

LAMENTATIONS 3:19-24
STOCKPILES OF LOYAL LOVE

You're sitting on one of the hills round the city; you're watching it burn! The invading army has come to destroy it and the significant places are gone. The King's palace has gone up in smoke; all the houses round about it, and the city walls are knocked down, so that anyone can walk in. The temple, the place where you met with God, you prayed, you offered worship, is burning, and the army taken great delight in raiding its treasure stores and has taken away all that is precious. How do you feel, sitting on the hill watching all of this? There must be tears: everything precious to you about your home city is gone and that sense of grief has to be there, weeping over the city. For the person of faith, there's more to it than that: is there the feeling that God has gone away? Somehow, the people's love and loyalty to God have been found wanting and has God gone away? There are more questions than answers. Will God come back? Will the city ever be rebuilt? What will become of the people who have been taken away, the captives, the exiled?

This could have been Jeremiah sitting on hill above Jerusalem watching the city burn as Nebuchadnezzar's army came to destroy the city and take the people away. He wept over a city that was lost, a people that were gone, a people whose hearts had turned away from the Lord, whose faith was given to another and the city and the people have faced God's judgement on their lack of loyalty. Lamentations is Jeremiah's reaction to that situation. But it is not his immediate reaction. An immediate reaction would have been a rant against God, full of grief and anger perhaps, struggling to articulate faith when everything was going wrong. These events took place in 586; Lamentations was written perhaps 10 years later, still "a tear-drenched elegy for the dreadful events of 9th August 586" (Sinclair) but thoughtful, careful, considered. Each chapter in Lamentations is an acrostic poem, each verse beginning with a different letter of the Hebrew alphabet; or in chapter 3, each group of 3 verses. This is not a rant from the heart, but the considered view of heart and head, of faith and hope.

Lamentations is well-named. Most of this book is what it says in its title; it is a lament for a lost people, for a nation that had lost its way, and lost its faith and is a call for people to repent and return to the Lord. Chapter 3 provides the highlight of the book, indeed probably the only light in the darkness. In this considered piece, full of grief, sadness and loss, there is light; there is hope; there is faith, and Jeremiah can see that God has not gone away and the people are not abandoned. Our instinct when things go wrong is to rage, to rage against the dying of the light, to rage against another thing going wrong, to rage against God when He seems not to answer our prayers again! Here, later, Jeremiah considers, stops, thinks, sees another side; Lamentations is that considered picture, honest, painful, full of grief for what is lost, but not without hope; Jeremiah considers that hope goes on because of the "stockpiles of loyal love" (The Message) that are in God's heart. Alongside the broken city, he sees that God has not gone away, that God still loves.

"I remember..." (Lamentations 3:19f) This is a very personal description of Jeremiah's heart and mind as he reacts to a tragic situation. He has seen the city that he loves destroyed and knows now that it was avoidable. The words he uses are sad words: here is a man who feels hurt, beleaguered; a man who can't settle, but feels that he is wandering, lost and aimless; "no-one ever told me that grief felt so like fear... the same fluttering in the stomach, the same restlessness, the yawning. I keep on swallowing" (CS Lewis *A grief observed* p.7) Gall is a bitter herb, a picture of suffering and travail. 10 years on, he still remembers; the events are burned in his mind, in his heart, in his soul and he still feels dispirited when he remembers. That is

part of our human experience of life and how we deal with these times shapes so much about us, whether hard times are allowed to dominate our minds and make us bitter and leave us wandering, and restless for all of our years.

There are all kinds of ways in which we can identify with Jeremiah and the way he feels. Our reaction to the events of Friday on a beach in Tunisia was probably a feeling of anger, wondering what is going on. The reaction in 1915 to Gallipoli was one of anger; this is where the "lions led by donkeys" jibe started, together with sadness at such loss of life, that still lives with families here and in Australia and New Zealand. Personal circumstances do that for us; remembering difficult times, or being in the middle of difficult times and we react like this: we rage against the dying of the light, or God not answering us; we feel afflicted and bitter; we're restless and can't settle to something because of the nagging fear in the back of our minds about what happens next. This is part of the human experience of life and we never talk about it in church because life is supposed to be sweet and perfect; we say that we're 'fine' when we're asked, but if we're honest, the emotions we really feel are very different. We might feel the same way about the society and culture of Scotland: lots of things we loved are being destroyed; elements of society that we've valued and thought were important are not important any more; the nation that once seemed to love God now has pushed God to the margins and some want to take Him out of the picture altogether; we feel afflicted, bitter, or angry about that. We see a Church that seems to have broken its moorings and floated off into a sea of doubt and misadventure, losing its anchor in the Bible and in Jesus; many are left feeling lost and wondering about the future. All of that is around and we remember and we feel afflicted, lost, or bitter.

But Jeremiah considers something else. He sees something else, the highlight of the book, indeed probably the only light in the book. "*Because of...*" (*Lamentations 3:22f*) We are not cast off, but God's love continues; God's love goes on and there are several ways of describing that love which are good for us to consider today. First of all, this is a love that goes on: it never fails, it is a love full of faithfulness and loyalty. This is such an important theme: 70 years after Jeremiah sat on the hill round Jerusalem in tears because the city was destroyed and the people had gone into exile, God began to bring His people back and the process of rebuilding the city began under the leadership of men like Ezra and Nehemiah. God had not gone away; indeed God was with His people by the rivers of Babylon, and His love was poured out into their hearts even in the place of exile, in the dark place. God's love goes on, it never fails, despite what our circumstances might lead us to think. Faithfulness is an abiding quality of God; we can count on Him, He never lets us down; we might not see it at time, but this considered view with hindsight, bears witness to the Lord's great faithfulness. Love goes on.

Compassion is at heart, literally, of God's love to His people. There is a hugely important idea here because when things go wrong, God gets the blame! But the Bible offers another side to God, the God who feels with His people. Compassion is all about feeling with someone when they're sore; it is about walking beside them through hard times, even trying to put ourselves in their shoes. Compassion is a quality in the heart of God, feeling with His people the hurt they feel, understanding their sense of affliction and bitterness, knowing what makes us rage. God feels all of that in us. How? Well, the supreme answer to that is Jesus: Jesus came into our world, one of us, one with us. What kind of life did Jesus live? Well, in the end it was a life marked by rejection, torture, suffering, death, God-forsakenness. In Jesus, God knows what life is like for us and so is full of compassion for His people. Life throws hard things at us; God is full of compassion for His people, He feels with us, He walks with us, He understands us, He knows what we feel; He listens to our prayers.

Thirdly, this love is new every morning. What does that mean? Is God's love exhausted by the end of the day before? Does He recharge His batteries overnight? This is a powerful way of expressing something important: for a new day, God's love is enough. Here is a new day, God's love is new, fresh, and strong enough to rise to meet today's challenges. There were many new mornings in 70 years of exile, mornings when the people wondered what today would bring: would it bring fresh torment from their captors, or a fresh sense of loss and abandonment, of restlessness and new questions about "where is God in all of this?" Will we ever go home? This is familiar, because these are the questions we ask about church: today will pose new questions for us or for people we know: what will today hold? Tomorrow will be same. Every day, for someone, is like that. Here's other considered side to that coin: God's love is new every morning, is fresh every day, and He is able to help us and sustain and support us in all that today holds for us. His is a love that is new every morning.

All of this inspires hope in Jeremiah's heart. "*the Lord...*" (*Lamentations 3:24f*) The word for "hope" and "wait" is the same. To wait upon the Lord is not to sit, doing nothing; to wait upon the Lord is to have hope in our hearts, the hope that God will love us, the hope that God will answer our prayers. Hope is inspired by the endless, compassionate love that God has for us, the love that is new every morning. This is considered: this is not something that flies in the face of facts, nor some random sense that everything will work out and that we should always look on the bright side of life regardless. No, this is considered: this hope is thought-through, this hope is based on something deep and profound, the endless, compassionate love that God has for us, the love that is new every day. This is not blind faith, or blind hope; this is hope that looks at reality and feels afflicted, and also sees God. Jeremiah considers what God is like, what God has done, what God has said and finds hope. As Jesus came to share our suffering, so also He is raised and the power that raised Jesus is also at work in us; so we have hope; we wait for Lord in hope and faith and prayer.

To close the service in few moments, we're going to sing *Blessed Assurance*, a hymn written by the US hymn-writer Fanny Crosby. Hymns were a big part of the Moody and Sankey revival campaign and she wrote hundreds; from the few that we now sing, I don't know any of her hymns that are downbeat. They are all full of hope and faith, they are all full of inspiration, encouraging us to praise and celebrate God's grace and power in the gospel. Yet Fanny Crosby was blind from birth. That could have been the reason for her to be angry and bitter, but instead all through her life she kept deep sense of gratitude to God for the ways in which He had blessed her. Her faith shines through her music. *Lamentations* lives in the real world; it knows all about the things that afflict us, that leave us feeling angry and bitter; but it also lives in the real world where God lives, with love that is endless, full of compassion, and is new every morning; that love challenges us to hope. Lord has stockpiles of loyal love for us; consider that and have hope in your heart.