

Cultivating Hope Among the Ruins

By David de Bruyn

Remembering mine affliction and my misery, the wormwood and the gall. My soul hath them still in remembrance, and is humbled in me. 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. They are new every morning: great is thy faithfulness. The LORD is my portion, saith my soul; therefore will I hope in Him. 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.

Lamentations 3:19-26

The background to Lamentations is that Jeremiah was in a fair amount of agony regarding the Lord's discipline on Judah. But in the middle of this, Jeremiah finds some meditations on the person of God that renew his hope.

It is wonderfully instructive to learn from this book, much like the book of Job – that whatever the situation, there is cause to rejoice in the Lord; there is cause to look ahead in hope.

Hope is closely allied to faith. Hope is absolute confidence in the future grace of God. It is really joy in advance. Biblical hope fully expects that the grace which God has given is a guarantee of more to come. So it looks to the future with humble optimism, with quiet confidence, with joyful expectations. It is not glorifying to God when His people look to the future with bowed heads and frowning faces.

What does it say of the Sovereignty of God when His people act like everything may unravel soon in the future? What does it say about the care of God for His people, when they speak and act like they are somewhat uncertain that He will carry them through this life, let alone into the next? How does it exalt God as a loving, good God, when His people are gloomy, frustrated, and pessimistic about the future?

No one says we must be optimistic about the world system, but the world system is not our home, and it is no loss if it is judged by God. But when we are pessimistic about the very course of our lives, we say much about our Shepherd, about our trust in Him, about our walk with Him.

Biblical hope for the year ahead magnifies God as good, and powerful, and actively working for and in His people. How do we develop this biblical hope? Three ideas emerge from Lamentations.

1. Move your 'Deserve Index' in line with that of the Bible.

Picture for a moment a continuum, rather like a thermometer. At the bottom you find the most terrible thing that could happen to you. At the very top is the best possible thing that could happen to you. Working your way from bottom to top, you have terrible, less terrible, until you reach things that are fairly nice, better, good – all the way to the top, which is as good as it can possibly be.

Now, on this measuring stick, you are asked to place your deserve index – that is, you must mark out what you think you deserve. So you scan up and down this possible list of good and bad things, and place the marker at the place which you think indicates what you ought to receive in life.

Everything under that marker, it's safe to say, you will complain about. You will feel you are getting less than you deserve, worse than you deserve. You will feel life is unfairly bad to you. Everything above that marker, you will feel grateful for. You will feel you are getting more than you deserve, better than you deserve. You will be glad and thankful, and feel that life is unfairly good.

Well, the key is really where you, every day, mentally place your 'deserve' marker. Here is Christian 1 who has enjoyed an affluent, fairly healthy, comfortable life with not too much trouble. If he is not careful, he places his deserve marker way up on the index.

Now, almost all of life makes him mad, because he feels it is less than, worse than, he should be, ought to be, must be, receiving. Traffic jams, hot weather, poor service, broken appliances, difficult people – just about everything annoys, irritates and infuriates him. Good things become a 'right'; it's what he expects. He is grateful for very little, because very little is above his marker.

Now let's take Christian 2. He has grown up in a poverty-stricken, disease-ridden country, where survival is a constant concern. His deserve marker may well be pretty low on the scale, because he doesn't know too much.

Give him four sets of clothes, he is glad. Give him sanitation in his home, and he will be overwhelmed with gratitude. Give him a bicycle to get around on, and he will sing. Why? His marker is much lower – simply because of life's circumstances. But you can see gratitude will come a lot easier to him because of where his mental marker is.

But both Christian 1 and Christian 2 must come to this passage in Lamentations and allow it to set the deserve marker. What do we deserve? What should we expect? What is due to us, such that anything below it gives us a right to feel robbed, and anything above it gives us reason to be grateful?

Verse 22 gives us the answer: *It is of the Lord's mercies that we are not consumed.* A simple definition of mercy is 'not giving us what we deserve'. The Bible tells us God is not giving what we truly deserve, when He does not destroy us. In other words, being alive and not burning in a fiery hell is mercy.

Now, before your mind quickly does a mental nod to that, let the thought really penetrate to where your heart will gaze on this text and say, "Yes, God, I deserve to be consumed. Not being consumed is loving mercy." Well, where does that place the deserve marker on our scale? Right at the bottom, doesn't it? Therefore, for what can I give thanks? For what can I truly feel is something better than what I deserve and therefore something for which I can thank God for? The answer is really everything.

That's the explanation behind verses like **1 Thessalonians 5:18**: *"In everything give thanks: for this is the will of God in Christ Jesus concerning you,"* and **Ephesians 5:20**: *"Giving thanks always for all things unto God and the Father in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ."*

Your gratitude is proportional to what you think you deserve. When your view of yourself is high, your gratitude is low. When your view of yourself is in line with God's Word, your gratitude will be high.

Suddenly, having another day on earth, more opportunities to live and breathe, are a joy; being able to see, to hear, to walk, to understand, to remember; food, and lots of it, and in many different varieties, becomes an undeserved praise; hot water, clean clothes, being able to get around, money.

What about the helpers God has sent your way, the friends, the teachers, the counsellors, the loved ones, the pastors? What about all the adversity that came your way, through the hands of a loving God,

aimed at refining you, sharpening you, equipping you to be more like Christ? What about all the kindnesses that found their way to you personally, originating from a loving God, mediated through people?

What about your salvation? What about all the spiritual blessings found in Christ? When you see that we belong at the bottom of the scale, but in Christ eternally, we have the things at the top of the scale, what can it do except cause gratitude?

Jeremiah saw it from this point of view, and thus in the middle of what was outwardly terrible, he had gratitude and joy in his heart.

What is the result of having gratitude? Hope. Gratitude must transform into hope. Joy over grace already received points me to look forward to grace still to come. I have hard evidence of the goodness and grace of God from the past, and it causes me to look ahead with joyful expectations.

2. See that God's attitude toward His people is all mercy.

Jeremiah looks at the burning ruins of Jerusalem, the terrible slaughter, the pain, and he concludes, *"...because his compassions fail not. They are new every morning: great is thy faithfulness."* That's seemingly an odd way of seeing what looks like a tragic scenario. But it comes on the heels of the statement: *"It is of the Lord's mercies that we are not consumed."*

In other words, if God has not sent us to hell, and is not planning on doing that, because of Christ, then all of His acts toward His people are mercy. His compassions fail not. God's compassion is not exhausted, worn out or eroded. The same compassion that Jesus felt over the masses that came to Him has not faded or weakened or lost zeal. It remains.

And as if to emphasise it, we have that beautiful phrase – *they are new every morning*. As much as the morning makes the world seem new – the dew on the grass, the air is crisp and clear, everything says, "a new start," so is the mercy, compassion, the steadfast love of the Lord. It does not run out or wear thin, and God is permanently disposed towards His people in mercy.

Let's put it another way: *If God be for us, what can be against us?* (**Romans 8:31**).

We must confess that a kind of works-based mindset often enters our head. We reason that when things are going well, it must be because we are pleasing God fairly well, and when things go badly, we must have offended Him somehow. But when we think or speak like that, we reveal that we do not think God is always dealing with us mercifully.

When things that seem good in our eyes happen to us, it is the loving grace of God. When things that seem bad happen to us, it is the loving grace of God. God is not at one moment doing things for you, and then at another moment doing things to you. Everything that happens to you, happens for you.

If God was aiming at you, He wouldn't miss. If an all-powerful God is actually against you, nothing could possibly be for you. If God's attitude toward you was not mercy, He could, and would, wipe you out. Therefore, we must conclude that *all* His acts toward us, in Christ, are acts of love.

Romans 8:32 is the proof of this: *"He that spared not His own Son, but delivered Him up for us all, how shall He not with Him also freely give us all things?"*

Think about this: If there was one thing that God would have been reluctant to do for sinners, it would have been to give up His precious Son. Anything else would be easier than that. But God did indeed give up His Son. If God has then given up for us, that which was hardest, it is reasonable, and biblical, to conclude that everything else is easy for Him to give.

Nothing was more valuable to the Father than the Son. But if He freely gave Him for us all, then God does not have a problem with reluctant love. He could not give up the Son for us in mercy, and then act toward us in vengeance later on. It is a done deal – God has forgiven us of our sins in Christ, and will reverse that. All His acts toward us now are mercy. *All* things – He is working together for good to them that love God.

As **Romans 8:38-39** says, *“For I am persuaded 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, shall be able to separate us from the love of God, which is in Christ Jesus our Lord.”*

What is the result of understanding that all God’s acts toward me are done in love and mercy? Hope. It means the future is all in the hands of a loving God who is for me, not against me. What can I expect this year? I can expect the steadfast love of God guiding my life. I can expect that everything that happens every day will pass through the hands of a merciful, wise, loving God. I can have joy in advance.

3. Make the Lord Himself your portion.

Now Jeremiah says something quite wonderful: *“The LORD is my portion.”* What does he mean by that? The word for portion sometimes means inheritance, allotment. The idea is, *the Lord is my treasure*. The Lord is my security, my sufficiency. Not the Lord’s gifts. Not what He provides for me. The Lord *Himself* is my portion.

I do not look further than God for the ultimate satisfaction of my soul. My soul’s pursuit of joy, happiness, meaning, contentment, peace, delight, value – call it what you will – my soul will be satisfied in God Himself.

Psalms 73:25-26 says, *“Whom have I in heaven but thee? And there is none upon earth that I desire beside thee. My flesh and my heart faileth: But God is the strength of my heart, and my portion forever.”*

Now, think of that. What is the one thing that cannot be taken away from you, once you are a believer? God Himself cannot be taken away from you. You can lose all your earthly possessions, all your money. You can lose all your family, friends and loved ones. You can lose your job. You can lose your status, your reputation. You can lose your health. You can even lose your life. But the one thing you cannot lose is God. That is why Paul wrote: *“For to me to live is Christ, and to die is gain” (Philippians 1:21).*

My satisfaction in life is Christ. But if I lose the most precious earthly thing – my own life – I have not really lost; I gain, because then I go into the very presence of God. Bottom line: I can always, at all times, find satisfaction, because God is always there, always accessible, and always the same.

When I am unhappy, I need to check two things: Firstly, where have I been seeking joy – in God, or in one of His gifts? Secondly, if I have been seeking it in God and am not happy, what is the pride in my life which is preventing me from seeing, and knowing, and enjoying God?

God is not a means to an end. He is the end. Therefore, when we lack the hope, the explanation can only be that our hope has been placed somewhere else. And God may sometimes remove those things to show us where we have begun looking for joy.

And what is the result of meditating on the fact that the Lord is my portion? Hope is the result. It gives incredible hope to realise that what I truly need for joy is not something that I need more money to obtain, or need to go to another country to find, or need to do more things to get.

Psalm 145:18-19 says, *"The LORD is nigh unto all them that call upon Him, to all that call upon Him in truth. He will fulfil the desire of them that fear Him: He also will hear their cry, and will save them."*

Hope is joy in advance. In the middle of a terrible situation, Jeremiah had hope; he had a sorrowful, trembling joy in the future. He understood that he deserved worse than what he was getting, so he was grateful, and it gave him hope.

Past grace points to future grace. He understood all God's actions were mercy. Therefore everything in the future was going to be mercy. And though all the gifts of earth might be taken away from him, he could still be satisfied in the fact that God remained his portion. That means my hope can never be lost, because what I am ultimately hoping in can never be taken away from me. The source of my joy and delight is always near.