

## Great Is God's Faithfulness

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Two Services

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*The steadfast love of the Lord never ceases; his mercies never come to an end; they are new every morning; great is your faithfulness. Lamentation 3:22-23*

I wonder how many of you have never heard of the Hoover Dam in Nevada. It was constructed between 1931 and 1935. It is about 726 feet tall, and it's 660 feet thick at its base. You can drive along the top of it. You see the dam's face on one side, and Lake Mead, the largest water reservoir in the United States, on the other side. It produces enough power for utility companies in three states. It was originally called the Boulder Dam, but was renamed the Hoover Dam many years ago in memory of President Herbert Hoover.

What is amazing is that the accomplishment of this project took place during the time of the Great Depression. The stock market crashed. Billions of dollars were lost leading to bankruptcies. The economic system collapsed. Many people were out of work. A tremendous number of banks closed as people lost confidence in them. Many of the unemployed traveled across America to find work. Southern Nevada became home to workers from forty-seven different states.

A time of great suffering in our land brought an unexpected result. In the midst of the suffering, many people found employment and hope. Something great and enduring was built.

Our reading from Lamentations this morning offers Christians a glimpse of God's great power at work in the midst of our suffering also. Don't ever think that just because things are bad God is not doing important things. They may not be the things we have in mind, but they are things that will help accomplish God's goals.

Here was the situation. God's people were suffering. God's people, Israel, had been exiled to Babylon. The city of Jerusalem had been ripped apart under siege. There were walls battered down and her temple was destroyed. Out of this suffering came the Book of Lamentations, a cry of lament from those who were suffering. But even in these times, marked by suffering and judgment, the Word of the Lord stood firm for generations to come.

The Book of Lamentations in the Old Testament contains five laments. Each one is different. Our text for today is part of the third lament. The word lament means to mourn aloud, to express sorrow, to cry out in grief. The third lament is personal. It is the cry of grief from a man who has been suffering. He speaks not only for himself, but also for the suffering community of which he is a part.

It is interesting to note that in the first part of the lament he is not speaking to God but about God. What he has to say is not very nice. He says that God is like one hiding in the brush like a "bear lying in wait". He is like a "lion in hiding". He is like an archer shooting his arrows into one's kidneys. He seems to be blaming God for his misery. He's not happy with God.

Physically, mentally, emotionally, this man( probably the prophet Jeremiah) experienced the judgment of God and reached the point where his endurance and his hope in the Lord had just about perished. He didn't speak to God. He only spoke about him. Looking at God through the experience of suffering, he was not even able to pray. What was the point?

I have met people like this in my ministry. It does not seem to happen to everyone. Some people have actually been an inspiration to me with how they have handled their suffering, especially as they faced the end of their lives. I remember a man who was lying weak in the bedroom in his home. He called me back after I had prayed for him and started to leave because he wanted to share a joke. I walked out with a smile on my face and admiring his spirit, not knowing that this was the last time I would see him on this side of heaven.

I remember one woman whose son was killed by a car just after he left my sixth grade class. Her daughter was crippled for life after she was hit on the same road years later. The family actually joined our church sometime after that. Years later, the woman became ill, and we visited her home many times. I looked forward to going there. She always had a smile on her face and a word of encouragement for me. And I would think that most of you still remember and admire Bill Maiden, especially if you were in the service on a day last year when he stood up during the announcements. He said that he was dying, but he told us not to be concerned about that. He said he loved everyone and had forgiven everyone and was looking forward to going to heaven. What a testimony!

But we are not all the same, nor are we all of the same spiritual strength. I talked with a woman recently who is going through a very difficult time and I encouraged her to pray. She said she could not pray any more. She said she could not even say the words, that she sort of felt numb. Other people I have spoken to have been bitter or seemed greatly depressed about their situation in life. I understand that. More important, I believe that God understands that and still loves them. But I also believe that the Bible tells us it doesn't have to be that way.

Let's get back to the man in Lamentations 3, the man whose hope has almost perished and is no longer able to pray. He remembers someone. He remembers God. He remembers that God redeemed Israel from slavery in Egypt. He remembers that God revealed himself to his people at Mount Sinai. Moses asked to see God at that time, and God gave him a glimpse. As the Lord passed before Moses, God proclaimed these words about himself: "The Lord, the Lord, a God merciful and gracious, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love and faithfulness." (Ex. 34:6) These words are repeated in the Psalms. The people of Israel have remembered them especially in times of sinfulness and distress.

Then something amazing happened. God restored a relationship with this man. Suddenly, the man was speaking to God not just about him. And in our text this morning, we hear the beginning of a prayer: "The steadfast love of the Lord never ceases; his mercies never come to an end; they are new every morning; great is your faithfulness." (Lamentations 3:22-23)

This God whom the man accused as an enemy, was really near to him in faithfulness and love. God will not forsake the promises he has made or his love toward his people. This God who delivered his people from slavery in Egypt, would eventually deliver his people from exile in Babylon. The God who judged his people for their sin, would forgive them and restore his relationship with them. Despite great sin, and in the middle of great suffering, God's great faithfulness could still be relied upon.

Here is part of the problem. People sometimes read God according to their lives. What do I mean by that? They use their life experiences as a way of determining God's love. If God delivers them from suffering, then God is powerful. If God has prospered their business, then God is loving. If they are feeling good and things are going well, God is great. But if things don't go well, or life begins to break down, so does their relationship with God.

God does not change. We are the ones who tend to change according to whatever the current climate of our life is. Rather than read or define God according to our lives, we need to consider something else. Rev. Craig Bode, former Pastor of Bethlehem Lutheran Church in Euclid, recently wrote these words on my Facebook page: "When things are not good, we should focus our thinking on God's promises, not our problems." Let me say it again: "The steadfast love of the Lord never ceases..." (vs. 22)

Of all people, Christians should know and draw strength from knowing about the steadfast love of God. The Rev. Dr. David Schmidt of Concordia Seminary in St. Louis writes, "In the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ, God has shown his everlasting love. There upon the cross, God revealed how much he loves us, once for all time. Using a Roman instrument of torture, God wrote his faithfulness in the landscape of history. His love is so great that he bore the judgment of sin for us. His love is so great that he promises life eternal to us. It is love that brought you here today, and love that sends you (to your eternal) home." (Concordia Pulpit Resources, Volume 28, pg. 29 of "Great Is God's Faithfulness")

While in this world, it is almost inevitable that at some time we will suffer. But in the midst of that suffering is a certain hope. Jesus knows our situation. Hang on to the hand of the One who paid for our sins and earned a place in heaven for us. This world is but a brief stop, and we have a new home, one not made with human hands, waiting for us. Thank God for his grace and his faithfulness and his love. Amen.