

A New Year's Lament: 2. Remember, Remember

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- [0 : 0 0] Well, if you've let your Bibles close, then it's time to begin the hunt back to the book of Lamentations, page 688, tucked in behind Jeremiah.
- As you rustle to find it, we'll have a moment's prayer. Our good and merciful Father, we trust, Lord, that you have given us this book of Lamentations to make us wise for salvation through faith in Jesus Christ.
- So our prayer, Lord, is that you make us sensitive to its warnings and give us great courage through its promises. We ask it in the name of your Son, our Lord. Amen.
- Well, sometimes the Bible can make you feel as if you're trapped in a Cold War movie. You've been caught by the enemy and they're determined to get information out of you.
- And last week, as we looked at Lamentations 1, they had our heads plunged deep into a bath of cold water. We were exposed, weren't we, through the terrible realism of poetry to suffocating grief, all the horrors of the exile and the shameful reality of Israel's sin.
- [1 : 2 5] And then finally, we were let up for a gasp of air. And we went home. And most of us, I at least, tried to forget about it.
- But that isn't how it happens in Lamentations. As soon as chapter 1 ends, our heads are plunged down in the water again. Chapter 2 of this book is a fierce ode to God's just wrath.
- You can think of it as the Romans 1 of the Old Testament. It holds us down in the water until we're forced to admit that terrifying thought we came across last week.
- That because of their rebellion, God himself had become the enemy of his people. And now in chapter 3, we're pushed down below the surface.
- One more time. Look at verse 2. Our poet's been driven into darkness. In verse 6, it's like the darkness of the grave.
- [2 : 3 5] Or over the page, verse 54. Water closed over my head. I said, I am lost. Chapter 3 takes us to the very depths of despair.
- To the suffocating ends of the Lord's fury. If today's church took judgment just half as seriously as the Bible does here, then we'd listen very carefully indeed.
- This isn't comfortable stuff, is it? It's not much fun to preach. We ended last week with the poet's stomach churning and heart wrung. And to be honest, if you add clammy palms, then that's a pretty good description of what it's like to stand here and expound this book.
- But it's in our Bibles for a reason. The Lord knows that sometimes poetry like this can grab hold of our emotions in a unique way and convince us deeply of realities that we try to hide from.
- And surprisingly, amid all the gloom of chapter 3, we also find Lamentation's biggest leap of faith.
- [3 : 5 5] We ended last week with huge unanswered questions, didn't we? God's people were in exile in Babylon, suffering that bitter, lonely slavery that their sin had brought about.

They'd lost their land, they'd lost their reputation, they'd lost their temple, and they'd lost their king. God's people, the people on whom his whole plan of redemption was focused, were in slavery in Babylon.

And so from any rational point of view, God's plan seemed to be in ruins, just like Jerusalem. And worst of all, his people are haunted by that terrible thought we came across last week.

The thought the writer wrestles with again and again in this chapter, that rejecting God's grace had meant rejecting him, making an enemy of him.

But last week, we also began to see the very first seeds of an answer. You see, when God has become your enemy, we saw that God himself becomes your only hope.

[5 : 15] And in chapter 3, once we've been brought to that lowest ebb of despair, we begin to see how that hope takes shape. Hope.

Hope. Hope. That's a word that runs through the veins of this chapter. It's a lament concerned with one question.

Is there any hope? Is there any hope for Israel, faced with the terrible consequences of their sin?

And is there any hope for you or for me? When we're trapped by our sin, pinned down by despair, the suffocating consequences of failure, is there any hope?

Or right at the heart of this lament, in fact, right at the heart of the whole book of Lamentations, we'll find where real hope lies.

[6 : 19] Right in the depths of blackness and despair, we'll find one lamp of hope, based not on you, or on me, or on Israel, but entirely on God's unchanging character.

So embedded into the stark poetry of this chapter is Israel's roadmap to redemption, her path to recovery and to rescue.

The chapter reads like a chart, like a map, that plots the progress from utter despair through cautious hope and to a God who hears and answers his people.

Now any good schoolboy could tell you that a decent map should reveal a few strategic locations where X marks the spot. And our roadmap to redemption is no different.

There are three key points on Israel's path to recovery, marked out for us by the poet. So again tonight, we're going to study this giant chapter in broad brushstrokes.

[7 : 31] We're going to look at those three key locations where X marks the spot. And you see, on an exciting map, you'd hope to find something helpful written under the X.

Something to tell you why it's so important. If you're lucky, you'll find something like, here lies treasure. Well, the first stage on Israel's roadmap to redemption marks a far less promising spot.

It comes in verses 1 to 18. Here lies hopelessness. Here lies hopelessness. That's our first point.

These first 18 verses tell the tale of broken bones and banished hope. We're delving here into the absolute depths of despair for faithless Israel.

Now you might have noticed that in chapter 3, the voice of our poet has changed slightly. Usually the writer stands back a little and talks about God's people as a whole.

[8 : 45] His subject in all the other chapters has been Zion, Jerusalem, the capital city of God's people. But in this lament, Zion speaks with one voice, the voice of our poet.

God's people are represented by one man. I am the man, verse 1. And here's his terrible creed, verse 17.

I have forgotten what happiness is. I've lost all hope. Look at the next verse.

My endurance has perished and so has my hope from the Lord. Here lies hopelessness. But you'd be mistaken if you thought that our poet or Judah was the subject of this chapter.

It looks that way in verse 1. I am the man. But look carefully and you'll see that nearly every verse of this chapter begins with the word he, God.

[9 : 53] Verse 4, he made my flesh and my skin waste away. He has broken my bones. Verse 12, he drove into my kidneys, my heart, we would say, the arrows of his quiver.

it's the rod, verse 1, of his wrath. So yes, it was the Babylonians who inflicted this punishment on Israel.

But they simply did God's bidding. That is a shocking thought, isn't it? The prophets may be warned of this rod of God's judgment, but even so, I think, every time that word he starts a verse, it sends a sickening shock into our Jewish listeners.

The language and the pictures here sound a lot like the book of Job, don't they? It's very similar. But there's one crucial difference. You see, where Job was innocent, our writer knows that Israel was utterly deserving.

Remember, this is not the book to read if you're grappling with the pain of ordinary human suffering. We joke for that.

[11 : 11] This is about suffering because of sin, faithlessness. And it's striking, isn't it, that our poet knows exactly who is in control of that suffering.

There's none of modern man's squeamishness about God's judgment here, is there? And there's none of modern man's feeble denial of God in the presence of suffering.

We often tend to do that, don't we? We ask questions like, how could a good God allow me to go through this? But the poet here does just the opposite.

He doesn't deny God's control. Instead, he's forced to confront it. Judgment just confirms. the absolute sovereignty of a holy God who demands justice.

So we can try to deny that reality when we suffer, but it won't stop the punishment. Pushing God out of the picture of suffering or discipline will only make it meaningless.

[12 : 22] Lamentations never makes that mistake. This lament is wrestling with a far more troubling question. You see, if God is in control, then how can we escape?

Look at verse 8. He has blocked my ways with blocks of stones. And if it's God we've provoked, then how can we turn to him for help?

We saw last week, didn't we, that only God can save you from God. But how will God save you if he won't even listen to your prayers?

Look at verse 8 again. Though I call and cry for help, he shuts out my prayer. Look on to verse 44, and it's the very same fear.

It's as though the writer is praying into bubble wrap. You have wrapped yourself in a cloud so that no prayer can pass through. That, friends, is the reality of God's anger.

[13 : 31] While we are still enemies, while we're outside of Christ's protection, and our sin stands unforgiven, it puts an uncrossable chasm between us and God.

And there can be no fellowship, no meaningful relationship or communication, no prayer, in the presence of hot, settled fury.

When God is against you from any sane human point of view, then all hope is banished. But it's just then, isn't it, in verse 18, when the poet realises just how hopeless his cause is, that he's able to turn to a real solution.

Verse 18 is a bit of a forest fire moment. You know how the cycle works in a forest fire. It's only when everything is burnt to the ground, when all human hope is lost, that the seeds of real hope have a chance of germinating.

nothing. So verses 19 to 39, mark the second X on our map. Here lies hope.

[14 : 59] It's a section all about covenant compassion and cautious hope. And the turning point when those seeds of hope begin to spring up out of complete despair is in verses 19 to 21, isn't it?

So what happens in those three verses? What's the key to discovering this spot on our roadmap to redemption? Well if you look at those verses you'll see that the writer is giving us a clue.

Listen carefully to the repetition in those verses. Verse 19 Remember my afflictions and my wanderings, the wormwood and the gore. My soul continually remembers it and is bowed down within me but this I call to mind and therefore I have hope.

The steadfast love of the Lord. The turning point there from hope to despair comes when the poet remembers two things.

Remember, remember. The first one was in verses 19 and 20 and he can't help but remember this one. My soul continually remembers it and is bowed down within me.

[16 : 20] It's what he's been talking about all along. The hopelessness of his own sin. My afflictions and my wanderings. But the second one, verse 21, is very different, isn't it?

He has to call this one to mind. It doesn't come easily. There's a different choice of words there, isn't it? Because he forces himself to drag this memory back into his consciousness.

A memory that changes everything. But this I call to mind and therefore I have hope. The steadfast love of the Lord never ceases.

You see, nothing outward has changed, has it? Those chains of slavery and suffering are just as real. But now, suddenly, the poet has moved from despair to real, tangible hope.

And that happened when he accepted his condition and then chose, forced himself to turn from navel gazing to God.

[17 : 31] To remember God's covenant compassion and call to mind those great covenant promises which God gave to his people. Now, don't be fooled in the next couple of verses into thinking that this is just flowery, poetic language.

We all know those lovesick teenage poets, don't we, who spin out words like candy floss. But that's not this poet. Every word here is chosen carefully.

Every word poet picks is telling us something central to God's character. You see, every great covenant word of books like Exodus rings through this next triplet of verses.

God's steadfast covenant love, his sense in Hebrew, his vast never-consumed mercy, and God's great, trustworthy faithfulness.

those three words are at the very heart of who God is. They're the words that he chose right back at the beginning to reveal himself, and he hasn't changed.

[18 : 49] You see, the very same words that made sense of God to Moses make sense of God now to our suffering poet. And the point is this.

Yes, Israel has been a faithless bride, a hopeless bride. They have trashed the covenant. They've provoked God to his faith.

But the substance of our poet's hope is not found in Israel. It's found in God's faithfulness to his promises.

Verse 24, the Lord is my portion. Therefore, I will hope in him. Yes, Jerusalem may be in ruins.

Judah may be in slavery. But Jehovah's steadfast love endures forever. That passionate, unconditional love by which he has pledged himself in marriage to his people.

[19 : 52] So here's the poet's message to us, sitting comfortably in Glasgow 2011. Remember, remember. Humble yourself and remember first your affliction and wandering, the wormwood and gall of your unfaithfulness.

Think back to the forest fire that burnt down every last straw of trust in your own ability to put things right. But force yourself to remember this too, the great faithfulness of your God.

Remember that his mercies are never consumed. They are new every morning. And if you feel worn down and close to despair, trapped by your own sin, then remember where your hope lies.

If you feel suffocated by failure, then remember the Lord is my portion, says my soul. Therefore, I will hope not in me, but in him.

Remember, remember, your hopelessness, his hope. hope. And if you remember both of those things, then the response is never triumphalism.

[21 : 22] Look at the text. It's great humility. This is covenant compassion and cautious hope. Verse 29, let him put his mouth in the dust.

There may yet be hope. isn't that just what this God is always like, burning down all human pride, yet the man in the dust, the Christian struggling to obey him, giving the courage to fight on.

Well, how does that section finish? Remember, the poet started in gloom and in introspection, wallowing in that suffocating punishment for his own sin, and then we were forced to look outwards to God's gracious covenant love.

But the result, as this section finishes, is that we're turned back to look into our own hearts again. Verse 27, it is good for a man that he bear the yoke in his youth, that he recognizes that sin has terrible consequences, consequences, recognizes that even forgiven sin has terrible consequences, and he bears them like a true man.

He learns from them. Three verses here that each starts, in the Hebrew at least, with the word good. 25, 26, 27.

[22 : 59] Do you see that? That is extraordinary, isn't it? We're talking here about discipline, about God's punishment, and of every word this poet could have picked, he chooses the word good.

You see, God's discipline is what binds us to him. It keeps us on path, just like in his language, the yoke keeps an ox bound to the plow.

at the end of the sermon, we're going to sing a favourite hymn of mine, Come Thou Fount of Every Blessing. But sometimes I find the last words of that hymn very difficult to sing.

Let thy goodness like a fetter bind my wandering heart to thee. You see, the goodness by which God bound this poet's heart to himself.

The way he may answer that prayer of ours is very often with his discipline. Verse 32, though he cause grief, he will have compassion according to his hesed, his covenant love, for he does not willingly afflict the children of men.

[24 : 21] Even God's punishment is gracious. It was meant to lead Israel to repentance, to lead us to repentance. So verse 39 is the last turning point, the point that leads us into the final map on our road to redemption.

Listen to verse 39. Why should a living man complain, a man, about the punishment of his sins? Remember, so far this poet has spoken as one man, one voice, representing his people.

But that verse, verse 39, is a bit like a hinge. From now on, he turns back to a corporate voice, the voice of the rest of the book, the voice of God's people as a whole.

It sounds a bit like verse 1, doesn't it? It echoes those words, I am the man. But this time he's recognizing something more. He isn't just focusing, in verse 39, on his own punishment.

Why should a living man, mankind, complain? Do you see that in the first half of the verse? He uses a new word this time. He uses a Hebrew word that even I understand.

[25 : 44] Adam. Why should an Adam, a living, created, human being, complain when his creator calls him to account?

And that thought leads him beyond his own suffering and to his people's. You see, Adam's race, you and me, corporately, are in a terrible mess, aren't we?

And corporately, we need a solution. Without one, there's no point to all this suffering, is there? There's no super spiritual advantage to suffering.

There's nothing good in suffering by itself. Remember, God doesn't willingly afflict the children of men. His discipline is meant to lead us beyond itself.

And that's where the lament leads us now, to the solution for the people of God. The final mark on our poet's roadmap to redemption, verses 40 to 66.

[26 : 49] here lies help. Here lies help. The help that comes from answered prayer. This last section is all about penitent prayer and well-placed hope.

In those first couple of verses from verse 40, the poet challenges Israel, corporately, to deal with the situation. and then the rest of the lament takes a form of a prayer which does just that.

But the miracle of this prayer is that God hears it. Look at the great reversal that takes place over these verses.

In verse 42, the situation is as bleak as ever. We have rebelled and you have not forgiven. In that verse 42, God is still wrapped in a cloud of fury, blocking out all prayer.

But look at verse 56. You heard my plea. And by the end of the chapter, Israel is again trusting God to rescue her from the enemy.

[28 : 06] What makes the difference? Well, let's look at the poet's challenge to God's people in verse 40. They've heard, haven't they, that great statement of God's faithfulness that came a few verses back.

And now the challenge for the people of God is true repentance. We can get awfully muddled up about repentance, can't we?

I find it quite difficult sometimes. But actually, it's very straightforward. This little paragraph from verse 40 onwards is an idiot's guide to repentance.

Just what I need. Sadly, there aren't many idiot's guides to the book of Lamentations. If you're thinking of buying a commentary, I would save your cash. But there is one chap who's written a very helpful little book, a chap called Bob File.

You might have heard of him. And if you fancy giving Bob a little bit of pocket money, I'm sure he wouldn't mind. it's well worth a read. But if not, if you're a bit tight fisted, then here's one of the gems from Bob's book, how he breaks down this guide to repentance from verse 40.

[29 : 19] You see, it's really important that we don't confuse true repentance with simply feeling sorrowful. Feeling sorrowful was where we were at the start of the chapter, wasn't it?

before God's covenant love was called to mind. But true repentance, says Bob, is made up of three things, and they're all right here.

In verse 40, you've got the first part of our idiot's guide to repentance, looking inwards with genuine self-examination. You see, we have to be realistic, don't we?

We have to be realistic about the state of our own heart. And then the second, verse 42, is confession, acknowledging what we find when we look inside.

One writer says this, lament without confession is merely complaint. Lament without confession is just moaning about your condition.

[30 : 28] But confession, confession means reaching outwards, trusting what we learnt about God's character a few verses back, and taking your hopeless condition to him.

And there's one more part to our idiot's guide, and that's prayer. Penitent prayer. There it is in verse 41, lifting our hearts and hands to heaven, to the source of our hope.

love. And over the last verses of this chapter, Israel does just that, she pours out her heart to the Lord. Penitent prayer is how the chapter ends.

And from that leap of faith that we had in verse 22, she seems to sink again into the torment of her suffering, but never again quite to the depths of despair that we open the poem with.

now there is hope, well-placed hope, hope in a God who will rescue and redeem. Look at verse 55, I called on your name, O Lord, from the depths of the pit.

[31 : 43] You heard my plea, do not close your ear to my cry for help. You came near when I called on you. You said, do not fear.

You have taken up my cause, O Lord. You have redeemed my life. Well-placed hope. Well, what does all this matter to us?

We could easily turn a book like Lamentations into a bit of a Paddington Bear. You all know Paddington Bear, don't you? He was hopelessly out of place in the modern world, didn't fit in.

He was a relic from deepest, darkest Peru. And this book can seem like that, can't it? A relic from the deepest, darkest Old Testament.

But we can't leave it there. If we do, we forget that this is God's eternal word to us. And we've already thought a bit about how it applies to us individually, haven't we?

[32 : 42] Humbling our pride, yet lifting us out of the dust with that promise of God's great faithfulness. love to us. But what about us as a people?

Remember, this is the people of God in exile. So how does Christ's church today, in 2011, compare with our poet Israel?

Well, Israel learned something, didn't they? Israel learned that hope, true hope, is only found when we're brought to utter despair in ourselves and forced to grasp hold of God's covenant promises, his faithfulness, his sure character.

But is that where today's church is? Despairing of itself and on its knees? I'm not so sure.

You see, it's not quite enough to be a dead church. There are plenty of dead churches around today, aren't there? But think of Israel. They were dead long before the exile.

[33 : 54] It wasn't that that made the difference. It's remarkably easy, isn't it, to be a dead church and yet still cling on with pride to your name or your buildings or your reputation or your history.

How easy it is to bumble along as if nothing were wrong in churchy arrogance. And how hard to repent.

How hard to ask God to forgive and plead the covenant love that God promises to his people. Judah learnt that lesson, but not until she was in chains.

And as the chapter ends, those chains are just as real. Judah's heart might have changed, but the struggle is just as sharp, isn't it?

So now, like in chapter 1, the poet ends with a cry for justice. Justice, verse 61, for the taunts of those cruel captors of God's people.

[35 : 08] people. And maybe that seems odd to us. Maybe it seems strange that this writer can have such confidence that God will punish those Babylonians.

We can be squeamish about that as well, can't we? But if it does seem odd, ask yourself this. What if the Lord didn't pursue the enemy of his people?

What hope would there be then for us? You see, these last verses are still powered by a trust in God's covenant promises, in God's unfailing covenant love, and for God's covenant plan to survive, for those promises to come to any fruition, for redemption to come to us here in Scotland, then God would have to act, wouldn't he?

He would have to act to rescue these people from exile. Redemption comes to us through this ancient little people of Israel, through one born of them.

It's only because the Lord did save Judah from exile that we can plead his covenant love today. Our truly penitent prayer can be answered by God without compromising his justice, but only because our sin has been punished.

[36 : 46] Of course, we haven't faced these chains of slavery and separation, not in the way that Judah did. But if we grasp these gracious promises of God, then one man has, one man, a man born because God rescued his people from exile.

Jesus Christ, the Son of God. One man who can say in our place, I am the man who has seen affliction under the rod of God's wrath.

One man who bore that rod, who willingly bore the suffocating grief that our sin deserves to rescue us from slavery.

The steadfast love of the Lord never ceases. His mercies never come to an end. They are new every morning. Great is your faithfulness.

therefore, I will hope in him. Amen. Let's pray. Father, we thank you that in your certain promises, there is real, solid hope for us.

[38 : 17] We pray, Lord, that you teach us to be a people who stake our trust increasingly on your merciful love. Teach us, Lord, to listen to your discipline and be quick to repent, always humbled by that great love of your Son, the love which bore our sins in his body on the tree, that we might die to sin and live to righteousness.

For we ask it in his strong name. Amen. Amen.