July 7 Lesson 6 (NIV)

Ceaseless Love

Devotional Reading: Psalm 30
Background Scripture: Lamentations 3:16–24; Psalm 30; Jeremiah 52:1–30

Lamentations 3:16–24

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 splendor is gone
and all that I had hoped from the LORD."
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:
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."

Key Text

Yet this I call to mind and therefore I have hope: Because of the LORD's great love we are not consumed, for his compassions never fail.**—Lamentations 3:21–22**

Hope in the Lord

Unit II: Expressing Hope

Lessons 6–9

Lesson Outline

Introduction

A. The Truth About Trauma
B. Lesson Context

I. Remembering Judgment (Lamentations 3:16–20)

A. Memories of Humiliation (v. 16)
Broken Teeth
B. Memories of Despair (vv. 17–18)
C. Memories of Bitterness (vv. 19–20)

II. Remembering Mercy (Lamentations 3:21–24)

A. Memories of Ceaseless Love (vv. 21–23)
Great Is Thy Faithfulness
B. Memories of Sufficiency (v. 24)

Conclusion

A. Remembering the Whole Truth
B. Prayer
C. Thought to Remember

How to Say It

Mishna *(Hebrew)Mish*-nuh.

Nebuchadnezzar*Neb*-yuh-kud-nez-er.

shalom *(Hebrew)*shah-*lome*.

Introduction

A. The Truth About Trauma

Physician Besser van der Kolk, a world leader in the study of trauma's impact on the brain, made the following penetrating observation:

> Breakdown of the thalamus explains why trauma is primarily remembered not as a story, a narrative with a beginning, middle, and end, but as isolated sensory imprints: images, sounds, and physical sensations that are accompanied by intense emotions, usually terror and helplessness.

Poetry is the perfect medium for sensory impressions that cannot yet be remembered as a coherent plotline or story. Poems require no plot; rather, they are an artistic means of processing intense emotions. They can mirror the experience of remembering trauma too. These memories so overwhelm our brains with intense sensations and emotions that we cannot quite narrate them. We can only remember them in patches and fragments as images, sounds, and sensations. It is extremely difficult to remember the whole truth about trauma.

The poetry of Lamentations wrestles with the people's trauma and what the whole truth—about the people and about God—really is.

B. Lesson Context

The book of Lamentations commemorates the devastating destruction of Jerusalem that occurred when Nebuchadnezzar, king of Babylon, invaded Judah in 586 BC. A long siege left many dead from starvation, and a significant number of the remaining population was brutalized and taken captive to Babylon. The city itself was leveled after Nebuchadnezzar's forces successfully breached the city. Especially hurtful to the inhabitants of Jerusalem was the utter destruction of the temple, the centerpiece of their city and the symbol of their special relationship with God (Jeremiah 7:4–14; 52:12–23).

The five poems of Lamentations are one person's attempt to sort through his confusion and questions as well as to find a reason for hope. Though traditionally, this person has been identified with the prophet Jeremiah, the book of Lamentations is anonymous. We cannot know with certainty who expressed the community's grief with such vivid images and powerful poetry. What is clear, however, is that the poet was a master of metaphors with an unusual awareness of his people's pain. The poet's experience is representative of the people as a whole. In fact, throughout Lamentations 3, the speaker presents himself as an authoritative figure with an official role as the people's representative with a responsibility to lead them in expressing and processing their pain. This leads eventually to his leading them in a liturgy of repentance, appealing to divine mercy, and seeking restoration to divine favor (Lamentations 3:40–42).

The first four of these five laments are acrostic poems: they use the Hebrew alphabet as their organizational scheme by having the first word of each stanza begin with the successive letter of the alphabet. The third lament, the one in which our text is located, intensifies the acrostic so that the first word of each line of each stanza features the successive letter of the Hebrew alphabet. This technique aided the community's collective memory of the trauma. It was also a means of trying to order the chaotic emotions and make sense of the horrific experience in terms of the people's covenant with God.

While the people of Judah certainly had to express their grief and wrestle with the difficult theological questions raised by their intense suffering, they also had to remember God's character and his long track record of faithfulness and love if they were to avoid succumbing to despair. This latter task dominates the poet's concerns in Lamentations 3:16–24. These verses are a climax for the collection of poems that make up the book of Lamentations.

I. Remembering Judgment
(Lamentations 3:16–20)

A. Memories of Humiliation (v. 16)

16a. He has broken my teeth with gravel;

Our text begins amid an extended reflection on how God has behaved like one of Judah's vicious enemies, seemingly seeking the people's annihilation (Lamentations 3:3–15, not in our printed text). The imagery is of extreme humiliation. Breaking teeth with *gravel* conveys the

experience of being thrown to the ground with such force that the rock-covered ground knocked the victim's *teeth* out.

The poet's physical posture of lying injured on the ground points to the more profound and lasting reality of being brought low spiritually. Ironically, David twice requested that God break the teeth of his wicked enemies (Psalms 3:7; 58:6). Though this fate may have once been reserved for David's and Judah's enemies, it now enters Judah's own experience as David's descendants and the nation they governed became enemies of God through their persistent rebellion.

16b. he has trampled me in the dust.

The humiliating experience is exacerbated by the poet's sense that God has personally forced him down into the dust. The Hebrew indicates the act of forcing someone down and keeping him down, perhaps by pressing one's foot down on his back. A contemporary way of putting it might be, "He made me eat dirt."

The poet attributes this action directly to God, though no doubt it was the Babylonian invaders who treated the poet and his fellow Judeans harshly. In one sense, this is due to our human tendency to project onto God the cruelty we experience at the hands of human beings. While this is an understandable reaction insofar as God was using the Babylonians as agents of his judgment (Jeremiah 25:8–11), it also indicates how traumatic experiences and suffering tend to cloud and confuse our perception of God. We, like the poet, believe that God is in control and might erroneously attribute the evil actions of others to God's own hand (compare Job 1:12, 22; 2:6, 10; 42:1–6).

B. Memories of Despair (vv. 17–18)

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

Here the poet reflects on the significant losses he and his community sustained in the wake of their tragedy. Chief among them was any sense of well-being or hope for future prosperity. The poet uses the familiar Hebrew word *shalom* (translated *peace*), known to most English speakers as the common greeting in Israel to this very day. The word conveys a broad sense of holistic well-being, of both material security and deep spiritual contentment. Not only had all sense of this security and contentment fled the poet's experience, but he could not even remember what *prosperity* was.

While this could be an example of poetic hyperbole or exaggeration for effect, it also underscores a well-documented effect of trauma. The tragedy of Jerusalem's destruction significantly altered how the poet and his community viewed their past. Their present pain threatened to eclipse all memory of past prosperity and permanently cast a dark shadow over the entire story of their emergence as a people and of their relationship with God.

18. So I say, "My splendor is gone and all that I had hoped from the LORD."

It is not clear to whom the poet says this. Did he speak to himself, share with fellow sufferers, or address it to God in prayer (see Lamentations 3:23b, below)? Whatever the case, it captured the utter despair that inevitably followed the poet's loss of any sense of well-being, contentment, or even the ability to recall pleasant memories from Judah's past.

In strikingly absolute terms, the poet dismisses any possibility of a future return to *splendor* or rea son for hope. Whereas the previous verse emphasized the impact the poet's trauma had

on his recollection of the past, the present verse emphasizes the effect his trauma had on his vision for the future. In the immediate aftermath of Jerusalem's destruction and all the pain and suffering that came with it, the poet saw no way forward, no path by which he could imagine God advancing his plans for his people.

C. Memories of Bitterness (vv. 19–20)

19. I remember my affliction and my wandering, the bitterness and the gall.

The poet captures a nauseating sense that all of life has turned sour and lost all of its taste and delight with the use of two vivid words: *bitterness* (more literally, "wormwood," as in the *KJV*) and *gall*. These two extremely bitter-tasting plants were often used in medicinal elixirs and teas, as referenced in the Mishna (an important Hebrew extrabiblical text); the plants were notoriously hard to swallow without gagging or vomiting.

But in Scripture, these plants are rarely associated with healing and are viewed negatively as having no redeeming value. They are considered toxic (compare Deuteronomy 29:18; Proverbs 5:4; Lamentations 3:15; Revelation 8:11). The one possible exception is the occasion when gall was offered to Jesus on the cross, presumably as an anesthetic (Matthew 27:34), though his rejection of it does not speak highly of the substance.

20. I well remember them, and my soul is downcast within me.

The poet reflects on the overall effect this allconsuming memory from Lamentations 3:3–19 had on the poet. (See lesson 9 regarding the *soul* in Hebrew thought.) The vivid memories served only to darken the poet's outlook further and depress him. Indeed, they were hardly memories at all, but more like flashbacks, as though the poet relived the experience each time he recalled it.

II. Remembering Mercy
(Lamentations 3:21–24)

A. Memories of Ceaseless Love (vv. 21–23)

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

As if recognizing the danger of continuing down the dark path of bitterness, the poet suddenly turns his thoughts in a very different direction. He draws from the rich tradition of prayer and praise that he undoubtedly knows from his own education beginning in his boyhood. His recollection interrupts the downward spiral of despair with memories that are deeply ingrained through years of study and more profoundly formative than the traumatic memories of recent suffering (see commentary on Lamentations 3:22a, below). The poet can *call to mind* convictions powerful enough to challenge and hold in check the despondency threatening to dominate his thoughts and determine his outlook. His *hope* is revived as he begins to view his situation from the perspective of revelation and tradition rather than personal experience.

22a. Because of the LORD's great love we are not consumed,

The poet confessed the truth of divine mercy with language reminiscent of the book of Psalms, Israel's hymnal and prayerbook. The phrase *the Lord's great love* recalls, among others, Psalms 89:2 and 107:43 (where *great love* is translated as "loving deeds") and refers to God's long track record of forgiveness and grace that had preserved Israel by withholding the full penalty of the people's sin (compare Ezra 9:13; Psalm 103:10). This sentiment seemed to inspire the poet to turn his attention to this traditional recitation of the long list of God's merciful actions and faithful interventions on his people's behalf and to remind his fellow sufferers of this. With this in mind, the poet can see that his survival and the survival of his fellow sufferers is no accident of history but is instead evidence of God's enduring love.

The poet caught himself in a common theological error—the error of pitting God's love against God's wrath as if the two were mutually exclusive. However, divine wrath is a function of divine love. God's anger over Judah's persistent sin was his love taking disciplinary form. His purpose was not to destroy Judah, nor was it to forsake her and give up on his covenant. Rather, the judgment was a kind of radical surgery performed to save the patient.

22b. for his compassions never fail.

The poet uses the plural form *compassions* to hint at numerous, discrete divine actions motivated by God's amazing tenderness for Judah. The word the poet uses for divine compassion is related to the Hebrew word for "womb" and has strong connotations of warmth, intimacy, and maternal tenderness. This is a striking and unexpected choice of words on the heels of such vivid descriptions of the carnage and destruction that the poet and his community recently endured, seemingly at God's hand! (See Lamentations 3:16, above).

23a. They are new every morning;

The significance of the poet's use of the plural "compassions" (verse 22b) again takes center stage here with the assertion that God's compassions *are new every morning* (compare Psalm 92:2). In other words, a new expression of divine compassion greeted the poet daily. The poet's previous experiences of the manifold nature of divine mercy assured him that he and his community would somehow experience yet another new depth of divine mercy. God's mercy would be equal to the task of healing the deep wounds of Jerusalem's destruction.

23b. great is your faithfulness.

This is the only one of the poet's statements expressed directly to God as a prayer. In the rest of the text, the poet either addressed himself in an attempt to keep his own faith afloat (example: verse 21, above), or he addressed his community in an attempt to rally them to persevere in faith with him (example: verse 22a, above). This is an interesting shift in the poet's rhetoric, considering that elsewhere he seemed to view prayer as an impossibility (see Lamentations 3:8, 44). Nonetheless, between those two statements asserting God's unwillingness to hear, the poet prays quite confidently, if briefly. While this may strike readers as odd and perhaps even contradictory, it makes sense considering the circumstances under which the poet wrote these words. In this time of crisis, his faith waxed and waned, ebbed and flowed as it does for us in our moments of intense trial.

The fact that the poet prayed these words rather than addressing them to himself or others raises the possibility that he was looking for reassurance from God that his *faithfulness* really is

great. Perhaps the statement was half assertion and half question: "Great is thy faithfulness! Right?" Either way, the poet was determined to hold on to this hope.

B. Memories of Sufficiency (v. 24)

24a. I say to myself, "The LORD is my portion;

The poet drew once again from Israel's prayerbook as he desperately sought resources to support his faith through this trial, this time from Psalm 16:5. The word *portion* refers to the land plots distributed to the various tribes of Israel according to Moses' instructions (Joshua 18–19). This is significant considering that the original land distribution had been disrupted by the exiles of first Israel and then Judah due to their sin (2 Kings 17:7–23; 25:1–21). With the land under the control of the foreign power by which God judged his people (Habakkuk 1:6), these original land grants were effectively rendered meaningless. Aware that Judah had now forfeited the physical manifestation of God's fidelity to his promise due to sin, the poet made perhaps one of the boldest and most beautiful assertions of faith in all of Lamentations.

As great a loss as the seizure of the land by foreigners was, it was survivable if the poet and his people could only maintain their relationship with God. The assertion was a surprising generalization of a principle originally modeled only by Levites. Of all the tribes of Israel, they alone received no portion of land as did the other tribes. God's explanation for this was that he was Levi's portion. The special privilege this tribe had of maintaining the sanctuary made it a model for all of Israel of dependence on God's all-sufficiency. The Levites lived lives of deprivation and dependence, relying on Israel's sacrifices and tithes for their livelihood (Numbers 18:20–24).

24b. "therefore I will wait for him."

The poet concluded these reflections with a simple statement of his determination to fix all of his hopes on God. Given all that he remembered of God's past faithfulness, both from his personal experience and from the collective memory of previous generations carefully preserved in Scripture, liturgy, and tradition, the poet can find reasons to *wait for him*. His was a hope that all the evil in the world could not ultimately sink. After the tears had been shed and the grief, anger, bitterness, and doubt expressed, hope remained.

Conclusion

A. Remembering the Whole Truth

Lamentations 3:16–24 can be thought of as an exercise in remembering the whole truth. The text does not shy away from the ugly reality of the community's suffering. Honest and vivid expression is given to the pain, disillusionment, and bitterness experienced by the poet and his people.

This, however, is not the whole truth. Experience is important and sheds valuable light on reality, but it is not the only or final word. The poet balanced his experience with revelation Scriptures, prayers, and traditions he had learned since his youth. Though the tension created by their juxtaposition at times seems greater than our hearts can bear, the internal dialogue

between our lived experience and the Spirit's testimony in Scripture is essential to our arriving at the whole truth and to the survival of our hope.

When enduring great trials and suffering, we cannot isolate ourselves in an echo chamber of despair. Never is it more crucial to participate in the worshipping community than when we are wrestling with intense doubts regarding God's goodness and love. Many people of faith have survived harrowing experiences only to rebound from them with greater assurance of God's love. We must not ignore their testimony. All of these form a great cloud of witnesses testifying that faith in God's ceaseless love need not wither and die in the face of the world's horrors. The secret to their resilient faith was that they trained their memories to recall not only the pain of their experience but also the many pieces of evidence of God's enduring love, both in their own lives and in the lives of believers who preceded them.

B. Prayer

Our Father, we thank you for the testimonies of the cloud of witnesses who remind us of your enduring love even in our darkest moments. May your Spirit awaken in us memories of your faithfulness and love to balance the memories of our heartbreak and pain. In Jesus' name we pray. Amen.

C. Thought to Remember

Have hope in God's compassions and faithfulness.[1]