

## 5) Hope Even When All Seems Hopeless

Lamentations 3:22-33 • 2021-07-04 • Series: Defy Expectations



I'm guessing most of you are familiar with what happened in 1776 at the Battle of Brooklyn Heights. But there are a number of Americans who aren't aware of just how close the colonies came to losing the war against Britain in just less than two months after the fourth of July. It was one of the largest battles of the Revolutionary war and one of the few times that the main armies of both sides faced off. General Washington had amassed around 19,000 troops and had positioned them to defend New York from the British. He knew they would go up the Hudson River, so he positioned his troops and canons at Brooklyn. But the British came with a force of so many ships that eyewitnesses say it looked like a forest in the New York Harbor. They had 400 ships with 32,000 troops. It amounted to the largest and most powerful naval force up to that point in recorded history. In a surprise move British General Howe was able to get his troops to surround Washington's forces on Long Island. It looked like the end. But then instead of pressing the attack, Howe built trenches and decided to wait for Washington's plea to surrender.

But what seemed hopeless ended up with a turn of the tides of history. The ships which were supposed to block a retreat from Long Island never made it to the East River. There wasn't enough wind that day. Meanwhile Washington ordered his troops to use every available vessel to retreat across the river to Manhattan. Over the rainy night they brought men and canons and horses from Long Island to Manhattan. Dawn arrived before they could finish transporting all 9000 of the troops who had been trapped on Brooklyn Heights. It seemed a good number of them would have to be killed or surrender. A loss this big at the start of the war would have been devastating and possibly ended the war. But as dawn approached so did hope. A thick fog covered the river and all the military encampments. Washington's army may not have been able to save New York, but they did avert a disastrous defeat and surrender of their entire army. By the time the fog lifted later that day the British were astonished. That morning they saw that the American army had all escaped.

Accounts like that remind us that God sometimes gives hope to the hopeless. To be sure, many of those soldiers saw God's hand in it all and credited him with the sudden rescue from a hopeless position. What about us today? Do we have hope even when all seems hopeless? In Christ we have hope in every dire strait! No matter how bleak it might get we know our hope will not fail us. We finish our series looking at how a Christian will "Defy Expectations." We'll turn to Lamentations 3 to see how we hope even when all seems hopeless.

If you ever want to find a picture of defeat in the Bible just turn to the book of Lamentations. Five poems recount the disgrace, downfall, and defeat of Jerusalem. I won't get into the details of it here, but it far outweighed the near defeat of Washington's 9000 troops. The city had been surrounded and starved to death. The people were desperate to just die by the sword. These chapters contain some of the saddest pictures in the Scriptures. The people of Israel were routed and humiliated. And the worst part? They had to acknowledge this was all done under the Lord's hand. He had said he would send their enemy against them. He had told them it would happen. So, when it did, they felt the fury of the Lord against them. Near the middle of it all the writer says, "My endurance has vanished, along with my hope from the LORD." (La 3:18)

What do we do in such hopeless situations? Maybe someone might try to find comfort in the fact that God is in charge. They might console themselves, "It'll be okay. God is in control." But if God is in control and we are suffering, shouldn't that bring us the opposite of comfort? Many people feel hopeless when they look to the hand of the one who says he holds all authority. And the only conclusion they can come up with is, "This suffering is from God." And they are right. The Lord brings blessing, and the Lord brings calamity. He had told Israel he would send them great suffering. He is in charge, and he does send trouble, pain, and suffering our way too.

If God sends suffering our way shouldn't that make every day a fearful nightmare? When we consider that we are not holy and do not deserve to be spared from the results of our sins, shouldn't we tremble? The man who feels guilty for his sinful, selfish anger should feel like God's hand is heavy upon him. The woman who gossiped against and slandered her coworkers, her parents, or her pastor should feel guilty and wonder if God will forget such things. And how about you? Did you live for God this past week or was it sometimes for self? When you face the next struggle in your life, the next pain, the next loss will you be able to say, "I don't deserve any pain." Or will you feel like it's the righteous weight of a holy God sending his judgment over your sin? And when it all seems like a loss and you breathe your last, will that morning be filled with fear or hope? For many it is void of all hope.

Followers of Christ: you are never without hope in the Lord. In the middle of this lament is a portion of Scripture which stands out. One of the greatest pictures of suffering and tragedy comes with some of the greatest words of comfort and hope for the suffering. "*I keep this in my heart. This is the reason I have hope: By the mercies of the LORD we are not consumed, for his compassions do not fail. They are new every morning. Great is your faithfulness.*"

Are you feeling guilty and crushed under the pain of sin? Then keep this also in your heart: God is merciful! We are not consumed by his holy and just wrath over sin. We are not overtaken by the devil and his lies. We are not consumed by

the grave. And it isn't because we find hope in our own hands. It is "By the mercies of the Lord." He spares us from what we rightly deserve for our sins.

When suffering comes our trust in the Lord comes in full use. My soul says, *"The LORD is my portion. Therefore, I will hope in him. The LORD is good to those who wait for him, to the soul who seeks him. It is good to hope quietly for the salvation of the LORD."* In the midst of suffering, we have hope. Hope is our faith, our trust in the Lord, looking to the future. Hope sees beyond all suffering to what our Lord has in store for us. And it is good! The book of Lamentations really centers on this point. The Lord may send calamity and suffering. But the Lord is great in mercy and his mercy endures forever. So, it describes our way of handling pains and troubles as one who looks to the Lord in faith even during the hopeless times.

And in faith we know not all our suffering is bad. We bear it with a new mindset if we know the goodness of the Lord. *"It is good for a man that he bears a yoke early in his life. Let him sit alone and be silent, because the LORD has laid this upon him."* Have you ever considered carrying a heavy burden from the Lord a good thing? It is good if you know that the Lord is not going to treat us as we deserve, but be merciful.

So, how ought a believer to respond to the times of great pain or loss? The best response in suffering is not to despair. It is to lay your face in the dust and say, "Lord, have mercy on me, a sinner." Lamentations reads on, *"Let him stick his face in the dust. Perhaps there still is hope. Let him turn his cheek toward the one who strikes him. Let him be filled with disgrace. For the Lord will not push us away forever. Even though he brings grief, he will show compassion on the basis of his great mercy."* We are able to humble ourselves and repent of our sins because we know our God is merciful. There's no greater place to be than with your face in the dirt but under the mercy of the Lord!

Does God delight in our suffering? By no means! Pain comes because of our own sin. Pain and suffering come because we live in a world cursed by sin. This world is ruined, and we are often at a loss because of what a holy God must do because of evil. He must let justice consume evil and destroy all evil. But God does not desire that you or anyone suffers. *"Certainly it is not what his heart desires when he causes affliction, when he brings grief to the children of men."*

We know that is true because his heart went out to a hopeless world lost in the curse of sin. God desires that everyone repent and come to a knowledge of the truth. He desires that we humbly turn from our evil ways and turn to his mercy. And he will deliver us from all evil.

He doesn't deliver us from our suffering and our hopeless situation by sending a fog so that we can make an escape to safety. He did something far greater. He became our faithful source of eternal hope. All the justice over sin which every sinner deserves was taken by one man. God did not desire that you suffer, so his Son came to take that suffering in your place. He was consumed under the wrath of God over sin as he cried out, "Father, why have you forsaken me." He was crushed. But the punishment placed upon him set us free. By the mercy of the Lord, he had taken our punishment and taken our place. Jesus, the perfect and holy Son of God died so that you might live. The Son of God became your everlasting source of hope in this dying world.

And so that your hope might be new every morning he rose back to life on the third day. As sure as Jesus is alive your sins are all forgiven. Each morning you wake up with another day filled with the mercy of God because he spared you from sin's curse. This mercy from Jesus is new every morning. Daily we continue to fail and sin. Daily our hearts stray. And daily we deserve to be consumed by God's justice. But his mercies are new every morning! Great is his faithfulness to his promise of forgiveness and rescue! Have you done some deed that hangs over your head? Wake up each day remembering that you will not bear the punishment for that sin. Jesus did that for you. He has pardoned you in mercy. Do you feel that if one more trauma or ordeal comes your way you'll collapse in despair? Keep this in your heart: the Lord will not consume you in his wrath. He will show you mercy.

And this isn't just true for you. It is true for those in this world. Hope is there for all. There are many who are suffering and dying in this world and fear to face their God. They have spent years or even a lifetime wondering if God will ever relent from his anger. They have suffered from abusive parents. They have lived in war-torn nations. And they have felt the curse of sin consume everything around them. But you have this glorious gospel message of the mercy of the Lord. You carry the hope which gives hope to the hopeless in this world, *"The Lord's heart does not desire to bring grief to the children of men."* He desires that all repent and be saved. He desires that all experience the showers of his mercy every morning and for all time.

I'm sure there were many in Washington's army who were ready to raise the white flag and surrender. They didn't want to face any more loss or die in battle. But when morning came, they saw the mercy of God who spared the hopeless. You have experienced a far greater rescue. And each day you are filled with hope even though all seems hopeless. Each morning you are mercifully covered by the waters of baptism and connected to the cleansing blood of Christ. What can you ever face that can remove such hope? Continue to always wait patiently for the Lord. When that final bright morning comes you and all who trust in the Lord will defy expectations as we escape from the evil and suffering of this world and find ourselves safe forever beyond all expectations.