

Surviving a Blue Christmas

Lam. 3:20-32

This time of year, often proves to be the most difficult for many people... The holidays that come near the end of each year are filled with emotions... Emotions that cover everything from nostalgia, joy and loving family – to ... to great heartache due to loss, brokenness and pain...

Being a Christian doesn't automatically affect those emotions:

There are NON-Christians who can hardly wait for Christmas to come – and there are Christians who can hardly bring themselves to church during this season...

Perhaps that's you. You may be one here today whose life has changed a great deal since last Christmas – and, in your mind, that change may not necessarily “been for the better”...

I realize that this time of year can be more serious than just facing a “Blue Christmas”... It can be the most depressing, discouraging and defeated time in many people's lives... So, what should we do?... Just give-in to the “blues”?

God always has a word for us – to meet us in our need – whatever that need truly is. He knows what you and I need in our times of distress and even depression...

Perhaps there is no better passage to turn to than the book of Lamentations, where we drop in on one of God's choicest servants / prophets – Jeremiah...

When you read the entire book surrounding our focal passage – it is very dark and depressing... Jeremiah pours his heart out in brute honesty about his plight... In fact, he writes in poetic style. This book contains five poems by Jeremiah and it is a work of art... Each of the poems is an acrostic of the Hebrew alphabet where every verse corresponds with a letter of the Hebrew alphabet... That's why each chapter has 22 verses, because the Hebrew alphabet has 22 letters... The exception is chapter 3. This chapter is what is called a triple-acrostic – which means each letter has 3 verses associated with it, which is why it is 66 verses... The other exception is chapter 5, which has 22 verses, but Jeremiah abandoned the acrostic style in that chapter...

Lamentations is a dark book to read – except for the bright beam of the light of hope that is found in our passage... So, let's just cut to the chase for a moment and read how God works in and through Jeremiah's heart in his deep time of need...

Jeremiah lived during a time when Israel was being delivered over to exile because of their sin. Israel had hardened their hearts against God so many times – that God was finally exiling them from the land he had promised to them.

During his life, Jeremiah witnessed multiple, “violent deportations” of friends and family from Jerusalem to Babylon. He watched as Solomon's Temple, the symbol of Israel's faith and the center of her cultural life, was torn down... Jeremiah was one of the remaining survivors in Jerusalem, and everybody may have thought that the worst was over – but God told Jeremiah that the worst was yet to come!... Jeremiah was given the task of telling everyone the armies of Babylon would keep coming until nobody was left. (Imagine that being your job – to tell people around you that you love who have seen unspeakable tragedy that the worst was yet to come!) (J.D. Greear)

To make matters worse, nobody believed Jeremiah; they called him a traitor and put him in a dungeon where [Jeremiah 38:6](#) says he sank down into the mud... perhaps even up to his armpits...

Keep in mind – these are the middle verses, of the middle chapter, in a book that is otherwise filled with despair... This is the anchor point for the whole book of misery. This is Jeremiah’s spiritual answer to the discouraging circumstances and dimensions of depression that would otherwise destroy him...

He shows us what to do in the midst of despair...

So – how do we face discouraging seasons in our lives?

In his commentary on this passage, **Chuck Smith** says – “*When the outlook is so bleak you can’t face it - try the up look.*”

So let’s gain some insight from Jeremiah’s example:

1. Remember and Reflect on the Goodness of God (:21)

The greatest Christians in history were not those that God delivered from all pain and misery but those he delivered through pain and misery.

C. H. Spurgeon – “Christian, remember the goodness of God in the frost of adversity.”

Faith starts with honesty before God – but it doesn’t stop there;

²¹ This I recall to my mind,

This might be one of the most profound transitions in the Bible. I want you to see Jeremiah, in his dungeon, sunk in mud, thinking about a child he lost, or a wife, wrestling with the prospect that he might never see them again, and saying DEFIANTLY “*This I recall to my mind*” and therefore I ... choose to ... have hope:

Therefore I have hope.

²² The Lord’s lovingkindnesses indeed never cease, For His compassions never fail. ²³ They are new every morning; Great is Your faithfulness.

²⁴ “The Lord is my portion,” says my soul, “Therefore I have hope in Him.”

²⁵ The Lord is good to those who wait for Him, To the person who seeks Him. ²⁶ It is good that he waits silently For the salvation of the Lord.

³¹ For the Lord will not reject forever, ³² For if He causes grief, Then He will have compassion According to His abundant lovingkindness.

³³ For He does not afflict willingly Or grieve the sons of men.

What is it that Jeremiah recalls to his mind? That God’s lovingkindness never cease, that He is good...

Jeremiah knows that God is like any good father! There are times when He allows His child to go through some pain – because He knows that the pain will ultimately produce greater joy later...

[ILC immunization days]

Jeremiah was saying; “In my pain, I cling to the goodness of God.”

And how did we know God is good?

- Because of what His word reveals about His character.
- In the life of Jesus, we saw His heart break over the lost – over the hurting – and He offered healing and compassion to all who approached Him.
- We know from these things that He’s a good! He is “a good, good Father”, and we CHOOSE to believe that even when we can’t see or feel it right now in our circumstances.

“Recall to my mind” means this thought is not naturally there... We have to put it in there. It’s what **D. Martyn Lloyd-Jones** called preaching to yourselves. He said, “...there is a sense in which the primary task of the Scriptures is to teach us how to talk to ourselves.” (D. Martyn Lloyd-Jones, *Spiritual Depression*, 116)

J.D. Greear – “Your emotions, you see, don’t have brains. They can’t think. They can’t show faith. You have to think for them; you have to show faith; and then you tell them how to feel.”

Here’s a phrase we need to remember:

Don’t feel your way into your beliefs – we have to believe our way into our feelings.

A lot of Christians understand that “we walk by faith, not by sight” (2 Cor. 5:7), but they fail to realize that we walk by faith – and not by feeling!... For many Christians, what they feel is their most reliable indicator of what is true. I feel like God has forgotten me. I feel distant from Him... Jeremiah says, “I feel all those things but God’s word tells me they not true” and I choose to believe Him even though I can’t feel it!”

Maybe you should do that. Get somewhere, where others won’t hear you and think you’re crazy, and shout outloud – “*God is good!*” And call to mind His many acts of faithfulness.

And if you can’t recall them, have someone do it for you...

This is why Christian community is so important... There will be times when we will lose our way and need someone else to “recall to mind” the promises of God and remind us of them!

2. Recognize and Receive Instruction from God (:26-28)

In other words – Determine to learn any lessons God is wanting you to learn...

J.D. Greear – “God does His best work in our suffering... When you experience a season of suffering, it’s important to learn any lessons God is trying to teach you in the midst of your pain. The reason you have found yourself in a season of suffering may vary. But one thing is always true: If you are hurting, that is an opportunity to lean into God. It is an opportunity to learn something from God you might never know otherwise.”

We need to be careful at this point... I am not implying that in whatever suffering you are going through God has you in it because He has some grand lesson for you to learn and He won’t let you out of it before you learn it... There are many times that is not true!

There is nothing to indicate that Jeremiah’s suffering was any kind of response to what he had done... Jeremiah had been a faithful prophet of God since he was a young man – but still, look at what he says:

²⁶ *It is good that he waits silently For the salvation of the Lord.*

²⁷ *It is good for a man that he should bear The yoke in his youth.*

²⁸ *Let him sit alone and be silent Since He has laid it on him.*

It is good because God often does his best work in us when we suffer even when we don't know why we suffer.

Here are a few things He might be doing:

- Sometimes in our suffering God is working to take some idol out of our lives.

Ps. 119:71 (NASB) “It is good for me that I was afflicted, That I may learn Your statutes.

Sometimes God uses suffering to get our attention... When that happens, we usually know exactly what it is – because the Holy Spirit lets us know what He is doing...

- Sometimes God might be working to humble us.

In **2 Sam 16**, you read about David, when he was on the run... He had been falsely accused of something he didn't do... This guy Shimei comes out and starts following David on the road, shouting and spitting at him and throwing stones at him... One of David's men basically says – “Let me go and relieve this guy of his head.” David says, “No, even though I don't deserve this, I think God told him to do it, just to humble me and teach me. God will pay him back”...

- Sometimes God uses times of waiting to prepare you for ministry.

We see so many examples in Scripture, where God's own servants are spending such long periods of time “waiting”... You might even call this a “standard”...

- Moses – waited 40 years before actually leading God's people out of Egypt...
- Scholars say that Paul had a 17 year wait between his “call to be the apostle to the Gentiles” and when he actually “got on the field”... (17 years between Acts 13 and Acts 16)
- David was a young shepherd when he was “anointed” king... but it was years before he actually became the king...

²⁶ *It is good that he waits silently For the salvation of the Lord.*

Sometimes through pain God is giving you the ability to relate to others in ways you couldn't without the pain!

This seems to be what Paul learned... God broke him so he could learn to comfort others with the comfort he had received:

2 Cor. 1:3-4 (NASB)

³ Blessed *be* the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of mercies and God of all comfort, ⁴ who comforts us in all our affliction so that we will be able to comfort those who are in any affliction with the comfort

with which we ourselves are comforted by God.

It reminds me of the statement I understand is attributed to **A. W. Tozer** – “For God to use you greatly he must first wound you deeply.”

Some of you have experienced that recently... God let you go through some painful chapter in your life – so that you can identify with and minister to someone else...

Sometimes the good lesson God is teaching us is not even about us!...

[“cardboard testimony” – of former atheist doctor and stage 4 cancer survivor...]

²⁶ *It is good that he waits silently For the salvation of the Lord.*

3. Realize and be Resolute in the Purpose of God (:24, :32)

God’s purpose and plans are ultimately for good and for blessing...

There are two extremes that Christians tend to gravitate toward in the midst of suffering:

Some in the midst of suffering will say, “*Well, Jesus told us in the world we’ll have tribulation and that we would carry his cross – which means there is no use praying for things to get better. We should expect only pain and misery and disappointment, but God will help us get through it.*”

People who lean this way usually identify as “Reformed” and love deep theology books...

Others say, “*No, God has appointed us to walk in blessing. It’s like the story of Joseph. You might be in prison now, but that’s just temporary. He’s just using the prison to prepare you for the palace. The blessing is right around the corner so hang on – in just a few days I’ll be appointed the king of Egypt.*”

Those who lean a little toward the charismatic tend to gravitate toward this view...

Both answers are partially correct; and both are incomplete by themselves.

Notice what Jeremiah says. First –

²⁴ “The Lord is my portion,” says my soul, “Therefore I have hope in Him.”

Portion is a word that the Jews used to refer to their allotment of land – the inheritance passed down in a family from generation to generation. (Deut. 32:9)

Jeremiah is saying, “*I don’t have any land left. The Babylonians stole it all. But God Himself is my portion. He’s my inheritance and He’s better than land*”.

There’s nothing wrong with praying for the blessings in life – friendship, marriage, a good job... But we need to learn that the greatest blessing of all is God Himself!... God is better than any of those blessings.

But Jeremiah also says –

³² For if He (or – “since He”) causes grief, Then He will have compassion According to His abundant

lovingkindness.

Let's be clear: Jeremiah wanted deliverance... He wanted vindication in the eyes of the people. He wanted reunion with his loved ones and restoration and salvation for the people. And he says, I'm convinced God will change things in the days to come...

Why does he think that? Because God is a God of goodness and blessing!

Ps. 27:13 (NASB)

I would have despaired unless I had believed that I would see the goodness of the Lord – in the land of the living.

It's not just at death I'll experience God's goodness... It's while I am living on the earth!

Psalm 30 rather boldly charges God, "Can the dead praise you? I want to praise you now—I want to be a testimony to my generation today of the strength of your right hand, so let me experience that deliverance now!"

Ps. 30 (NASB)

¹ I will extol You, O Lord, for You have lifted me up,
And have not let my enemies rejoice over me.

² O Lord my God, I cried to You for help, and You healed me.

³ O Lord, You have brought up my soul from Sheol; You have kept me alive, that I would not go down to the pit.

⁴ Sing praise to the Lord, you His godly ones, And give thanks to His holy name.

⁵ For His anger is but for a moment, His favor is for a lifetime; Weeping may last for the night, But a shout of joy *comes* in the morning.

⁶ Now as for me, I said in my prosperity, "I will never be moved."

⁷ O Lord, by Your favor You have made my mountain to stand strong;
You hid Your face, I was dismayed.

⁸ To You, O Lord, I called, And to the Lord I made supplication:

⁹ "What profit is there in my blood, if I go down to the pit?
Will the dust praise You? Will it declare Your faithfulness?"

¹⁰ "Hear, O Lord, and be gracious to me; O Lord, be my helper."

¹¹ You have turned for me my mourning into dancing; You have loosed my sackcloth and girded me with gladness,

¹² That *my* soul may sing praise to You and not be silent. O Lord my God, I will give thanks to You forever.

Don't get so spiritual that you overlook that God's intentions for the world are good. Don't just say, "Well, Jesus is enough." Yes, He is enough. But Jesus came to do something on earth, and I want to see His goodness and restoration at work in the world now – in my life – in my family – in our church – in our communities.

Though He causes grief sometimes, I know, ultimately, He plans to show compassion...

“The arc of history and my life may be long, but it will bend toward Jesus!”

1. Remember and Reflect on the Goodness of God
2. Recognize and Receive Instruction from God
3. Realize and be Resolute in the Purpose of God

4. Reason on and Rest in the Mercies of God (:22-23)

²² The Lord’s lovingkindnesses indeed never cease, For His compassions never fail.

²³ They are new every morning; Great is Your faithfulness.

Get up tomorrow and look for the goodness of God...

Don’t you love this image of the new morning?... God’s mercies and faithfulness are like the sun coming up new every morning, washing away the shadows and the darkness of the night!

Today may feel like a terribly dark, never-ending night of mistakes and despair – but God’s mercies rise new and fresh every morning.

Some of you may think you have messed up so bad there’s no more plan for you.

As I heard someone else say – *“If you’re not dead, God’s not done!”*

His mercies are brand new this morning – and they will be again tomorrow morning!

You may feel, like Jeremiah, like you have been forsaken... But this you must call to mind:

²² The Lord’s lovingkindnesses indeed never cease, For His compassions never fail.

²³ They are new every morning; Great is Your faithfulness.

For some of you, this may be a watershed in your life... Don’t let your emotions dictate reality to you. Your emotions don’t have brains; they can’t show faith. Let’s God word dictate reality.

[Watchman Nee – FACT/FAITH/FEELINGS]

Re-read this chapter again, through the lens of Jesus’s life.

Jesus lived in the darkness of Lamentations 3: 1–20 so I could live in the beauty and light of vs. 21–33

So, now, *“when darkness seems to hide his face, I rest on his unchanging grace. In every high and stormy gale, my anchor holds within the veil. On Christ the solid rock I stand ...!”*

So, once again: Get up again tomorrow. Get up and look for God’s mercy. God is not dead...

C. H. Spurgeon, one last time – “I find no better cure for my depression than to trust in the Lord with all my heart, and seek to realize afresh the power of the peace-speaking blood of Jesus, and his infinite love in dying upon the cross to put away all my transgressions.”

So “call to mind” – the steadfast love of the Lord never ceases – His mercies never come to an end –

They are new every morning!

Great is your faithfulness, O God!

Where are you looking for hope?