

Breaking the Barriers

Breaking the Barrier of Despair

We are continuing in our preaching series “Breaking Barriers”, and today we will look at Breaking the Barrier to Despair. We live in a world where we don’t have to look very far to find people in despair. Within King of Kings I get to hear the many stories of people facing deep valleys of despair and so this morning I don’t promise to have a solution to the difficulty you face, but I do want to share some insights from scripture on this incredibly difficult topic. I meet many people living in despair and just to be clear what I’m talking about this morning is not trials and difficulty that we all face. Trials, for the most part, help us grow, gain experience and we become stronger. Despair, however, is very different and is when someone reaches the point where they lose hope. In their minds they see their circumstances as so dire they come to the conclusion they have reached the point of no-return, no hope, no answer, and no solution. This type of despair comes in many different shapes and sizes:

For some it is financial despair where finding employment is next to impossible or pit of debt has grown so deep it feels impossible to climb out. For others, despair comes in relationships that have broken down and marriages left in ruins or children that have lost direction and seem hell-bent on destruction. Some face the despair of addiction where you have tried so hard and so long to break free from that stronghold, but its claws dig deep into your soul and won’t let go. Others face the despair of sickness and disease where even the doctors and physicians have given up – “So sorry there nothing more we can do.” Many face emotional despair where everything on the outside looks fine but within there is a deep and intense sadness that no-one else understands.

So what does the Bible have to say about Breaking the Barriers of Despair?

If I were to ask you what your favourite book in the Bible was, there might be a variety of different responses. For those who love theology, the book of Romans may be at the top of the list or maybe the Gospels for those who like the story of Jesus. The evangelists may rank the book of Acts up there, and for the romantics, the Psalms may be number one.

However, the Old Testament book of Lamentations is probably one of those books that land up at the bottom of the list – the least favourite. In fact, I can see from the look on some of your faces you’re thinking, “Is that actually a book of the Bible, I thought that was a type of cake,” – (That’s lamingtons for your information.) You don’t hear a lot of sermons preached from this book – it’s just all so depressing, even the name (lament) sounds down, sad and gloomy, so no we would prefer to read those books of the Bible that are uplifting and inspiring. Nevertheless, for those going through deep valleys, there is a connection and identification with Lamentations, and there is a valuable lesson we can learn from this book that is easy to miss if we skip past it.

The book of Lamentations was written, almost certainly, by the prophet Jeremiah about the year 586 BC and was probably the lowest time in history recorded in the Bible. Things were bad in the nation of Judah – really bad, and when things couldn’t possibly get worse, they did. Jeremiah, known as the Weeping Prophet, wrote this book after he experienced the horror of the Babylonians invading the land and destroying the city of Jerusalem. It was a time of great loss and Jeremiah was in deep mourning (lamenting) because Jerusalem lay in ruins and the Babylonians had destroyed Solomon’s magnificent temple. Many of the inhabitants had been carried off into captivity, and the rest had been slaughtered – only a handful remained. Lamentations, in spite of its depressing content, is a carefully crafted book – this was not just Jeremiah scribbling in a journal but was written as a set of five songs or poems. It was also written as an acrostic which means that the first word in each verse begins with the first letter of the Hebrew alphabet, the second verse with the second letter, the third with the third, and so on. There are 22 letters in the Hebrew alphabet, and so each song has 22 verses or multiples of 22. The book of Lamentations also contains intricate combinations of themes

and structure, so this book was not just thrown together but carefully thought out and painstakingly crafted. Chapters one and two describe the desolation and destruction of Jerusalem, but chapter three is different and is what we will be focusing on this morning.

Lamentations 3

***1 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.***

For 40 years Jeremiah had warned the nation of Judah, but they would not listen, but now he looks across the city in utter devastation. I guess it would be something like looking over Aleppo or other towns lying in heaps of rubble in Syria today. Tradition says that Jeremiah wrote this book from a cave known as Jeremiah's Grotto which is the same site as Golgotha, where Jesus was crucified.

Jeremiah, however, identified himself with the judgement. We sometimes get the idea of facing the consequences of our own sin. I noticed a sign in the minor hall the other day apparently aimed at children with rules and one of the rules is that there are consequences for not following the rules. Yes, we understand the principle of facing the consequences of disobedience, but sometimes we suffer the consequences of other people's sin. Here Jeremiah takes on the guilt and shame of other people's sin – he doesn't say *you*, or *they* have seen the rod of the Lord's wrath, he takes it all in very personally. He sees himself, Jeremiah, as one driven away walking in darkness and God's hand turned against him.

***4 He has made my skin and my flesh grow old
and has broken my bones.***

***5 He has besieged me and surrounded me
with bitterness and hardship.***

***6 He has made me dwell in darkness
like those long dead.***

Jerusalem was besieged – cut off and was probably the worst time of famine described in the Bible. The few remaining inhabitants were starving to death, in fact, the famine was so severe they sunk to the depths of cannibalism in their desperation. Jeremiah wept bitterly, and as he looked out over the city from his cave, he could hear the cries of women and children. The stench of death hung in the air. Jeremiah felt isolated and consumed with bitterness and hardship.

***7 He has walled me in so I cannot escape;
he has weighed me down with chains.***

***8 Even when I call out or cry for help,
he shuts out my prayer.***

***9 He has barred my way with blocks of stone;
he has made my paths crooked.***

Even in his desperate cry for help, Jeremiah felt he faced insurmountable obstacles, and he was convinced his prayers were blocked.

***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.***

Jeremiah felt vulnerable like he was being hunted down – a bear or lion stalking their prey with deliberate intent. He felt mangled – ripped apart, and he was helpless to do anything about it.

Jeremiah was beaten and put in the stocks, and he was left to die in the mud after they threw him into a cistern (well). He was accused of treason, beaten, placed in a dungeon cell for many days. People devised plans to bring him down. He was seized by the priests, prophets and all the people in order to put him to death. He was shut up in the king's prison.

***12 He drew his bow
and made me the target for his arrows.***

***13 He pierced my heart
with arrows from his quiver.***

Jeremiah felt he was the target not from his enemies but God. His heart is broken.

***14 I became the laughingstock of all my people;
they mock me in song all day long.***

***15 He has filled me with bitter herbs
and given me gall to drink.***

Jeremiah was not only dismissed he was ridiculed, accused of being a ranting fanatic and the subject of scorn. Even his own family and friends turned their backs on him. He tasted the extreme bitterness of rejection.

***16 He has broken my teeth with gravel;
he has trampled me in the dust.***

***17 I have been deprived of peace;
I have forgotten what prosperity is.***

***18 So I say, "My splendour is gone
and all that I had hoped from the Lord."***

The famine was so severe people would go to the threshing floor and eat gravel in the hope of finding some traces of flour left behind.

***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 experienced the most profound depression, but this depression was fuelled by the harsh circumstances he found himself.

***21 Yet this I call to mind
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.**

From verse 21 when things looked so desperate, and the situation couldn't possibly get worse, Jeremiah takes a step backwards, takes a deep breath and says "Yet." Yet despite the circumstances, Jeremiah had hope, and it is important to note that the evidence of his situation didn't reflect any hope at all.

Hope in God is not a gift. We all know about the gifts of the Spirit: Word of Knowledge, Word of Wisdom, Gift of Prophecy, Faith, Healing, Miracles and others but the hope is not a gift. Hope is something we do – Jeremiah called to mind; he engaged his mind, his reasoning power to reflect on the character of God. Jeremiah's hope was not imparted to him – he had to work for it.

In the midst of destruction, devastation and death Jeremiah had just the faintest glimmer of hope. As Jeremiah looked down over the smouldering city from his cave, I can imagine him raising his sight off the city towards the sky as he sees something else going on, something deeply spiritual.

The old King James version says *"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. "

Thomas Chisholm lived in the late 1800's and came from a very low-income family. However, he became a Christian and had a heart to go into full-time pastoral ministry but because of ill health only spent one year in ministry. Thomas spent the next 50 years writing over 1200 poems and 100 hymns. His famous hymn "Great is Thy faithfulness" comes directly from this verse in Lamentations.

*"Great is thy faithfulness! Great is thy faithfulness!
Morning by morning new mercies I see;
All I have needed thy hand hath provided;
Great is thy faithfulness, Lord, unto me!"*

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

It is in those times of desperation that God becomes central. Jeremiah understood the principle of waiting. Again he says to himself – this is not someone else giving him advice, but he says to himself "The Lord is my portion, He will come through for me, God is faithful.

**25 The Lord is good to those whose hope is in him,
to the one who seeks him;**

**26 it is good to wait quietly
for the salvation of the Lord.**

I'm not sure if you have picked up a theme running through these verses? These verses sound a lot like Jesus on the cross when He died for our salvation. But here's the thing about those in despair, Jesus not only identifies with your hopelessness but He enters into your despair with you. We sometimes get the impression that Jesus is up in heaven, seated next to the Father, looking down and like chess pieces moving situations and circumstances according to His will. But we have the Holy Spirit within us representing Jesus so that He knows exactly how we feel and connects deeply with us during those times.

Let's look at some of those verses:

**7 He has walled me in so I cannot escape;
he has weighed me down with chains.**

Do you sometimes feel walled in by your circumstances, like a prisoner with absolutely no way of escape? You feel weighed down with cares, worry and anxiety with no energy, continually exhausted; getting up in the morning is a struggle?

Jesus was forced to carry His own cross, weighed down with the weight you carry.

**8 Even when I call out or cry for help,
he shuts out my prayer.**

Do you feel like nobody cares? Even when you do cry out for help no one really listens, you feel forgotten and forsaken

(Matthew 27:46) Jesus cried out "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?"

**11 he dragged me from the path and mangled me
and left me without help.**

Do you feel like your life is mangled? You feel crushed?

Jesus' body was beaten with whips – his body mangled for us.

**12 He drew his bow
and made me the target for his arrows.**

**13 He pierced my heart
with arrows from his quiver.**

Do you have a broken heart? You feel like the poison arrows of other people's cruel words have pierced your heart? Jesus identifies with your broken heart.

Jesus' side and heart was pierced with a spear.

**14 I became the laughingstock of all my people;
they mock me in song all day long.**

Do you feel like people are talking behind your back? You are the butt of others jokes and they mock and treat you with contempt.

The crowds mocked and scorned Jesus.

**15 He has filled me with bitter herbs
and given me gall to drink.**

Do you feel like life has been unfair and left you bitter?

Jesus was given gall vinegar to drink.

The remarkable parallel between these verses and Jesus' death on the cross is no coincidence; even Jeremiah wrote the book of Lamentations from the same place where Jesus was crucified.

Breaking the Barrier of Despair is not so much about changing circumstances but about entering into deep intimacy with God. When we can truly love God with all our hearts, minds and souls in the midst of despair we begin to move beyond the hardship we experience – heartache becomes secondary, and Jesus emerges as primary.

Jeremiah, in the book of Jeremiah, wrote the well-known passage we love to quote -

Jeremiah 29

11 For I know the plans I have for you," declares the Lord, "plans to prosper you and not to harm you, plans to give you hope and a future.

We love that verse, don't we? And if you posted that verse on Facebook or written it in someone's birthday card that's ok, but we must be careful to never interpret this verse as God changing our circumstances before He changes our hearts.

I think we have all heard the comment that if God is so loving and kind and if He is in control of the universe, then why is there so much suffering? Or to be more correct why did He allow bad things into my life? The conclusion these people come to is that either God doesn't care or worse doesn't exist – there are millions who think like this. Alternatively, people want to claw their way out of despair by offering bigger sacrifices, praying harder, obeying more rules, trying harder or going on a pilgrimage. But there are a few who will love God with all their hearts, minds and souls right in the middle of their despair.

You see, God's plan for your life is for you to love Him deeply and passionately before He makes you comfortable. God plans to prosper you in spirit before financial prosperity. God's plan for your life is that the foundation of your hope is exclusively in Him and not your own resources. God's plan for your future is to be grounded in love for Him before a future of comfort.

Verse 11 is integrally connected to verse 12:

12 Then you will call on me and come and pray to me, and I will listen to you. 13 You will seek me and find me when you seek me with all your heart.

"Then" implies something must happen before the breakthrough, not necessarily in circumstances but a discovery within, within our hearts. God's plan for your life is to call on Him, to pray and to seek Him with all your heart.

It may be surprising to discover that Breaking the Barrier of Despair is not what we expected because when we are in deep relationship with God when we love Him with all out heart and strength, despair begins to look very different.