

# Afflictions of God's People

by John Murray

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*The sermon emphasizes the importance of self-humiliation, mercy, and hope in the face of affliction, highlighting the significance of Lamentations 3 in the Bible.*

**Duration:** 45:12

**Scripture:** Lamentations 3:22

**Topics:** "Affliction"

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## Description

In this sermon, the preacher focuses on the idea that there is no arbitrariness in God. He emphasizes that this truth is not an anti-climax, but rather a pinnacle of faith. The preacher references verses from the book of Lamentations, where Jeremiah laments the Lord's indignation against Zion and the captivity of Jacob. Despite the afflictions and challenges faced by God's people, the preacher encourages believers to have hope and wait patiently for the salvation of the Lord. The sermon emphasizes the relevance of these teachings to believers today and highlights the importance of studying scripture for guidance and instruction.

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## Transcript

The book of Lamentations, the third chapter, beginning at verse 21. Lamentations 3.21. This I recall to my mind, therefore have I hope. It is of the Lord's mercies that we are not consumed because His compassions fail not.

Say, I knew every morning, great is thy faithfulness. And also including succeeding verses. The prophet Jeremiah lived in those days when Judah was carried into captivity.

And the book of Lamentations are the lamentations of Jeremiah connected particularly with the desolations of Zion. That is perfectly obvious from the preceding and the succeeding parts of this book. At the beginning of the first chapter, we read how doth the city sit solitary, that was full of people? How is she become as a widow, she that was great among the nations and princess among the provinces? How is she become tributary? She weepeth so in the night, and her tears are on her cheeks.

Among all her lovers she hath none to comfort her. All her friends have dealt treacherously with her, they have become her enemies. Judah is gone into captivity because of affliction and because of great servitude.

She dwelleth among the heathen, she findeth no rest. All her persecutors overtook her between the straits. And again at the beginning of the second chapter, how hath the Lord covered the daughter of Zion with a cloud in his anger, and cast down from heaven unto the earth the beauty of Israel, and remembered not his footstool in the day of his anger? The Lord hath swallowed up all the inhabitants of Jacob, and hath not pitied.

He hath thrown down in his gourd the strongholds of the daughter of Judah. He hath brought them down to the ground. He hath polluted the kingdom and the princes thereof.

He hath capped off in his fierce anger all the form of Israel. And again at the How is the gold become dim? How is the most fine gold changed? The stalls of the sanctuary are poured out in the top of every street. The precious sons of Zion comfortable to find gold.

How are these steamed as earthen pitchers, the work of the hands? These are Jeremiah's lamentations. But they are the lamentations of Jeremiah because of the Lord's indignation against Zion, against the people of his possession. We read that the Lord's portion is his people.

Jacob forlough of his inheritance. And now Jacob is gone into captivity and is thrown down. Her gold is become dim.

This is the Lord's indignation. And that is perfectly apparent at the beginning of this chapter. I am the man that hath seen affliction by reward of his war.

Now Jeremiah was so identified in his interests, in his affections, in his aspirations, and in his hopes with the welfare of Zion, that mourning and weeping now took hold of the inmost recesses of his being. And that is the portraiture we have in this particular, in this particular book. How can it be otherwise with us? I say can it be otherwise with us today? It is one thing to read this book of lamentations as a commentary on the past, but it has relevance to us.

These things happen for our admonition, upon whom the ends of the ages are come. And all Scripture is given by inspiration of God, and is profitable for doctrine, for reproof, for correction, for the instruction which is in righteousness. That the man of God may be perfect, thoroughly furnished, and do every good work.

And this, this has a great lesson for us. Our interests, affections, and aspirations, and hopes must likewise be identified with that which is in our situation, the Church of Christ. That to which the Old Testament Zion corresponded.

And if we do not identify ourselves in our interests, affections, aspirations, and hopes with the Church of Christ, we do not identify ourselves in our faith and affection with him who is the head of the Church. You can never separate Christ from his Church, or the Church from Christ. Christ is meaningless apart from his interest in the Church.

It was for the sake of the Church that he came into this world. Christ loved the Church, and gave himself for it, that he might sanctify and cleanse it by the washing of water by the word, to present it to himself a glorious Church. And as we can never think of Christ apart from the Church, or the Church apart from Christ, so our interest in Christ can very well be gauged by our interest in his Church.

And we can well take up the lamentations of Jeremiah, and we may take up the lamentations of another prophet, when he said, our holy and our beautiful house where our father praised thee is burned up with fire, and all our pleasant things are laid waste. We cannot dissociate ourselves from the situation in which the Church of Christ finds itself. There is a corporate responsibility, and we cannot possibly dissociate our own responsibility from that which afflicts the Church of Christ in our particular day and generation.

We cannot shrug our shoulders and say that we have no responsibility for the plight in which the Church of Christ finds itself, when her gold has become dim, and her wine mixed with water. There is a grave danger that people in a particular location, in a particular denomination, will shrug their shoulders and say that we have no responsibility. My friends, there is a corporate responsibility that we cannot divest ourselves of.

And not only is there this corporate responsibility for the defection and the impurity that are so rampant in the professing Church of Christ. Not only are we responsible for that, but we are responsible for our own individual personal iniquities. Another prophet said, I will bear the indignation of the Lord because I have sinned against him, until he plead my cause and execute judgment for me.

And you cannot read this chapter of the Prophetic Lamentations of Jeremiah without recognizing on the part of Jeremiah himself what profound sin, of his own sin, and the indignation of the Lord against him for his iniquity. I am the man that hath seen affliction by the blood of his Lord. He hath led me and brought me into darkness, but not into light.

There is here profound recognition of his own individual personal iniquity, and there is prostration in self-humiliation before God. Not only do we find the reflection in this chapter of the indignation of the Lord against the sin of Zion, not only do we find the reflection of the indignation of the Lord even against Jeremiah himself because of his sin, his own personal individual iniquity, but we find in this chapter a reflection of those mysterious dispensations of God's providence that are ever tending to bewilder even the people of God. God's providences to his people are not all dictated by his anger, by his indignation.

They are all providences that are the expression indeed of his indignation for their iniquity. They are the dispensations that are dispensations of chastisement, and chastisement of course is always for sin and for its correction. But there are also those dispensations of God's providence that do not find their explanation in God's indignation against particular individuals who are the recipients of these dispensations.

If you take for example the patriarch Job, it wasn't because there was particular indignation on the part of God against Job for his iniquity that he visited him with these afflictions. Not at all. There was something in the unseen spirit world that was the explanation of Job's affliction.

And Job could say, notwithstanding the fact that the dispensations of God's providence to him were not dictated by God's indignation against him, Job nevertheless could say, Behold, I go forward, but he is not there, and backward, but I cannot perceive him. On the left hand, where he doth work, but I cannot behold him. He hideth himself on the right hand, so that I cannot see him.

Job was encompassed with great darkness, with great bewilderment, because he did not understand at that time the unseen purpose of God in the tribulation that overtook him. And so it is often the case with the people of God, and you find a reflection of that in this very chapter, when Jeremiah says, He hath led me, he hath set me in dark places, as they that be dead of old. He hath hedged me about, that I cannot get out.

He hath made my chain heavy, and when I cry and shout, he shutteth out my prayers. And again, in the forty-fourth verse, thou hast covered thyself with a cloud, that thou shouldst not pass through. And there are all these dispensations when the people of God have to walk in darkness and of no light.

That is, walk in the darkness, in the mystery or the abyss of God's providential dealings towards them, and they cannot understand the reason. You have all of this causing the bewilderment and the distress of heart, of mind, and of soul reflected in this particular chapter. No, that is just simply by way of introduction, in order to appreciate that pinnacle of praise, of thanksgiving, and of hope, which we find in the words of our text.

In face of all this perplexity, this darkness, this dismay, even this bewilderment, this profound sense of the indignation of the Lord against Zion, against Himself individually, is there any outlet of confidence, of joy, or of hope for the prophet in this, what we might call, unspeakable situation of grief, and of sorrow, and of trouble? Yes, there is, and you find it in the words of our text. This I recall to mind, therefore have I hope. That is to say, Jeremiah recalled to his mind certain things.

There were certain considerations that entered into his thoughts, into his mind, notwithstanding the bewilderment, the darkness, the dismay that possessed him. What is the secret? He remembered certain things, recalled certain things to mind. And just very briefly, I'm going to call your attention to these particular things, which are reflected in this particular chapter, and which the prophet called to mind.

And first of all, there is his own self-humiliation before God. You find that in this very verse, it is of the Lord's mercies that we are not consumed. The prophet recognized that he had not received, that there had not been visited out to him, that which was equal to the measure of his deserts.

That God had visited him with much less affliction than his iniquities deserved. And you find that so eloquently set forth in verses 28 through 30 in this chapter. The expression of his own self-humiliation, of his abasement before God.

He sitteth alone, that is describing the person who is in this particular situation of self-humiliation. He sitteth alone, and keepeth silence, because he hath borne it upon him. He putteth his mouth in the dust, if so be there may be hope.

He giveth his cheek to him that smiteth him, he is still full. He giveth his very cheek to God himself who smiteth him. And there is humble recognition of what he says in, again in a later part of this chapter, why should a living man complain? A man for the punishment of his sins.

Now here we have something that is far too frequently overlooked in our relationship to God, and that's the very starting point for deliverance. Of course it is the very starting point for deliverance even at the inception of Christian life. But it is also the starting point for deliverance for the people of God themselves, when they are under God's afflicting hand.

And when they are experiences, experiencing those bewildering dispensations of His providence. It is that of self-humiliation before God recognized that however bitterly God may be dealing with us, however severe may be the dispensations of His providence, however stinging may be the arrows of His holy displeasure on God, we have not received anything yet that is equal to the measure of our deserts. Why should a living man complain? A man for the punishment of his sins, when he thinks that what he deserves is not the afflictions of this life, however severe they may be, but the blackness of darkness

forever.

And I tell you, my friends, that a great deal of the superficiality that there is in the Church of God today, and a great deal of the impiety that even characterizes the people of God, is due to this failure to recognize what we are. Ourselves in the presence of God, that we do not measure ourselves by the criterion of God's holiness, of His majesty, of His justice and of His truth. And we have the apprehension of the glory and the majesty of God.

Then the only reaction that is proper, and the only reaction that can be appropriate to our situation, is that which is reflected in the words of the prophet Isaiah, who always preached, For I am undone, for I am a man of unclean lips, and I dwell in the midst of a people of unclean lips. And that, my friends, is the starting point for any deliverance, deliverance at the inception of Christian compassion, of Christian faith. And deliverance in the pilgrimage of the people of God, as they experience the bitterness of God's dispensations towards them.

And, my friends, we shall never properly assess God's dispensations to us, of whatever character these dispensations may be. Or for whatever reason they proceed in the divine mind and in the divine counsel, until we prostrate ourselves before God in the recognition of our own iniquity. It is of the Lord's mercies we are not consumed.

Why should a living man complain? A man for the punishment of his sins. Now the second element that is clearly portrayed in this particular text, as that which fills the mind of the prophet with hope, with confidence, and with expectation. And as that which likewise must fill our minds with hope and expectation, is that he has remembered the mercy and the compassion of the Lord.

This I recall to mind, for how I hope it is of the Lord's mercies we are not consumed. Because His compassions fail not. They are new every morning.

Great is Thy faithfulness. And I tell you again, my friends, that we cannot have any true appreciation of those provisions of God's grace for our deliverance at the very inception of Christian life, or in the pilgrimage that is the pilgrimage of the people of God, until we have an apprehension of the mercy of God in Christ Jesus. That God is merciful, that is the outlet in our misery, the outlet from our misery at the beginning, and the outlet from our misery in every onward step of our pilgrimage, until we come to the city which hath the foundations of which God is the builder and the maker.

But the Lord is the Lord God, merciful and gracious, law to law, abundant in loving kindness and truth, forgiving iniquity and transgression and sin. That's the outlet. And you can see that so conspicuously in this particular case, in the instance of Jeremiah.

It is just that great truth that is so emblazoned on one of the Psalms, so familiar to us, the hundredth Psalm, the Lord is good, His mercy is everlasting, and His truth endureth to all generations. Don't you see that what the prophet here lays hold upon is the mercy and the faithfulness of God? And that were the keynotes of this great Psalm of thanksgiving, the Lord is good, His mercy is everlasting, and His truth endureth, His faithfulness endureth to all generations. And may I plead, my friends, very humbly, that as we prostrate ourselves before God's majesty in recognition of our ill-desired, in recognition of what our iniquity deserves, let us also have the apprehension of the mercy of God in Christ Jesus.

And let there be the outreach of our hand in faith, albeit humbly, being paid but as a grain of mustard seed. Nevertheless, in the outreach of that faith, we have the guarantee of a reproduction in our experience of that exaltation which the prophet Jeremiah reflects in this particular case. And the third element is this.

This I recall to mind, therefore have I hope. What is it? You find it in verse twenty-four in this chapter. The Lord is my portion, saith my soul, therefore will I hope in Him.

The Lord is my portion. I say that you don't, you don't ascend to a higher pinnacle in the whole of Scripture than that which the prophet initiates at this particular point. There is no higher pinnacle of faith than this.

The Lord is my portion. We read, of course, in the Scripture that the Lord's portion is His people, and that Jacob is the lot of His inheritance. God has peculiar delight in His people.

That's why He sent His Son into the world, that He might redeem His people from all iniquity, that He might present His people faultless before the presence of His glory with exceeding joy. The Lord's portion is His people. Jacob is the lot of His inheritance.

But you have together the complementary truth, that the Lord is the portion of His people. Perhaps there is nothing in the New Testament that denounces what you might call the very apex of Christian privilege, the very apex of God's provision of grace. And that expression of the Apostle Paul, that we might be filled unto all the fullness of God.

That we might be filled unto all the fullness of God. Well, that's the New Testament counterpart of this very thing which you find in the Old Testament, that we come into the very possession of God Himself, that God is ours, if Christ is ours, all things are ours, and God Himself is ours. And you find it in that very psalm which we were singing.

Whom are I in heaven but Thee, and there is none upon earth that I desire besides Thee. My flesh and my heart faileth, but God is the strength of my heart and my portion forever. I tell you, my friends, that eternity will not exhaust the meaning of that.

And it's only a very dim glimmering that you can have of this great truth even at the very best. But it is something that is true. It is something that you are to appropriate.

The Lord is my portion, saith my soul. And if God Himself is the portion of His people, surely everything in His dispensations to them is something that is the unbowing of His own favor, of His own mercy. If God is our possession, prepare no evil before us.

Now that's the third. Now the fourth. And that is hope.

You find it in verses 25 and 26. The Lord is good unto them that wait for Him, to the soul that seeketh Him. It is good that a man should both hope and quietly wait for the salvation of the Lord.

O my friends, what endless misery we weep for ourselves. And what dishonor we do to the God who is the portion of His people. We take illegitimate methods of getting away from the dispensations, the bitter dispensations of God's providence.

It is to wait. God doesn't dispense to His people all His favor in this life. And He doesn't dispense to His people all His favor at any one time in this life.

We have to wait. We have to hope. You know how utterly hopeless is a situation in which there is no hope.

If a person is caught in the toils of tribulation, in the toils of distress, and perhaps of pain and torment, what a difference it makes if there is just a glimmer of hope. If a person is overtaken by a very serious disease and is whacked with pain, if that person has absolutely no hope of deliverance from it, what a difference it makes. Whereas if that person has just even a glimmer of hope, it gives him endurance.

It gives him a measure of patience. He is willing to endure it or she is willing to endure it because there is going to be deliverance. Well, that is what is true in a much more transcendent realm in reference to our relationship to God and our relationship to the dispensations of His providence.

It is good that a man should both hope and quietly wait for the salvation of the Lord. May I quote again the words of another prophet, I will bear the indignation of the Lord because I have sinned against Him until He pleads my cause and executes judgment for me. He will bring me forth to the light and I shall behold His righteousness.

It is that of which the prophet Isaiah speaks, they that wait upon the Lord shall renew their strength. They shall mount up with wings as eagles. They shall run and not be weary.

They shall walk and not faint. And it is the secret of endurance. It is the secret of patience.

It is the secret of waiting with expectation. To be submissive to God's providences until He brings us forth to the light. We shall then behold His righteousness.

It is hope. Hope that is well-grounded for the reasons that have been already enunciated. That the Lord is full of compassion and of tender mercy.

That the Lord is the portion of His people and therefore there cannot possibly be anything else. But the glorious can't be otherwise. If the Lord's portion is His people and if that has its issue with now being filled unto all the fullness of God, unto the plenitude of that grace and truth that resides in the mediator Jesus Christ and is being communicated to His people.

If that is the case, there cannot possibly be but a grand and glorious. And now fifth and finally, what the prophet here brings to mind and fulfills him therefore with hope and expectation is the vindication of God Himself. That there is no arbitrariness in God.

Now you might think that that's a sort of an anticlimax, is it? That it isn't as it were on the plane of these other things with respect to the loving kindness and tender mercy of God. Or on the plane of this great truth that the Lord's portion is His people and that God is the portion of His people. Or on the plane of this glorious hope that is set before the people of God that there will be a grand finale.

And a finale that will fill their hearts with praise and thanksgiving throughout the endless ages of eternity. But it's not an anticlimax. This is after all something that is on the very summit of faith.

It is the vindication of God Himself and you find it in verses 33 through 36. For He does not afflict willingly, nor leave the children of men, to crush under His feet all the prisoners of the earth, to turn aside the right of a man before the face of the Most High, to subvert a man in his cause. The Lord approveth not.

That is no anticlimax for Jeremiah. And it should not be any anticlimax for us. Because what is the secret of this? That there is no other holiness in God.

That He does not afflict willingly, nor grieve the children of men. It is just this, that the Lord is just in all His ways and holy in all His works, that the judge of all the earth will be right. And I tell you, my friends, that whatever may be our affliction, however much we may cringe under the chastening hand of God, and however much the arrows of the Almighty may enter into the innermost recesses of our being, as Jeremiah said, when we have come to the point of vindicating God's ways, of recognizing that He is holy and just and good, when we have come to the point of recognizing His holy sovereignty, then we have the outlet, then we escape as a bird out of the smear of the powder.

Our soul is escaped, and our help is in the name of the Lord, who made heaven and earth. The Lord, we can then say, will light my candle so that it shall shine full bright. The Lord, my God, will also make my darkness to be light.

And to this, my friends, I would appeal. For this, hey, I would appeal to you as I would address it to my own heart and soul, that the secret of outlet, that the very secret of escape in the midst of tribulation and darkness and anguish is that we are able to justify God, and we are able to justify God in all His works. Because we recognize that we all always have less than our iniquities deserve, there is a very close connection between that which is first in the remembrance of the Prophet, self-humiliation before God because of his own iniquities, and his sins, and that which is enunciated in verses 33 through 36, the vindication of the justice and holiness and goodness of God.

It is something that we must never forget. That God does not afflict willingly nor grieve the children of men. God is never motivated or actuated by vindictive revenge.

He is indeed motivated and actuated by vindicatory justice. But He is never actuated or motivated by unholy, vindictive revenge. And that's what is enunciated here as it is enunciated elsewhere.

That the Lord does not afflict willingly. That is arbitrarily. He doesn't afflict simply for the sake of afflicting.

God is not vindictively executing His word. He is vindicatorily executing His word. And it is the same great truth in another connection that the Prophet Ezekiel sets forth in the words of God Himself, as I live, O Lord God, I have no pleasure in the death of the wicked, but that the wicked turn from his way of living.

And it is well for us, my friends, whatever may be the dispensations of powers to us, to recognize His sovereign holiness and bow before His sovereign majesty. And when we are able to do that, we shall also be able, in the strength of God's grace and by the energizing of His Spirit, to rejoice with the Prophet. The Lord is my portion of my soul.

That I do when I hope in Him. My heart and my flesh saveth, but God is my portion forever. And may we, by the grace of God and by the actual application of the Holy Spirit to us in these days, when we are encompassed about with so much that causes dismay, that causes us to walk in darkness and have no light, that we shall be able to reproduce in our own experience, in our own faith, and in our own hope that blessed assurance which we have here in the case of the Prophet.

This I have called to mind, and that, I hope, let us pray. O ever-blessed and eternal God, we praise and magnify Thy name, that Thou hast not dealt with us after our sins, nor rewarded us according to our iniquities, and that Thou dost give us the precious privilege of receiving Thy word in all its fullness. May it be reflected in our hearts in that day, and world, and hope.

O grant that we may be born and conquerors through Him that loved us, knowing that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor principalities, nor powers, nor things present, nor things to come, nor height, nor depth, nor any other creature, would be able to separate us from the love of God which is in Christ Jesus our Lord. For His name's sake. Amen.

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