

God's Tough Kind of Love
Lamentations 3:1-33

Good morning! We're beginning a new series today to run for the whole month of February which is unofficially called the Love Month. When February sets in, immediately people's minds are filled with images of flowers, chocolates, cards, balloons and the word "LOVE" in big, bold letters. Meanwhile, their hearts are filled with excitement and a sense of anticipation for what this month will bring them. But, of course, that is just one aspect of love, which we usually call the romantic kind of love.

There are other aspects and we're going to deal with those this month and one Sunday in March. In this series, we're going to look at different kinds of love – God's love for us, our love for our spouse or special someone, our love for our fellow Christians, our love for other people, and our love for ministry. This series is entitled, "Courageous Loving". It needs courage to love, doesn't it? Many of us have loved and been disappointed. We may even decide not to love anymore. Or there are times when we really need to show courage for someone we love especially during times of stress or in a difficult situation. Our love is tested during those times.

Like this story I read on the internet as I was preparing for this message last night. A man appears before St. Peter at the pearly gates. This is a true story. St. Peter asks, "Have you ever done anything of particular merit?"

"Well, I can think of one thing," the man replies.

"On a trip to the Black Hills, out in South Dakota, I came upon a gang of macho bikers who were threatening my beautiful wife. I directed them to leave her alone, but they wouldn't listen. So I approached the largest and most heavily tattooed biker.

I smacked him on the head, kicked his bike over, ripped out his nose ring and threw it on the ground, and told him, ‘Leave her alone now or you’ll answer to me.’”

St. Peter was impressed. “When did this happen?”

“Just a couple minutes ago.”

Whatever you think of love and however you feel, I believe there’s something in this series that can help you get grips with the reality of love. In all its aspects.

One aspect that some of us couldn’t understand or grapple with is God’s love for us. On the one hand, we know that God loves us. On the other hand, we wonder why it seems God is far away when we need him the most. Or it seems like he has a mean streak and gets angry at anything we do wrong.

Today, I’m going to talk about God’s kind of love, and I’ve entitled it “God’s Tough Kind of Love”. Please open your Bibles and turn to **Lamentations 3:1-33**. We’re not going to read the whole of it. We’re going to read starting from verses 19-33. I’ll just refer to all of these verse as I go through this message. Please follow along.

Read the passage

Let me ask you a question. What is the worst thing that has ever happened to you? For me it was when I was fired from my first job in Australia because I was told I was underperforming, and I felt alone and ashamed and worthless.

What is it for you? What is the worst thing that has ever happened to you? What is the worst thing that you have suffered? How did it feel? Did you know what to do with it? Did you know how to handle it?

Suffering can be so bewildering, so confusing, that unless we are prepared in advance for it, we won’t know how to respond to it.

Unless we've got a great, functional, practical theology of suffering before it comes, the chances are that we will buckle under it and flail around not knowing what to do.

What is the worst thing that has ever happened to you?

The worst thing that ever happened to the prophet Jeremiah was the exile of Judah and the destruction of his beloved city of Jerusalem. God had promised exile and warned of judgment for hundreds of years. And Judah had, by and large, ignored those warnings. In 586 BC, God brought judgment upon the nation of Judah. God kept His promise to bring disaster on His rebellious people. The King of Babylon, Nebuchadnezzar, sacked and destroyed the city of Jerusalem. And Jeremiah, the prophet, was there. He saw it with his own eyes. And his eyes were full of tears.

Jeremiah is called the "weeping prophet" because even though he had to faithfully deliver a message of woe to the people, he didn't have to like it. His message was a message of doom, condemnation, and judgment. And it caused him to weep.

The worst thing that he could imagine was the destruction of his beloved city—Jerusalem. The capital of the nation. The headquarters of the homeland. The jewel, the apple of the Israelite's eye. The location of the temple. The city that stood for the people. When Jerusalem went, so did the people. And Jerusalem fell. So, Jeremiah wept.

And Jeremiah wrote about his suffering in a little book tucked away between the major prophets called Lamentations. It is a collection of poetic laments for the destruction of Jerusalem. One of the most amazing things about Lamentations is how it is structured. 4 of the 5 chapters of Lamentations are acrostic poems. Do you know what an acrostic is?

It's like every sentence starts with a different letter of the alphabet in order. Like the first line starts with A and the second line with B and so on. That's something that the Hebrew poets loved to do. Psalm 119 is like that. And Proverbs 31 is like that.

But Lamentations is even more carefully structured. Here in chapter 3, which we're going to look at closely, each stanza (like a paragraph in poetry) begins with the next letter of the Hebrew Alphabet (Aleph, Beth, Gimel, Dalet, etc) and each sentence within that stanza also begins with that same letter.

It's very carefully composed. I think that's awesome. You know why? Because it says that there is a lot of thought that has gone into this expression of sad thoughts, of bad feelings, of lamentations. Jeremiah, who many believe wrote this book, put meticulous thought in how to express his grief and sorrow and pain over what had happened to him and his beloved city.

And he shows us how to be sad. He shows us how to suffer. How to practice the lost art of lament.

What I'm going to share with you this afternoon are two major things we should know in life. The first is this.

1. Life is tough.

It means it is hard, difficult, rough, disorderly, vicious, and even violent.

Many of you know this already. If you've lived long enough, you know that life is not always happy. It's not always smooth. It's not always pleasant. It can throw you a curve ball. It can catch you unawares.

Some of you are just beginning to realize that life is tough. You're beginning to gain experience. And many of your experiences are not that exciting anymore. In fact, many are discovering this during the past year. Many have lost their loved ones. Many are still suffering from sickness.

Many people are being treated for mental illness. I heard from a psychiatrist that they have seen a doubling of people wanting to be seen during the past year. Life is tough.

What goes on in our minds when life is tough? What happens to our theology when we undergo extreme suffering? Our feelings sometimes don't correspond with what we believe in our minds.

That's what Jeremiah is experiencing here. He starts getting angry at God. And blames God for what is happening to him. And accuses him of punishing him.

He starts off by saying in verse 1, "I am the man who has seen affliction by the rod of the Lord's wrath." He's talking here about God. I think the first part of this chapter is really the writer saying, "I don't believe Psalm 23. I think God is acting like a bad shepherd." And if you remember Psalm 23, the shepherd's rod and staff comfort the sheep. Here, it's just the opposite. He's talking about the rod of God's wrath, and God's using this rod, it seems, to beat rather than to guide.

In verse 2, he says, "He's driven me away and made me walk in darkness rather than light; indeed, he has turned his hand against me. Again and again, all day long. He has made my skin and my flesh grow old and has broken my bones." That's strong language— isn't it?—to say "God has broken my bones." Look at verse 5: "He has besieged me and surrounded me with bitterness and hardship." Note that image. That word picture probably went right over most of our heads, because the world today is so different than it was when this book was written. This book was written in a time when people lived in fortified cities with huge walls surrounding the borders. If the enemy attacked you, you could hold out for weeks, sometimes even months, if you had enough food and water. If an army came to lay siege to your city, they would surround it and just wait, hoping eventually to work out some deal with the people. But it was awful. It was so bad that as these sieges went on, the inhabitants of the city would even resort to

cannibalism. Meanwhile, if the surrounding army got impatient, they would come up to the wall and just start battering away. This picture is what he says God is doing to his life. God's like an army laying siege to a city.

Verse 6: "He has made me dwell in darkness like those long dead. He has walled me in so I cannot escape. He has weighed me down with chains. Even when I call out or cry for help, he shuts out my prayer. He has barred my way with blocks of stone. He has made my paths crooked. Like a bear lying in wait, like a lion in hiding, he dragged me from the path and mangled me and left me without help.."

Jeremiah feels as if that's what God is doing to him—mauling him like a bear or lion. That must truly be awful. But it gets even worse. In verse 12, he says:

"He drew his bow and made me the target for his arrows. He pierced my heart with arrows from his quiver. I became the laughingstock of all my people. They mock me in song all day long. He has filled me with bitter herbs and given me gall to drink [that is, with poison]. He has broken my teeth with gravel. He has trampled me in the dust. I have been deprived of peace. I have forgotten what prosperity is. So I say, 'My splendor is gone and all that I have hoped from the Lord.' I remember my affliction and my wandering, the bitterness and the gall. I remember them, and my soul is downcast within me."

He is utterly depressed. He is at the very bottom. He has no hope, because it seems that God is his enemy—that God is against him. This guy is hopeless. I sense that he'd rather die than continue to exist like this.

Maybe you think, Wow, this guy really sounds like a whiner. You have to understand: this guy is facing the worst possible thing that he could face in his life. The city where he's lived, where all of his family lives, where his hopes and dreams are, has just been destroyed by this enemy nation.

No doubt he's watching family members get hauled away into captivity into Babylon, which is modern day Iraq. He's devastated by this. And so, as you read this, maybe you think, "This nails exactly what I'm feeling right now."

Over the course of my life, I've run into some people that could really identify with these words. I think of a friend whose father impregnated a woman who was a worker at their store and the woman gave birth to a child. Her father kept this secret from her mom and her siblings for many years. When it was discovered, her mom understandably became so mad she threatened to divorce him but he threatened to kill himself if she did so. My friend was so distraught and said she didn't know what to do. She mentioned that it was one of the most difficult times in her life. I'm sure that was the same for her mom.

Then, I also remember another friend who couldn't keep a job. He's quite a good conversationalist and, in fact, that's the reason why he is able to pass interviews despite his not-quite-so-good resume. The thing is, a few weeks afterwards, he either quits or is let go because he shows his inability to connect with people. Sometimes he does things that are considered weird or inappropriate. Later on, I found out from him that he is suffering from mental illness. And this illness was caused by his parents who didn't get along well and divorced when he was young and he grew up with his dad, a judge in the city, who was harsh with him. In fact, he left when he was in his teens and never connected with his dad again. I have tried to help him in the past and whenever I looked in his eyes, I could feel the pain he felt.

Even if you're not in one of these places right now, I think we can all appreciate the fact that sometimes in life we get hit with things that make it hard to see God. "Where is God when I'm struggling?"

Friend, let me remind you, even as Jeremiah reminds himself that when life is tough,

2. God's love is tougher.

What's interesting in this chapter is that after twenty verses of sheer depression, there's a huge turn in verse 21. Jeremiah says, "Yet this I call to mind, and therefore I have hope." In other words, even in this dark hour, there's something he can recall. Now remember, this is a guy who just said in verse 18, "All that I hope from the Lord is gone." He says he has no hope. But then he says, "Wait a minute. I remember something. I recall something to my mind, and therefore I have hope."

I want you to see what it is that the writer recalls to his mind. He says in verse 22, "Because of the Lord's great love we are not consumed, for his compassions never fail." There are two great words for love in that verse. The first one in my Bible translated "great love", it's the Hebrew word *hesed*, and it's the term that refers to what I like to think of as loyal love. It's God making a promise, making a commitment, and then saying he's going to be loyal to that promise.

The second word is "compassions", and that word expresses the emotional side of love. In fact, it was a word in the time of the Old Testament that even referred to a child developing in his or her mother's womb. So, you can see how that word developed—from the idea of the compassion or love that a mother has for her unborn child. This is a word that speaks of God's emotion, his feelings, and his affection for us. I love that in verse 22 you've got both words. You've got the loyalty part—God's commitment that regardless of how he feels, he is going to be true to his commitment to us—and then the other word says that God is not only committed to us, but he has compassion, and he feels something for us. That encompassing love is what gives Jeremiah hope. In other words, God's love is tough because it is durable, strong, resilient, firm, solid, and steadfast.

We come now to verse 23 which says, "They are new every morning;

great is your faithfulness.” You know how famous this verse is and the verse just before it. One of my favorites is this hymn: “The steadfast love of the Lord never ceases, his mercies never come to an end. They are new every morning, new every morning, great is your faithfulness, Oh Lord, great is your faithfulness.”

Isn't that an uplifting song? I love that hymn but I don't know about you. Some mornings I don't see God's mercies. But you know what? They're still there. They're new every morning. Even if I can't see them it doesn't change the fact that they're there. As Jeremiah says "Great is your faithfulness."

These same words for love are used to describe God in Exodus 34:6 and throughout the Old Testament—that he is love and he is faithful. The writer wants us to understand that that's who God is. Even in those times when we feel like he's an enemy—when he's allowing things to happen to us that seem to crush us—he's loving, he's compassionate, and he's faithful.

The writer uses another picture in verse 24. He says, "I say to myself, "The Lord is my portion." Now we don't usually use language like that or an image like that to describe God, because things work a little bit differently now than they did when this book was written. But five or six hundred years before Jesus, the people of Israel each had a plot or portion of land, and that's what really kept you alive. That's what you would use to provide for your family. A few people might lease that piece of land, and you would take the income and buy food to feed your family. Or, if you were a farmer, you would farm the land, raising crops and livestock on it. That's what kept them alive. So when Jeremiah here says, "The Lord is my portion," he's using this word picture to say, "God is my life. He's the one who keeps me alive. He keeps me going." Therefore, he says he will wait for him.

Verse 25: “The Lord is good to those whose hope is in him, to the one who seeks him; it is good to wait quietly for the salvation of the Lord.”

It's hard to know where to stop reading. The rest of this chapter flows out of this section that says, “Even when God seems to be against you, he's still loving; he's still compassionate; he's still faithful to you. He is still your provider.” That's why in verse 31 the writer says, “For no one is cast off by the Lord forever.” In other words, no matter what you're going through, God's not going to let you go through that forever. Verse 32 says, “Though he brings grief, he will show compassion, so great is his unfailing love.” He uses the same word that was translated great love. That's who God is. Verse 33: “For he does not willingly bring affliction or grief to the children of men.”

That is tough love. A love that is steady and strong. A love that will love you no matter what. A love that will see you through.

So, do you get the picture as you read this chapter? Here's what Jeremiah is saying, “I'm in a time in life when it seems like God is against me. He doesn't hear my prayer. He's breaking my bones. He's mangling me like a bear. He's using me for target practice. He's broken my teeth. I don't have any hope.” Then he makes a turn-around and says, “But I do have hope when I remember that God is loving. He's compassionate. He's faithful. He's my provider.” His response, even in a difficult time, is to have that hope. Notice how many times he talks about having hope and waiting: Verse 21: “Therefore I have hope;” verse 24: “Therefore I will wait for him” (the word for wait here is the same as the Hebrew word for hope); verse 25: “The Lord is good to those whose hope is in him” (the Hebrew word for hope implies a confident expectation); verse 26: “It is good to wait quietly;” verse 29: “Let him bury his face in the dust—that there may yet be hope.” What I believe he's saying in verse 29 is to go ahead and grieve—work through your situation and endure what you're going through—because there is hope, and the hope is based on God's compassion and on his great love.

By the way, in Jeremiah's experience and in his laments, he moans the fact that God has been too harsh to his people. And he is right, because of the stubbornness of the people. They have strayed away from God and God let them go through this dark period in their history so that they'll know they're nothing without God and that God is their only salvation. But please, if you're going through your own dark journey, it doesn't mean that you have done a wicked thing and that God is punishing you because of it. First of all, God doesn't punish his children, he disciplines them. Punishment is to condemn but discipline is to correct. Proverbs 3:11-12-says, "My son, do not despise the Lord's discipline, and do not resent his rebuke, because the Lord disciplines those he loves, as a father the son he delights in." In Hebrews 12:10, Paul explains, "God disciplines us for our good, in order that we may share in his holiness." In short, God corrects us in order for us to become like Jesus.

But your problems are not always due to God's discipline in your life. More often than not, the struggles you're going through, the pain you're experiencing, the difficulties you're undergoing are there because of just one fact – life is tough. Meaning, since the beginning of time, when Adam and Even sinned by disobeying God, God cursed creation in such a way that it became imperfect and sin and death entered the world. So, the disease you have, the insults of people, your financial distress, your disobedient children, the job you lost, you're having all these things as a result of imperfection in this world.

But you know what, God's love is tougher than the tough times you're going through. In fact, he promised that he'll always be with you in your suffering. He will never leave you nor forsake you as he promises in his word. He is your shield and your strength.

What is the basis for our hope when we're facing difficult times? Again, it's God's great love. It's his compassion.

What Jeremiah is telling us is that even when we feel like God is against us, he is still loving and compassionate; our bad circumstances don't change that fact.

I want to read a couple of sentences from a book written by Kathryn Greene-McCreight. Greene-McCreight is a college professor from Connecticut with a PhD from Yale. She's a leader in her church, and many people come to her for counsel. But she also struggles with mental illness. In her early thirties, she was diagnosed with a bipolar disorder. She wrote a book called "Darkness is My Companion", using the last line of Psalm 88, and she argues that even though we can't just read from the Bible and expect someone to feel better immediately, it is ultimately the love of God that brings healing. This is what she says: (quote) "If it is the love of God that we see in the face of Christ Jesus that has promised to pull us through, a love that bears out to the edge of doom even for the ugly and unlovable such as we, then the statement that love heals depression is, in fact, the only light that exists in the dark tunnel." I want to remind you of that this afternoon. I want to let you know that God's love is embodied in the person of the Lord Jesus Christ.