Congregation of the Lord Jesus Christ,

We begin today with a Hebrew poetry lesson. And we do this to see why it is that chapter 3 is really the high point of the Book of Lamentations.

* Ch’s 1/2/4/5 – how many verses? 22. 22 letters in the Hebrew alphabet.
* Verse = stanza of poetry. Ch’s 1&2 – 3 lines per verse, ch. 4, 2 lines per verse, ch. 5 – 1 line per verse. Ch’s 1&2 are same length, 4 is shorter, and 5 is shortest.
* First 4 chapters are acrostic – with ch’s 1/2/4, first letter of verse 1 begins with Hebrew A, first letter of verse 2 begins with Hebrew B, verse 3 C, etc. Ch. 5 is not acrostic. And we will talk about why that is when we get there.
* How many verses in ch. 3? 66. 3\*22. 3 lines per stanza. Same overall length as ch’s 1&2. But each line is a verse in our bibles. Verses 1,2,3 are stanza 1, verses 4,5,6 are stanza 2, verses 7,8,9 are stanza 3, etc. And the first letter of the first word of verses 1,2 and 3, all begin with A, first letter of first word of verses 4,5 and 6, all begin with B, etc.

*Verse* 1 - ***A****fflicted am I and beset, a man whom God in His wrath has abased.*

*Verse 2* ***- A****bused by His rod and broken, I am driven into the darkness.*

*Verse**3* ***- A****gainst me, He turned His hand, and again and again.*

*Verse**4* ***- B****ones broken, wasted, I am besieged and battered.*

*Verse**5* ***- B****itterness is my portion and tribulation.*

*Verse**6* ***- B****anished, I dwell in the darkest darkness like those long dead.*

* So this poetic emphasis suggests that ch. 3 is really important.

But here is another reason – vv 22-23.

* If you have been here for our first two sermons, you will know that chapters 1&2 were full of devastation and despair. And this continues in ch. 3 and it will continue in ch’s 4-5. So vv 22-23 are a bright and shiny contrast to the dark misery in the rest of the Book. And that is why they have always been a favourite Scripture memory verse for believers.
* And of course, vv22-23 were made even more ‘famous’ by the hymn we will sing after the sermon – *Great is Thy Faithfulness*. And this hymn is about God’s ‘ordinary’ blessings over a whole lifetime. It was written by Thomas Chisholm. He spent many years living and working as a life insurance agent and he eventually died at the ripe old age of 94 in 1960. But while he was away from home one time, he sent some poems to his good friend, William Runyan. And Runyan found the poem based on vv22-23 so moving that he decided to compose a tune so that the poem could be sung as a hymn. So *Great is Thy Faithfulness* was published in 1923.
* So vv22-23 are another reason why ch. 3 is viewed as the high point of the Book of Lamentations.

Well, with the first two chapters or poems we have heard Jerusalem speak as though she were a woman, whom we have called Lady Zion, and we have heard from a Narrator who speaks about Lady Zion or to Lady Zion. But we won’t hear from Lady Zion again in the rest of Lamentations. You can see from 3:1 that a man is speaking and he is probably our Narrator, who is probably none other than the prophet Jeremiah himself.

The three major themes of Lamentations are that man is really, really bad, that God is really, really angry with sin, and that grace is really, really powerful. And we will see more of those three themes today. And once again, we shall see them against the background of the sorrow and suffering experienced by God’s people in Jerusalem. And it is good for us to really wrestle with the hard questions raised in these chapters because every single one of us will encounter tough times in life. And very often we struggle to understand why the Lord has brought a particular circumstance into our lives or the life of a loved one. Indeed, some of you may have come to church today with this question weighing heavily on your heart.

So in this chapter we see our narrator having been flung into a dark pit, but we also hear that the steadfast love of the Lord never ceases. So we consider this chapter under this theme: **A ray of hope shines out of the dark pit of despair**. And we shall see this as we consider the five sections of this poem, which are that Hope **fades**, Hope **remembers**, Hope **instructs**, Hope **cries**, and Hope **pleads**.

1. So first of all then, in vv1-18, we see that Hope **fades**.
   1. Towards the end of ch. 2, the Narrator urged Lady Zion to call out to the Lord in confession and repentance. However, Lady Zion did not do this because she still saw God as her angry enemy. Well, as we come to ch. 3, the Narrator **changes his approach** by speaking from his own experience.
      1. As I said a moment ago, our Narrator is probably Jeremiah. And in the Book of Jeremiah we read that at one time Jeremiah was suspected of a crime so he was beaten and put in a dungeon for “*many days*.” And in v2 and v6 of this chapter, we read of a place of darkness. In v7, we read of being walled about and heavy chains. In v9 we read of being trapped, as it were, by “*blocks of stones*.”
      2. Another time, because the people and the king did not like what Jeremiah was prophesying, they threw him into a well or a pit. We read that he was “*let down by ropes. And there was [mud] … in the cistern … and Jeremiah sank in the mud*.” And v53 of our chapter speaks of being “*flung alive into the pit*” and water closing over his head.
      3. And it was times like these when it seemed to Jeremiah that God had abandoned him and that he would surely die. So if you look at v8 of our chapter, you can imagine Jeremiah thinking that his prayers were unheard and unanswered. In v12 he talks about feeling like God was using him for target practice. Indeed, things seemed so bleak and hopeless that we read in vv17-18, “*My soul is bereft (or empty) of peace; I have forgotten what happiness is; so I say, ‘My endurance has perished; so has my hope from the Lord.’*”
      4. So Jeremiah is saying to lady Zion, I know what you’re going through; I know what it is like to feel abandoned by God; to be utterly depressed.
      5. And this is not an uncommon feeling for believers.
         1. **Habakkuk** – “*O LORD, how long shall I cry for help, and you will not hear?*”
         2. **Psalm 88** – “*Darkness is my closest friend*.”
         3. Joni Earekson Tada – Quadraplegic, Chronic pain, cancer – “Hello God? What are you thinking here?”
         4. Have ever felt like this? Is this how you are feeling today?
2. So there can be times, even for believers, when hope **fades**. But we begin to see what the right response should be in those times as we come to vv19-24, where we see that hope **remembers**.
   1. Now, before we get into vv19-24, we have to note the last word of v18, which is? “**LORD**.” And because it is in capital letters it is the special covenant name of God. It means I am the unchanging, everlasting, faithful God of covenant mercy. It is the name that reminded the OT people of God that He was with them. So we could call it His ‘relationship name.’
      1. Sometimes husbands and wives have nonsensical, cutesy names for each other, or a Father might have a special name for his daughter that makes no sense at all but it is special to them both. Well, this name, LORD, was the special ‘relationship name’ that God gave to His people so that they would know that He was their God; that He was with them. And so, even as hope faded for the Narrator, he **preached to himself** just by using the name LORD.
      2. And brothers and sisters you can do this today by choosing to think about Jesus.
         1. Jesus also has a special ‘relationship name.’ Do you know what it is? **Immanuel** – God with us. And that name is much more than just a name. It speaks of the fact that God came down to earth to live as a human being. And this was necessary so that he could be our Saviour but it also makes Him sympathetic to all of our struggles and sorrows.
         2. And another benefit of thinking about Immanuel-Jesus is that no matter how bad your circumstances, His were far worse and completely undeserved. The Narrator and you and me all have something in common – we are really bad sinners. Look at **v39**, “*Why should a living man complain, a man, about the punishment of his sins?*” You and me really have no right at all to ever complain or be upset with any suffering or sorrow we experience, because we are sinners. But Jesus *never* sinned; He did *nothing* wrong. And yet, He suffered unspeakable anguish of body and soul, because of your sins and mine.
      3. So the first thing to do when hope fades is to think about Jesus-Immanuel. As soon as you can, stop dwelling on your circumstances and think instead about the person and work of Jesus. It’s what we read earlier in **Hebrews 12:2**: “*Fix* *your eyes on Jesus, the author and perfecter of your faith*…”
   2. And this ‘tactic’ for dealing with hopelessness continues with vv19-24. In vv19-20, he speaks about the reality of dwelling on suffering and sorrow. But in v21 he begins to ‘**call to mind**’ something else.
      1. And that phrase, “call to mind” is very, very instructive. To call to mind is to actively choose to remember something different than what you *were* thinking about.
         1. Compulsions/addictions – rubber band. Pain and think about something else.
         2. And again and again in the OT, God’s people were commanded to remember all that God had done to deliver them from slavery in Egypt and bring them to the Promised Land so that they would trust Him to deliver them today.
         3. We saw this with the Psalm we sung earlier – **Psalm 136**. The Psalm reviews all of God’s faithful acts of deliverance and provision and ends with the refrain, “*His steadfast love endures forever*.”
   3. And this is what our Narrator does with vv22-23, “*The steadfast love of the LORD never ceases; His mercies never come to an end; they are new every morning; great is your faithfulness*.” Wow! What beautiful words! What wonderful truth! And Jeremiah knew this also from his personal experience because He did not die in the pit. In v55-58 he speaks about how the Lord redeemed him from the pit.
   4. So the Narrator was calling on Lady Zion to stop dwelling on her circumstances and blaming God, and instead to remember all of God’s faithful mercies.
      1. I mentioned **Joni Earekson Tada** before. Here is what she says about this:

*I’d like to share what I did when I was tempted to blame God for my suffering.  First, as soon as those doubts and fears started to encroach (and they always seemed to creep up on me in the middle of the night when I couldn’t sleep)… when doubts started to choke out my confidence in God, I quickly turned it around and reaffirmed my belief in His sovereignty… I have to start talking to myself… I have to remember His power and wisdom and goodness toward me through Christ.  And I have to do it*quickly. *Listen, I know how awful, how claustrophobic suicidal despair can be, and I did*not *want to go back down that dark, awful road one more time, so at the first hint of fear or doubt or anger I rehearsed in my mind everything I had ever learned about His sovereignty:*God is good, He always has my best interests at heart; He is kind and merciful and He doesn’t take His hands off the wheel of my life for a nanosecond.  He’s in control and He’s got reasons for allowing this.

* + 1. When you are in the midst of some hardship and you are tempted to despair and/or blame God, you must call to mind who God is and all of His previous mercies to you and to others.
    2. And yes, we all know that sooner or later the time comes when we are not healed or delivered and we die. But when that time comes our faithful God has promised to bring us to Himself in glory. So it is true: “*The steadfast love of the Lord never ceases; His mercies never come to an end; they are new every morning; great is your faithfulness*.” Whether it be with a new morning here on earth or the morning of eternal life in heaven, the mercies of our faithful God never come to an end!

1. And this is the encouragement we receive as hope remembers. And it leads in to vv25-39 where Hope **instructs**.
   1. Look at vv26-30, “*It is good that one should wait quietly for the salvation of the LORD. It is good for a man that he bear the yoke in his youth. Let him sit alone in silence when it is laid on him; let him put his mouth in the dust- there may yet be hope; let him give his cheek to the one who strikes, and let him be filled with insults*.” To “bear the yoke” means to endure hardship and trouble. So the Narrator is saying that it is actually **spiritually useful** to endure times of hardship, like times of injury or illness or injustice or insult, especially when we are young, because we can learn very important lessons from such times.
      1. Our **Narrator** experienced this wit the time in the dungeon and the pit.
      2. The **Apostle Paul** learnt this when his prayer for healing was not answered.
      3. Joni Earekson Tada leant this when she came to accept her quadriplegia rather than be angry with God about it.
      4. **Robert Browning Hamilton** has a poem that goes like this:

*I walked a mile with Pleasure; She chattered all the way,*

*but left me none the wiser for all she had to say.*

*I walked a mile with Sorrow; and ne’er a word said she;*

*But, oh, the things I learned from her when sorrow walked with me*.

Have you learned important lessons from your times of hardship?

* 1. And what we should learn is what we read in **vv31-33**: “*The Lord will not cast off for ever … Though He cause grief, He will have compassion … He does not afflict from His heart.*”
     1. And this is the same point as what we read earlier in **Hebrews 12** about the discipline of the Lord: “*The Lord disciplines the one He loves … He disciplines us for our good, that we may share His holiness … For the moment all discipline seems painful rather than pleasant, but later it yields the peaceful fruit of righteousness to those who have been trained by it*.”
     2. And we talked about this passage in a recent sermon: Our Father’s dealings with us are not *punishment* but *discipline*. Because He has dealt with all our sins by punishing His Son on the cross, we are not punished; we are disciplined. He is lovingly correcting and training us.
     3. And that is why we learn such valuable lessons even from the hardships we encounter.

1. So that is the important lesson as hope **instructs**. But next, from vv40-51, Hope **cries out**.
   1. And what we read flows out of what we just said about the previous section. You see, one of the ways that times of hardship can be a blessing to us is if we use them to examine ourselves and confess our sins, as it says in **v40**: “*Let us test and examine our ways, and return to the LORD*!”
      1. About 10 years ago I experienced what seemed like a heart attack. It turned out to be something different but I spent a day or two in hospital as the doctors tried to figure out what it was. And while I was there I received a letter form a dear brother in Christ. It was a very kind and caring letter. And he spoke of his own regret at not using a time when he became ill as an opportunity for self-examination. You see, at the time he was engaged in sin but he ignored it and recovered from his illness only for the sin to wreak havoc in his life later on. So he was not accusing me of being like him but he urged me to do exactly what Our Narrator urges here, which is to use times of hardship as an opportunity from the Lord to ‘take stock,’ as it were.
   2. Now, as we come to **v42**, where it says, “*We have transgressed and rebelled, and you have not forgiven*,” we might wonder if this means that the Lord doesn’t always forgive those who confess their sins?
      1. What we need to remember though is that God had already said that the people of Jerusalem would be in exile for 70 years before He restored them and brought them back to Jerusalem. So the *visible* time of God’s forgiveness was still in the future.
      2. Right now, as we have read, the destruction of Jerusalem was fresh. And although we have read about lots of tears, it can sometimes be the case that tears are not tears of **genuine sorrow for sin** but tears of embarrassment or upset or even anger.
         1. Every parent here will know that there are tears and there are tears, right? You know when your child is genuinely sorry or when they are just angry or trying to get out of punishment. Do you boys and girls know what I am talking about?
         2. And of course, we adults know how to play this game too, don’t we brothers and sisters!
         3. **2 Corinthians 7:10** says, “*Godly grief produces a repentance that leads to salvation without regret, whereas worldly grief produces death*.” The sooner we learn to be sorry for our sin because of what it cost Christ and because of how it offends God and wounds others, the sooner we will experience the sense of being forgiven through Christ.
      3. So our Narrator knew that the people of Jerusalem had not yet come to the place of true repentance. And that is why we read of him crying in 48 and promising to continue crying until the Lord looks down from heaven and hears the tears of him and the people.
2. And so, finally, as we come to vv52-66, Hope **pleads**.
   1. And in this section, our Narrator returns to his past experience as a pattern or a template for what the people of Jerusalem should be doing now. As we have already said, our Narrator was rescued from the dungeon and the pit. That’s what we see in vv56-57. But while he was in the pit, Jeremiah pleaded with the Lord to punish those who had persecuted him. That’s what vv59-66 are about: v59, “*You have seen the wrong done to me, O LORD; judge my cause*,” and v64, “*You will repay them, O LORD, according to the work o their hands*.” So the Narrator was urging the people of Jerusalem to do as he did in terms of the Babylonians. They were to ask the Lord to punish the Babylonians for what they had done to Jerusalem.
      1. And this language is called **imprecation -** it is to ask that trouble come upon someone. You find the same language in **Psalm 137:8-9**, “O daughter of Babylon, doomed to be destroyed, blessed shall he be who repays you with what you have done to us! Blessed shall he be who takes your little ones and dashes them against the rock!” And Psalms like these are known as imprecatory Psalms.
      2. No boys and girls, if you are thinking that this is what you might do if you have a bully in your class this year – Dear God, please give Billy a nasty rash or make Sally fall off her skateboard!!! You need to know that the world of the OT was a world divided into two groups: The Jews – God’s chosen people, and her enemies – the Gentiles. So anyone who oppressed Israel was opposed to God and God spelled this out in the OT. So that is why it was legitimate to pray like this in OT times.
      3. But it is not like this with us today. It may even be that those who persecute Christians later become believers themselves. So what God says to us today is, “*Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you.*” “*If possible, so far as it depends on you, live peaceably with all. Beloved, never avenge yourselves, but leave it to the wrath of God, for it is written, "Vengeance is mine, I will repay, says the Lord." To the contrary, "if your enemy is hungry, feed him; if he is thirsty, give him something to drink; for by so doing you will heap burning coals on his head." Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good*.”
      4. And our perfect example in this is the Lord Jesus. 1 Peter 2 says “*He suffered for [us], leaving [us] an example, so that [we] might follow in his steps … When He was reviled, He did not revile in return; when He suffered, He did not threaten, but continued entrusting himself to Him who judges justly*.”
      5. So we are to show kindness to our enemies. We are to pray that the Lord would *convert* bullies or evil politicians or persecutors, and we can pray that the Lord would *remove* evil leaders from their office, and we can ask the Lord to *judge* evildoers.

Well, one last point: **v28** says, “*It is good for a man to bear the yoke when he is young*.” Boys and girls, young people, if you think that now is the time to enjoy life and you can worry about God when you are older, that is a foolish way to think. It is much harder to look to the Lord and to learn to trust Him when you are older. It is far better to have Him at the centre of your life when you are young. It will influence those very important life decisions that you need to make when you are young and it will make dealing with hardship easier because you will have many experiences of the Lord’s faithfulness to remember.

So congregation, when hardship comes, call to mind that the Lord Jesus is with you. And remember that the steadfast love of the LORD never ceases; His mercies never come to an end; they are new every morning; great is His faithfulness. And all God’s people said? Amen.