Lamentations 3:19-24 *Preach to Yourself: When the World is Crumbling Around You*

***What do You Tell Yourself?***Have you ever noticed that you can talk to different people and get two very different viewpoints on the same event?

For example: imagine that you know a couple that has recently gone on a vacation to the Caribbean. You run into the husband and ask him about the trip. He gets a frown on his face and kind of shrugs. He says: “Well, the resort was nice and all, but the weather was a complete bust. That tropical storm was passing by and it rained pretty much the whole week. We didn’t hardly get to go to the beach, we were supposed to go parasailing and do some other excursions that didn’t happen. To be honest, I couldn’t stop thinking about how much money we spent and how we could have spent it different.”

You tell him you are sorry to hear it, and you hope they get a chance to go again sometime under better circumstance.

Then, a couple of days later you run into the wife. You tell her you were sorry to hear that it was so rainy on her vacation. She says: “Yeah, that kinda was a bummer. But, you know, it was really sweet too. We got to sleep in with no agenda. We ordered room service. Life at home has been so busy lately, it was nice to just be together, just the two of us. I think it is one of the best vacations we ever had!”

Now what do you say? Who did you go with? Same experience, completely different perspectives. What makes the difference? It’s the story they choose to tell themselves. It’s the part of the story they choose to pay attention to.

What you say to yourself matters. I read a quote in last week’s sermon from a man named Paul David Tripp. He said: “Nobody talks to you more than you.” The things that we say to ourselves have incredible influence in how we see the world.

I heard about a study where researchers took a group of volunteers and divided them in half. The first half, they asked to keep an “irritation journal.” For 10 weeks they asked these people to carry a notebook around and anytime anything bothered them, they were supposed to write it down. For 10 weeks! (A lot of us do this already, we just don’t write it down. But we’re keeping track, right? We keep a mental log of every irritation. Some of us do write it down, we call it Facebook).

The other half of the group, they asked to keep a “gratitude journal.” For 10 weeks these people were supposed to carry around a notebook and write down everything that made them happy. Everything they were thankful for.

Then, at the end of the 10 weeks, the researchers used a bunch of metrics to compare the two groups. And guess what they found? Not only did the people who kept the gratitude journal perform better on these metrics, the report I heard said that it was “dramatically better” even than the researchers anticipated. Metrics like physical health, sleep patterns, emotional health, satisfaction in relationship, and so on went up for the gratitude journalists over the course of 10 weeks; and they went down for the irritation journalists.

More than that, the participants reported that the longer the experiment went on, the easier it was for them to complete their assignments. That is, the longer the irritation folks kept their journal, the more they found things to get annoyed by. And the longer the gratitude folks kept their journal, the more they found to be thankful for. (shared by Kyle Idleman, “I say to myself”, Dec. 2, 2019 <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=GrVQlZQEa6I>)

What we say to ourselves matters.

That’s the main idea behind the series of sermons we are in now. I’m calling it “Preach to Yourself.” It’s a reminder that the things we tell ourselves have power. But more than simply looking on the bright-side of things—"oh the rain gave us a chance to pay attention to each other”—and more than trying to accumulate more things to be thankful for than be annoyed by—what I want to do in this series is challenge you—challenge us—to remind ourselves of the deep truths of the Bible. To preach to ourselves the good news of who God is and what He does.

We are going to look at what I am calling “Yet I…” passages in the Bible. Yet I. Passages where the Biblical author is contemplating some difficult state of affairs but then reminds himself of God’s truth.

The passages we are going to look at follow a sort of formula: They begin with what I am going to call the **Painful Reality**. It’s an honest assessment of how things are. The facts on the ground, if you will. And, in most of these passages, it’s a pretty raw assessment. We’re going to look at some situations that are not good.

But then comes the **“Yet I…”** We’re going to see that expression, or something close to it in every passage, where the Biblical author grabs a hold of himself—gets his own attention, if you will—and starts preaching to himself. Things are bad, the passage will say, Yet I must remember this.

And then will come **God’s Greater Reality.** The Biblical truth about God that the author reminds himself—and us—about. These are the things that we are going to hold onto, so that we can start preaching to ourselves.

The passage we are going to look at today is one of the best examples of a Yet I passage in the Bible. It is also, probably, the one that is written in the grimmest of circumstances. Our text today is **Lamentations 3:19-24**:

**19**I remember my affliction and my wandering,
    the bitterness and the gall.
**20**I well remember them,
    and my soul is downcast within me.
**21**Yet this I call to mind
    and therefore I have hope:

[Here is the Yet I, verse 21 is where the passage switches. “Yet I call this to mind…Yet I remember this…**and therefore I have hope:]**

**22**Because of the Lord’s great love we are not consumed,
    for his compassions never fail.
**23**They are new every morning;
    great is your faithfulness.
**24**I say to myself, “The Lord is my portion;
    therefore I will wait for him.”

The big idea for today is simple, but it is profound. **We can have hope even in the midst of our greatest afflictions**. We can have hope even when our world is crumbling around us. My outline is simple: I am going to follow the “Yet I” formula. We’ll look at the painful reality, then we’ll see the Yet I, and then we’ll look at God’s greater reality.

***Affliction and Gall***First, we’ll look at the **painful reality.**

The book of Lamentations is an interesting book. Not necessarily one we spend a lot of time in. **A Lament is a passionate expression of grief or sorrow.** There are other laments in the Bible. Several Psalms are Psalms of Lament. There are a few others scattered here and there. The people of Israel have a strong tradition of being honest with God. Really, it wouldn’t be wrong to say that laments are complaints to God. These passionate cries to God where people really let God know how angry they are, even angry at Him.

So the book of Lamentation is an interesting book because that’s what the whole thing is: this big complaint to God. The Bible’s customer service center, if you will; and the author of Lamentations is not happy about the service he is getting.

More than, it is a book with an interesting structure. There are five chapters in Lamentations. Each chapter is a separate poem. Chapters 1, 2, 4 and 5 all have 22 verses. There are 22 letters in the Hebrew alphabet. So in chapters 1, 2, and 4 each verse starts with the next letter of the alphabet. That’s called an acrostic. (Chapter 5 is not an acrostic, but still has 22 verses. Scholars think that is intentional, that the pattern is broken because the author wants to show the chaos that lament brings). Chapter 3 is slightly different—it has 66 verses. It’s still an acrostic, but in chapter 3 there a three verses per letter, and each line in that group of three begins with the same letter.

It wouldn’t be wrong to think of Lamentations kind of like an assignment we might give a first or second grader, where we ask them to think of a word that starts with each letter of the alphabet. A is for apple. B is for buffalo. C is for car. And so on. Only, in this case, the assignment is to think of things you don’t like. Things that are bad. A is for abuse. B is for bankruptcy. C is for cancer. D is for divorce. It doesn’t read like that in English—the translators didn’t make it follow ABC--, but if we could read it in the original Hebrew, we’d see that’s what the author did.

Now, I keep referring to the “author” because, technically, the book of Lamentations is anonymous. We don’t know for sure who wrote it. But traditionally, the book is associated with the prophet **Jeremiah**. In fact, the association is so strong that, even though Lamentations is a book of poetry, in our Bibles it is not grouped with the other books of poetry but is placed in the section of the prophets, right after the book of Jeremiah.

And that makes sense, because even if Jeremiah is not the actual author, the book is clearly connected to him and the events of his life. So much so that I’m just going to assume, for the rest of the sermon, that Jeremiah is the author.

Jeremiah’s deal is that he was called to prophesy to the nation of Judah in the years leading up to the exile. He had a long career as a prophet—40 to 50 years—and by word count his book is the longest book in the Bible. And Jeremiah is known as “the weeping prophet.” He’s called that for several reasons:

For one thing, Jeremiah is the weeping prophet because his message is so sad. God called Him to preach against the sins of his people and to warn them to change their ways or face destruction. It’s a fiery message, with a lot of threatening language. For another thing, Jeremiah is the weeping prophet because the people he was talking to didn’t want to hear what he had to say. Jeremiah expresses a lot of reluctance to keep on preaching (Jer. 20:7-9), and he faces a lot of persecution for what he says. At one point the people he is trying to save throw him in a dry cistern rather than continue to listen to him (Jer. 38).

But the main reason he is the weeping prophet is because his message came true. Despite his decades of warning, the people refused to listen, and in 587 BC the Babylonians rolled in and destroyed Jerusalem. Judah’s leading citizens were carried away into exile, the walls and the Temple were pulled down, and those who were left were faced with the horrors of the aftermath—dead friends and loved ones; unstable structures and homes; famine and the other atrocities faced by conquered people.

And the thing is: it breaks Jeremiah’s heart. Jeremiah isn’t like: “See, I told you so. I warned you, but you wouldn’t listen. You threw me in a well, but I was right!” He isn’t like that all. Instead, Jeremiah is devastated. He loves this city. He loves these people. He wasn’t warning them because he hated them; he was begging them to change because he cared about them.

So when Jeremiah is left behind in the aftermath, he is devasted by what he sees. Everywhere he looks he sees death and destruction. He sees people weeping over dead loved ones (1:20), he sees young men and women being lined up in chains for the long march to Babylon (1:18), he sees treasure houses broken open and plundered (1:10), he even sees (according to Lamentations 4:10) people resorting to cannibalism in order to survive. (I thought about putting the verse on the screen, but decided not to. It’s that devastating.)

I picture Jeremiah walking around the city, taking in the stench of smoke and death, watching people grubbing around in the garbage, fighting with each other over scraps. And then he sits down at his writing table, and he doesn’t even know where to start, so he just starts with the alphabet.

And the thing is: Jeremiah’s theology is good. He knows that God is still in control. In fact, given that it was his job to give God’s message of warning, he knows that God is actually the primary mover behind all this judgment. Jeremiah is not afraid to blame God for what is happening. This is especially true in **chapter 3**:

I am the man who has seen affliction
    by the rod of the Lord’s wrath.
**2**He has driven me away and made me walk
    in darkness rather than light;
**3**indeed, he has turned his hand against me
    again and again, all day long.

Jeremiah knows that what is happening is coming from the Lord’s hand. He’s not afraid to complain to God about what God has done. In **verses 10-12** he compares God to a predatory animal. He says he feels like God is a hunter using him for target practice:

**10**Like a bear lying in wait,
    like a lion in hiding,
**11**he dragged me from the path and mangled me
    and left me without help.
**12**He drew his bow
    and made me the target for his arrows.

This is raw, devastating stuff. Jeremiah is suffering and he is not afraid to pour his suffering back out to God. **Verses 19 and 20** give us a picture of his mental state:

**19**I remember my affliction and my wandering,
    the bitterness and the gall.
**20**I well remember them,
    and my soul is downcast within me.

Jeremiah is bitter. Downcast. His stomach is churning with acid, he’s physically sick with affliction.

Now, I want to be careful in finding parallels to our own lives here. I don’t want to cheapen this passage by comparing it to the irritations and annoyances we sometimes face. I don’t want to take this passage and compare it to the momentary flash of pain we experience when we stub our toes. I don’t want to apply this passage as a life lesson for times when you deal with the kind of first world problems we sometimes complain about: things like slow internet or long lines to be seated at a restaurant.

Jeremiah is dealing with the aftermath of his city being overrun by enemies and destroyed. Hopefully, we’ll never experience anything like that; but we need to remember that there are people in our world, even today, who do. I don’t want to cheapen that. But maybe there are some parallels where you can think of times when it felt like your world was crumbling down:

* Maybe the time that you got a phone call and found out someone you love was facing a devastating cancer diagnosis.
* Maybe the time your spouse was waiting for you at the door, with papers in hand, and making the declaration that it was all over.
* Maybe the time you realized that no matter what you did, you couldn’t make the numbers work and the business you loved, the thing you’d worked so hard for, was going under.

I’m not sure what exactly makes for an appropriate parallel, I just want you to remember that this is big. It’s devastating. The painful reality is that Jeremiah’s world is caving in and he knows that God has had a hand in it.

***The Seedbed of Hope***And yet, blaming God does not mean Jeremiah is turning away from God. I heard this week that lament has incredible power to either drive us away from God, or toward God (Idleman sermon, Ibid). In Jeremiah’s theology, God’s judgement actually becomes the seedbed of his hope. Because he realizes that if God is consistent enough to bring His judgement on human evil; then God will also be faithful to His covenant promise that evil will not get the final word.

This leads to verse 20. This leads to the **Yet I** of this passage:

**21**Yet this I call to mind
    and therefore I have hope:

There’s an incredible change of tone at this point in the book of Lamentations. Such a dramatic change, in fact, that some scholars wonder if it could even be the work of the same author. Some speculate that a later editor added these verses; in an attempt to soften the thoughts about God.

But that can’t be, because remember what I said about the structure. This is an acrostic. In this chapter, each set of three verses starts with the next letter of the alphabet.

This is a carefully crafted poem, and if you take any verse out the whole pattern falls apart. Jeremiah carefully designed it this way. He’s not going to let his affliction have the final say. He’s going to preach to himself.

And **here’s what he says**:

**22**Because of the Lord’s great love we are not consumed,
    for his compassions never fail.
**23**They are new every morning;
    great is your faithfulness.
**24**I say to myself, “The Lord is my portion;
    therefore I will wait for him.”

Here then is how we can have hope even in the midst of our greatest afflictions. Here is what we can preach to ourselves. God’s greater reality. Three things:

***Morning by Morning New Mercies I See:***First, we need to preach to ourselves that **God’s mercies are new every morning**. Verses 22 and 23:

**22**Because of the Lord’s great love we are not consumed,
    for his compassions never fail.
**23**They are new every morning;

Two words to pay attention to here. The first is translated “great love.” That’s the Hebrew word *hesed*. That’s a word I’ve talked about before. That’s like the Old Testament’s greatest word for God’s love. Faithful love. Covenant love. It’s the Old Testament version of the New Testament word for “grace.”

The other word is “compassion.” That comes from a root word that references a mother’s womb. The word picture here is of tender love like a mother feels for her baby.

So I went with a word that can maybe capture both: mercy. From the hymn. “Morning by morning new mercies I see.”

And that’s a key point being made here. God’s love and God’s compassions are new every morning. That’s a word that means “new, but different.” Not just, more of the same day by day, but new and fresh and perfectly tailored to the needs of that day.

God’s compassions are new every morning. Every day, He has new mercies. So whatever comes, whatever problems we encounter tomorrow, He promises that He will give us the mercy we need to get through it.

**John Piper writes**:

The strength to live tomorrow will be given tomorrow, not today. And it will be given. Our task today is not to have the strength needed for tomorrow's burdens. Our task today is to live by the mercies given for today, and to believe that there will be new mercies for tomorrow. Today's mercies do not include strength for tomorrow; they include faith that tomorrow's unseen mercies will be sufficient for tomorrow…

This truth will save your life again and again, if you grasp it and live it. Because how many times in life do we come to the end of our resources and say: there isn't anything in here anymore. I am depleted. One more straw and this camel's back will break. And we despair that tomorrow will just be rolled onto today's depleted condition.

And at that moment we desperately need this truth: God will not expect you to carry one more straw with these present mercies. When the next straw is added, the mercies will be new. <http://www.desiringgod.org/messages/todays-mercies-for-todays-troubles>

Second, we need to preach to ourselves that **God is faithful.**

If you haven’t figured it out yet, this passage is the source for the hymn “Great is Thy Faithfulness.” It’s the next line inverse 23:

Great is your faithfulness.

When you apply for a new job, one of the things your potential new employer wants is a list of past places you’ve worked and contact information for references. Why? Because past performance is one of the best indicators of future behavior. If you’ve been a good worker in the past, you’ll probably be a good worker in the future. And the same goes for God. Since He has been faithful in the past, we can count on Him to be faithful in the future.

When young David volunteered to fight the giant Goliath, King Saul had serious doubts about his ability to survive. David replied with a story of God's faithfulness. He told Saul that when he had been a shepherd God had kept him safe and for that reason he believed he would be kept safe again. "The Lord who delivered me from the paw of the lion and the paw of the bear will deliver me from the hand of this Philistine" (1 Samuel 17:37). He simply drew on the past to get God's promises for the future.

At a staff meeting this week, Beth shared **2 Timothy 2:13:**

**13**if we are faithless,
    he remains faithful,
    for he cannot disown himself.

What an amazing verse. Faithfulness is such a fundamental part of who God is that he cannot possibly be faithless. It would be like disowning himself.

Several years ago I read about a woman named Gladys Aylward who served as a missionary in China before World War II. When the Japanese army invaded northern China, she was forced to flee, taking about 100 orphans with her. As she led the children into the mountains, she despaired of ever making it to safety. After a sleepless night, she was reminded by a 13-year-old girl of Moses and the parting of the Red Sea. "‘But I am not Moses,’ she replied. ‘Of course you aren’t,’ the girl said, ‘but Jehovah is still God.’"

God is faithful. You can trust Him.

Then, third, we need to preach to ourselves that **God is enough.**

Verse 24**:**

**24**I say to myself, “The Lord is my portion;
    therefore I will wait for him.”

The word “portion” in the Bible has to do with inheritance; it’s a person’s share, a person’s possession. It comes from the book of Numbers, when Moses was dividing the Promised Land among the 12 tribes. Each tribe got their portion, except for the Levites, who were set apart for service to the LORD. God said to them, in essence, “You get no portion of the land because I am your portion.” (cf. Numbers 18:20)

And now, Jeremiah tells himself that the Lord is his portion.

For us, a portion is usually associated with food. A portion is a serving size. It implies that it is the right amount. The perfect amount to satisfy our hunger. Like Goldilocks: “just right.”

When Jeremiah thinks about God being his portion then, he’s thinking about something he may not fully have right now; but something he knows is irrevocably his forever. His inheritance. And he knows it will be enough. Just right. Something that will satisfy him.

Remember: Jeremiah is writing about people who are starving. People who are contemplating cannibalism just to get a bite. They think, if I could just have something to eat, I’d be satisfied. That would be my portion.

Sometimes we think that way too. If I could just have this thing, or that. I’m waiting for my health to get better. I’m waiting for my perfect job. I’m waiting for my spouse to change, for my kids to mature, for my dream to come through. If I could just have that thing, it would be my portion, it would be enough. I’d be satisfied.

And Jeremiah says: “No, no you wouldn’t. Only the Lord is going to be enough. Wait for Him.”

I heard this quote by Charles Spurgeon this week. It’s so good. He’s writing about this verse to **people who have experienced grief:**

You have lost much, but you have not lost your portion. Your God is your all; therefore, if you have lost everything except God, you still have your all left, since God is all. The text does not say that God is only part of our portion, but the whole portion…

Imagine that it is daylight, the sun is shining bright, and I am holding a lighted candle. Someone blows it out. Should I sit down and cry because my candle has been extinguished? No, not while the sun shines. God is my portion, and if I lose some little earthly comfort I will not complain, for heavenly comfort remains. (quoted by Idleman, Ibid)

I do not make light of our earthly afflictions. Neither does the Bible. If I have one dispute with this quote, it would be with the phrase “if I lose some little earthly comfort.” Sometimes the afflictions we encounter are huge.

I’m not making light of them. And I’m not asking you to look on the bright-side or look for a silver lining or count your blessings or anything like that. Sometimes our painful reality is nothing but that: painful.

But I am asking you to look beyond that reality to a greater reality. To preach God’s truth to yourself. To remember that anything we lose in this world is merely a candle compared to the sunlight that is God. That’s not because our hurts are small, but because His love is huge.

Remind yourself that His mercies are new every morning. Remember that He is faithful. And preach to yourself that He is, indeed, enough.

***I Say To Myself***Finally, I’m going to wrap up a little differently this morning. An author and preacher who I like is named Kyle Idleman. He’s a pastor at Southeast Christian Church in Louisville. We’ve used some Bible Studies that he has authored. We have some of his books in the library. Sometimes, when I am writing a sermon, I like to check to see if he has a sermon on the same text.

So this week I googled Kyle Idleman and Lamentations. And what I got back was a sermon called “I Say To Myself”, based on what Jeremiah says in **verse 24.** I saw that title and I think I literally pumped my fist in my office. Because not only does he have a sermon on the same passage, but he’s taking the same angle. Preaching to yourself.

And he ends his sermon by telling a story about a young woman in his congregation. And it is just so powerful, I’ve decided to show it to you. Normally, I wouldn’t end a sermon by showing you a video of somebody else preaching their own sermon; but in this case it seems appropriate: