus, warned them that they must repent or Jesus would remove their lampstand from its place (Revelation 2:5). Despite their right doctrine, perseverance, suffering and hard work, these Christians had “forsaken their first love”. Their very existence was therefore at risk.

As we saw in the introduction (p.3), the Christian presence has been completely wiped out in certain places at certain times. But, while the Church may be eradicated in one place, elsewhere faith springs up. Jesus promised that the gates of hell shall not prevail against His Church (Matthew 16:18, AV). She will not be cast off forever. Though she may face death and destruction in one place, God in His infinite wisdom will choose to plant His seeds of new life in another place and so the Church continues. The true Church of Jesus Christ will not be consumed.

Part of the Church may die as Jesus Himself died, but through death comes life. Let us remember the Lord's words:

Very truly I tell you, unless a grain of wheat falls to the ground and dies, it remains only a single seed. But if it dies, it produces many seeds. (John 12:24)

Likewise, for individuals, earthly death is not the end for those who trust in Jesus. When we die we are not consumed but enter into glory. Our God is the Alpha and the Omega, who is, and who was, and who is to come (Revelation 1:8). He sees the whole.

In the midst of our thoughts of suffering and being cast off, the last verse of today's reading reveals a precious truth about God's own heart: “He does not willingly bring affliction or grief to anyone.” God is good. God is love.

Lord Jesus, by Your grace and goodness, help me to keep my first love for You.



**Friday 10
November 2023**
Lamentations 3:34-36

The Lord of justice

Our passage today deals with the Lord's attitude to injustice here on earth. Repeatedly Scripture tells us that He is a God of justice. His truth, justice and righteousness are often linked, as when Moses declared:

*He is the Rock, His work is perfect; for all His ways are judgment, a God of truth and without iniquity; just and right is He.
(Deuteronomy 32:4, AV)*

The Psalms also sing of His justice, righteousness and truth.

Guide me in your truth and teach me, for you are God my Saviour (Psalm 25:5)

*Righteousness and justice are the foundation of your throne
(Psalm 89:14)*

*... the heavens proclaim his righteousness,
for he is a God of justice (Psalm 50:6)*

Truth, justice and righteousness are also qualities that He looks for in His people. Yet what He sees (Lamentations 3:36) is often very different (3:34-37). One of Jeremiah's early prophetic messages was a cry from the Lord for His people to be truthful, just and righteous:

*‘If you, Israel, will return,
then return to me,’
declares the LORD.
‘If you put your detestable idols out of my sight
and no longer go astray,
and if in a truthful, just and righteous way
you swear, “As surely as the LORD lives,”
then the nations will invoke blessings by him
and in him they will boast.’ (Jeremiah 4:1-2)*

But the people ignored Jeremiah's prophecies.

*Guide me in Your truth and teach me, for You are God my Saviour.
Guide me in Your justice and teach me, for You are God my Saviour.
Guide me in Your righteousness and teach me, for You are God my Saviour.
My hope is in You all day long.*



**Saturday 11
November 2023**
Lamentations 3:37-39

The foreknowledge and omnipotence of God

God is often described as omnipotent, omniscient and omnipresent. In other words He is all-powerful, all-knowing and present everywhere. We have already seen (Day 5) that He calls Himself the Alpha and the Omega, the first and last letters of the Greek alphabet. “I am the A and the Z,” say some English translations. He knows the beginning, the end and everything between. His purposes will be fulfilled.

*I make known the end from the beginning,
from ancient times, what is still to come. (Isaiah
46:10a)*

As we noted yesterday, He sees everything (3:36). Our ways are not hidden from the Lord (Psalm 139:1-3). He knows the suffering we have to bear, the injustices we are subjected to. As a well-loved Christmas carol says, “And he feeleth for our sadness, and he shareth in our gladness.”

The God who allowed such affliction to come on us is not a distant and uncaring God, but rather a God whose purposes for this world will be fulfilled.

*I say, “My purpose will stand,
and I will do all that I please.”
... What I have said, that I will bring about;
what I have planned, that I will do.
(Isaiah 46:10b-11)*

He has a purpose for His Church and for His people. Perhaps it may involve affliction for a time but “we know that in all things God works for the good of those who love him, who have been called according to his purpose” (Romans 8:28).

When Jerusalem, capital of Judah, was destroyed by the Babylonians in 587/586 BC, the event for which Jeremiah is mourning in Lamentations, it had already been under Babylonian rule for a decade. In 597 BC Babylon had laid siege to Jerusalem, which soon surrendered. Thus, without much bloodshed or damage, Babylon gained control of Judah. The king and various leading or skilled citizens of Jerusalem were taken to Babylon along with some of the Temple furnishings. It was to these exiles that Jeremiah wrote a long letter with God’s promise that they would eventually return. “I know the plans I have for you ... plans to prosper you and not to harm you, plans to give you hope and a future.” (Jeremiah 29:11)

All the rest of the population, including Jeremiah, remained in Judah, and the Babylonians installed Zedekiah in Jerusalem as their king. Jeremiah’s message from God was that having Babylon as its overlord was God’s punishment on Judah for its sin so that they should accept their situation. But Zedekiah rebelled against the Babylonians despite Jeremiah’s warning of the terrible suffering this would bring (e.g. Jeremiah 21:8-10). These prophecies were fulfilled when the Babylonians moved against Jerusalem a second time. One result was that we have Lamentations, a book of crying aloud to God.

Lord, help me to hear and obey Your voice, no matter how unexpected Your plans for me are. My hope and my future are in You.



Sunday 12
November 2023

Lamentations 3:40-42

Let us examine ourselves

We have spent a week focusing on the character and purposes of our all-seeing and all-powerful God. He is the One before whom we bow in awe and wonder, the One whose light shines into the deepest recesses of our hearts, who sees our motives. We must fall before Him not only in adoration but also in confession.

We saw (Day 1) how Jeremiah recognised that God's rod of wrath was upon him because of the people's sin. Rejecting their first fairly gentle punishment, they brought down on themselves terrible suffering. Therefore they had to examine their behaviour and attitudes (3:40) and see where they had failed. We must view what is happening to us not from a human perspective but, as best we can, from the Divine perspective.

Some of us live in societies so strongly characterised by materialism, immorality, arrogance and lies that the wonder is only that God has not consumed us. Is there any affliction we are now enduring that could be God's light and loving rebuke? Something equivalent to the first Babylonian siege of Jerusalem? Something to show us that He is to be taken seriously, that His Word and will cannot be ignored indefinitely, that we cannot continue to call evil good and good evil (Isaiah 5:20), that He sees everything? If so, how should we respond?

Here is what the LORD told Solomon:

When I shut up the heavens so that there is no rain, or command locusts to devour the land or send a plague among my people, if my people, who are called by my name, will humble themselves and pray and seek my face and turn from their wicked ways, then I will hear from heaven, and I will forgive their sin and will heal their land.

(2 Chronicles 7:13-14)

We must humble ourselves before God, examine our lives, confess our sins and rebellion, turn away from them in repentance and return to the One whose compassions never fail (Lamentations 3:22).

We must encourage others to do likewise. This may not be a popular message. Jeremiah was persecuted for his faithfulness to God and God's message in a godless society; we must be prepared for the same.

"Have mercy on me, O God, according to your unfailing love; according to your great compassion blot out my transgressions. Wash away all my iniquity and cleanse me from my sin." (Psalm 51:1-2)

Our Father in heaven,

We cry to You in lament, for the suffering in the world and experience ourselves because of rebellion against You.

Have mercy on us.

Our Father in heaven,

In the midst of overwhelming trouble, we lift our eyes to gaze on You, our eternal refuge.

Our hope is in You.

Our Father in heaven,

We rest our weary souls in Your steadfast love that never wavers, fails or comes to an end.

Do not let us be consumed.

Our Father in heaven,

We wait in faith and confidence for You, Who alone are truly good, to save and deliver us in Your perfect time.

We trust and adore You.

Our Father in heaven,

Who does not willingly bring affliction or grief to anyone, help us to love You with all our heart, soul, mind and strength.

Do not forsake us.

Our Father in heaven,

The God of truth, justice and righteousness, may the lives of us, Your children, reflect Your character. Let Your justice reign.

Our Father in heaven,

Who alone is all-knowing and all-powerful, Who always works for the good of those who love You, Give to Your people a hope and a future.

Our Father in heaven,

We confess that we have sinned in what we have thought, said and done, and in the things we have left undone that we ought to have done.

Have mercy on us.

Amen

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1 Hymn by Samuel Trevor Francis (1834-1925)

2 Hymn by George Matheson (1842-1906)

3 "Once in royal David's city" by Cecil Frances Alexander (1848)