

Can You Sing Lamentations on Thanksgiving ?

No doubt on the Sunday before or after Thanksgiving you sing the hymn, “Great is Thy Faithfulness”, but did you know where it came from? The prophet Jeremiah wrote it as he was weeping and lamenting over the fate of his city and his people of Jerusalem. He was sitting in the smoldering ruins of a destroyed city when he wrote this as a funeral dirge to his once proud city of God. This dirge, written as Hebrew poetry originally, is called Lamentations in our Old Testament. “Great is Thy Faithfulness” is taken from Lamentations 3:22-23.

In order to understand the lamentations of Jeremiah, it is necessary to understand the man and his circumstances. God called and commissioned Jeremiah to speak the Word of God to the nation of Judah in about 627—586 BC. For more than 40 years Jeremiah warned Jerusalem and a succession of kings of the impending judgment of God. He begged his people to repent, turn from their idolatry, and submit to the one true God of Israel. The kings and the people would not listen, and grew increasingly antagonistic to Jeremiah and his message. He was arrested repeatedly and punished. His written predictions of the coming destruction of Jerusalem were destroyed by King Jehoiakim. Jeremiah was put in the “stocks” at the city gate—a painful and humiliating experience.

Jeremiah was called the “reluctant prophet” because of his response when God called him to deliver God’s message of coming judgment in Jer. 1:5-6, “I don’t know how to speak and I am too young.” God reassured him with, “I am with you to deliver you”, and “I have put My words in your mouth”; but my favorite call of God to Jeremiah was, “gird up your loins and arise, and speak to them all which I command you” (Jer.1:17). What was Judah’s crime against God? It was essentially breaking all of the 10 Commandments of Exodus 20, especially the first two. God put it well in Jer.2:13, “They have forsaken Me, the fountain of living waters, to hew out for themselves man made cisterns, broken cisterns that leak, that can hold no water”. What was the punishment that Jeremiah predicted? “Behold, I am bringing a nation against you from afar...mighty men who will devour your harvest and your food. They will devour your sons and daughters, and your flocks and herds...They will demolish your fortified cities in which you trust...As you have forsaken Me and served foreign gods in your land, so you shall serve strangers in a land that is not yours”(Jer.5:15-19). Through Jeremiah, God predicted that the Chaldeans of Babylon would come soon and destroy Judah, Jerusalem, and the Temple of Solomon. Jeremiah even predicted the man who would be the king of Babylon at the time—Nebuchadnezzar.

No Good Deed Goes Unpunished

What was their response to Jeremiah's message? "The people seized him, saying, „You must die!" Later, just before Jerusalem's destruction, the leaders were so angry at him they threw him into a cistern which had no water—only mud, and he sank down deep into the mud and stayed there in the dark for several days until the king had him pulled out.

Prophecy Fulfilled

The siege of Jerusalem began in 588 BC and lasted about 30 months. Jerusalem's walls were knocked down, the city was destroyed, and the Temple was looted and destroyed in 586 BC. Lamentations is the writing of Jeremiah as he sat in the smoldering ruins of the once proud city of Jerusalem. It is his lament over his people, his city, and his nation. His circumstances are unimaginable. It is hard to imagine a worse predicament. For 40 years he had tried to warn Judah of what was coming, but they would not listen. He had been ignored, imprisoned, beaten, and nearly killed. Now there was nothing left. His home, his family, and his people were either destroyed or carried away into servitude. This is the setting for his Thanksgiving in Lamentations 3:22-23, "The Lord's lovingkindnesses never cease, for His compassions never fail. They are new every morning; Great is Thy faithfulness." How could he be so optimistic and give such thanks in light of his circumstances?

Take a minute and open your Bible to Lam. 3, and you will see a wonderful contrast between the terrible pain and suffering of Jeremiah in a physical, emotional, and material sense, versus the great comfort, peace, and love he experienced from God in a spiritual, eternal sense.

The Lament of the Prophet

The first section of ch.3 uses wonderful imagery to express his emotional and physical suffering. In v.1-3, using a list of metaphors, he expresses the suffering at the hand of God's wrath. He had expected light but got darkness, and expected God's favor but God's hand was turned against him. In v.4-6, God's afflictions caused physical problems—he grew old and his bones were broken. These external changes were matched by inner bitterness. Have you ever felt like there was no way out, like you were trapped? This is what he expressed in v.7-9, "walled me in", "He shuts out my prayer", "He has blocked my ways". My personal favorite and one I can relate to is v.12, "He set me as a target for His arrows". Have you ever felt like you have a bull's eye painted on you and circumstances are using you for target practice? As if physical and emotional pain aren't enough, how about some humiliation thrown in like v.14, "I have become a laughingstock to all people". In v.15-18, he is filled with bitterness and deprived of peace and strength.

The Hope and Belief of the Prophet

The circumstances afflicting Jeremiah serve up a remarkable contrast to his spiritual perspective. In his mind and his soul he remembers the truth about God. No matter how bad things seem, we know that God has a faithful love for us. Just because things are temporarily bad, God still has a wonderful plan for us. God still has unconditional and sacrificial love for us. The attributes of God never change, therefore God's compassion and deliverance are on the way. Jeremiah expresses this eternal perspective well in verses 21-24, "This I recall to my mind, Therefore I have hope. The Lord's lovingkindnesses indeed never cease, for His compassions never fail. They are new every morning; GREAT IS YOUR FAITHFULNESS. Therefore I have hope in Him. The Lord is good to those who wait for Him, to the person who seeks Him."

This supernatural perspective was just like that of the Apostle Paul in the New Testament. Paul had been opposed and rejected wherever he went. He had been arrested and beaten times without number. The threat of death hounded him wherever he went yet he told the church at Corinth, "we are afflicted in every way, but not crushed; perplexed, but not despairing; persecuted, but not forsaken; struck down, but not destroyed...but having the same spirit of faith, according to what is written, „I believed, therefore I spoke“, we also believe, knowing that He who raised the Lord Jesus will raise us also with Jesus."

How about you and I? Can we praise God in spite of our circumstances? Can we look beyond our circumstances to the promise of the resurrection? The authors of the Bible had that unique perspective that whether circumstances were good or bad—God never changes and God's love never changes. You may have had the best year ever, you may be the picture of perfect health, and everyone may be treating you wonderfully. If so, praise the Lord and sing "Great is Thy Faithfulness" as loud as you can. But you may also be in a situation of great despair like Jeremiah was. If so, take heart in what he said in Lam.3, remember that God loves you and has a wonderful future for you, "His compassions never fail". Therefore, be comforted and praise God for who He is and what He is doing. God wants to bless you even in the midst of difficult circumstances.

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