

Time of Grace Ministry
A Fresh Start
Lamentations 3:19-26
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Pastor Jeremy Mattek

Hello, I'm Pastor Jeremy Mattek with Time of Grace. Back in 1874, the New York prison system hired a man named Richard Dugdale to come and study the inmates that were currently in the penitentiary system. They wanted to find out if there were any common characteristics that individuals had in their lives that would lead them to be more likely to be incarcerated. And so, he studied the lives of each of the inmates in the entire penitentiary system and was surprised to discover not only how many of the inmates were related to each other but also how many of them had descended from the same one man who had lived about 150 years earlier; a man that he called Max Jukes, which wasn't his real name; he used a fake name for his study. But he went back and looked at this man named Max Jukes, studied his family tree, and found that from this one man's family tree - over the course of 150 years - came 300 convicts, 27 murderers, 190 prostitutes, and 509 alcoholics and drug addicts. He wanted to compare that to the life of another person and so he found a man who lived around the same time as this Max Jukes, a man named Jonathon Edwards who was a missionary to Native Americans and the president of Princeton, eventually. And looking at his family tree over the same - over the same period of time, he discovered from his family tree came 430 ministers, 130 lawyers and judges, 99 college professors, 13 university presidents, 60 doctors and 11 congressman and governors. From this study came what we now know as the five generation rule; the rule or principle that says how you live your life not only impacts your life but the lives of the five generations that follow you.

I was sharing a story on these principles and statistics with someone that I had met once and she looked at me with a very sad face and she said, "Pastor, does that mean I'm stuck? Does that mean I'm in trouble?" She told me that she had come from a very troubled family; a family that had been troubled for many years. And I looked at her and I said, "Well, that's the beauty of the gospel. The book of 1 Peter tells us that God's grace has given us a new birth into a living hope through our Savior Jesus." In other words, the gospel gives us a fresh start every day; a fresh start that Pastor Jeske is going to talk about today on Time of Grace.

Pastor Mark Jeske

When you've been doing something – even a dysfunction for a long time – it's really hard to do something in a different way, isn't it? Inertia just keeps sliding us along down the track and the older you get, the worse it gets.

Sometimes it's pressure. Sometimes it's stubbornness; we're just too doggone stubborn to admit that there was anything wrong. Or we get defiant and defensive about the broken piece. Or we get to think that's part of who I am. One guy who was a really heavy drinker told me once: "Yeah, I don't like it but my alcoholism – that's like my thing; that's like my identity. It's what I do. I drink to excess." And you think, "What?" But that was his identity. And he didn't know

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– his alcohol was his place to hide – he didn't know who he really was. I think he was a little scared to look at himself sober and so drinking was a way of perpetually forgetting, although he was destroying himself in the process.

But that's the kind of dysfunctional thinking that God can help us with. Some of the pain in your life is out of your control; you are the victim of the cruelty or neglect of others and you don't have much control over that. Some of it are world events crashing around. The fact that someone in your family has been deployed to the Middle East or to Afghanistan, for instance, those are world events far beyond your ability to control.

But I'm not so worried about the things you can control. I'm much more concerned about the things in your – but especially to be perfectly honest and selfish – I'm more concerned about the things I know that can be different in my life. But because of my own mental breakdowns and dysfunctions, are not happening. And today is the day that that's going to change and so I invite you to sit in with me on a little self-talk as we go to the word. And we're going to the craziest possible place.

If you're looking for hope and optimism, if you're looking for energy, why on earth would you go to a book of the Bible called Lamentations? Does that make any sense? No. Zero sense. What is a lament? Do you know what that is? It's a sad song. Lamentations is five straight chapters of blues. Why on earth would you go to the book of blues to feel better? To get stronger leg muscles? A stiffer spine? Clearer head? Stronger willpower? Why on earth would you go to a book of weeping to find the joy and optimism to make some changes in your life.

Well, I'll tell you why: Cause the book of Lamentations is so real. A wonderful woman called Lamentations a bottle for all the tears in the world. It's an extraordinary and unusual book. It's one of those that people sometimes skip over because it just seems like such a downer but it's totally worth an hour of your time to go through it and savor it. Almost certainly written by Jeremiah – comes right after his book – in fact, why don't you look it up in your Bible; the book of Lamentations.

A lament is a sad song and Jeremiah was weeping as he looked at the disintegration of his country. There wasn't much left anymore. The northern half of the nation of Israel had been broken and defeated a century earlier and the little bit of Judah that was left kept getting shrunk down smaller and smaller. It was independent only by a fluke and wasn't going to be a nation much longer. In fact, he would witness the complete political, military, and economic destruction of his nation. And, in fact, was going to watch an awful lot of death happening, as well; death and starvation. He was watching the wrath of God being poured out. And what made it the worst to contemplate was he knew it could have been avoided. He was spiritually bright enough and faith-filled enough to see cause and effect. And his book, his book of Lamentations, lays out his personal confession: It is my fault and our fault. We did this to ourselves. That's what made burden even heavier, even more crushing in a sense, is we did it to ourselves. It's our own fault. Like an alcoholic sitting with an empty bottle of vodka sitting next to him saying, "I did this to myself. Nobody drank this bottle for me. I did it." Like somebody who wrecked a marriage because she was the one running around and lying and cheating. And

as she sits lonely on Christmas, has to say, “I did this. It’s my fault.” And you know, that’s an important part of what we need to do – all of us – as we reload, refresh, and reboot this year.

Lamentations will help us. Not only is it a vessel for our pain and our tears, not only does it express human brokenness and longing, the universal brokenness of our universe, we’re all in this together. We’re all broken. We’re all sinful. We’re all idiots. We’ve all hurt others and hurt ourselves. We’re going to tomorrow, too. So what to do? Right in the middle of this book of blues, in chapter three, is the place to go for broken people who want their lives to be different but who need to find energy and hope and some passion to do some hard things, whatever it might be – to get healthier, to have healthier relationships, to start telling the truth to yourself for the first time in a long time, to be able to say, “I’m sorry,” to be able to let somebody else unload on you and to listen, really listen, to someone whom you’ve wounded or injured. Those are hard, hard things to do. Here is energy and strength for you.

Right in the middle of this little book – it’s only, it’s basically five little songs. It’s actually seven songs but two of them have been kind of lumped together – or, three of them have been lumped together – into the middle chapter so it’s five, although the middle song, the middle lament, is three times the size of the other four. And it’s a stylized little poem. It is not just a sudden blast like Zechariah suddenly unloaded the Benedictus or Mary suddenly, in one incredibly creative spirit-fueled burst unloaded the Magnificat in one go. This is a carefully crafted and constructed jewel of pain. It’s almost sort of stylized. You know what I mean by that? Kind of nerdy English major word. It is elegantly and mathematically constructed in – as I said – it’s really seven songs of 22 verses each and the middle one has a triple load for some reason, so chapter three has 66 verses instead of – or, 66 stanzas – instead of the usual twenty-two.

And the first through the fourth of these poems, of these laments, are acrostics; they are stylized so that in Hebrew, there are 22 stanzas, each mathematically the same size as the others and each one starts with a successive letter of the Hebrew alphabet. So it’s kind of like a memory device. I suspect that in an age where there was not so much writing and a lot more of the culture was orally transmitted, this lament was something that was taught to musicians and bards and singers. And those alpha – that alphabetical arrangement would help them remember the verses so that they could sing this.

Jeremiah composed this – it almost certainly was by his pen – as an exile. He died before he saw what God was going to do about their pain. He died in hope but gosh, what hope he had! And I’d like to savor some of his hope that in the middle of a book of blues, he has put some nuggets of encouragement for people like you and me who’ve been dinged up by life, who are limping a little bit, who’ve got some pain that we’re carrying, who are hungry for some things that haven’t happened. Who are grieving with some regrets over things we wish we could change. What to do to go forward in this year and not just sort of get swept along and just endure but to thrive; to make a difference. To feel like there’s some hope. To utilize the still formidable platform God has given us; the still formidable skillset that you are sitting on top of so that you in paralysis and depression don’t just sit down by the side of the road and wait to die. But that you will get engaged knowing that you can make a difference and that change is possible in our life.

You ready? Let's go to the middle of Lamentations 3 and in verse 19, Jeremiah says, "I remember my affliction and my wandering, the bitterness and the gall." Gall has a sour taste in your mouth. "I will remember them and my soul is downcast within me. Yet this I call to mind and therefore I have hope: Because of the Lord's," – three things are mentioned – "because of the Lord's great love we are not consumed." God's love is his decision to assign value to you not based on your performance, but based on his choice; brokered to us through the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ. What gives you hope is God's repeated statements of unconditional love. Start there; don't start arguing with God: Why haven't you given me more? Why haven't you taken this burden off me?

Jeremiah found consolation not in a legal argument with God. You have pounded on us way too hard. He didn't argue with how God was doing his business. He said I'm circling back and coming back to your unconditional love so you must have a plan." You still have use for me. I still have value in your sight and collectively, we as believers still have value to you. We're worth something to you.

What Jeremiah perhaps only knew in seed form, you and I can look back in the fullest and see how much value we have; that God's own son was tortured to death in a brutal, cruel, unjust and bloody way in order that the love and favor of God might rest upon us and he gives it to us.

Second, his compassions never fail. That means that in addition, compassion involves – the word comes from two Latin words; cum and passio – means he suffers along with us. Not only does he love us, he doesn't despise us for being weak and sometimes acting like idiots and fools. Jesus knows how slimy and difficult the temptations of Satan are. When we cry out to him for mercy, he says, "Yeah, I know." And his heart hurts with us. Do you – can you grasp the fullness of that? That God feels pain when you feel pain? He's not just operating us as though we're laboratory rats, artificially applying electroshock and putting little cheese here and there and having punishments here and there and poking us and injecting drugs in us; manipulating us as though we were just laboratory animals. We're his children! We're his kids! He hurts when we hurt. Call and trust and rely and depend on his compassion. He doesn't despise you for your failures. He's more interested in your future than in your past. Call on that compassion. Trust in it, rely on it. Bath yourself in it. Wrap yourself up in it and hang onto it tight. That's what Jesus brings us.

Thirdly, "Your compassions are new every morning." We can restart all over again. The forgiveness of Jesus is infinite; bigger than any of my sins of the past. But it's also bigger than my sins of the future. He never gets tired of forgiving me. When I come and repent, he forgives me again. I can start over every new day as though I had never sinned and you can do that, too. That frees us from the crippling depression and guilt we feel from a lifetime of a lot of failures and a lot of stupid, stupid, selfish things. They can be unloaded off of us like as though we're dragging a trailer, a heavy trailer, full of useless rocks. You can just uncouple it and let it go and reload and restart and imagine yourself before God through the favor of Jesus Christ that you look as pure and perfect as though you had never sinned. And he's proud of you to call you his child. And what that means is that the struggles you still have only are platforms for accomplishing his agenda. And they are useful to him in ways we only partially grasp. I'm still struggling to understand this better. Man, how old am I and I'm still on the learning curve of

this, but a few things are beginning to dawn on me; that my own struggles are not always a disaster. Sometimes, it allows me to be more believable to help somebody else.

And the pain of my friends in their lives certainly is useful to me because when they share a faith testimony that comes from a sick bed or from a position of financial chaos and they express their trust in the Lord, that is a much more powerful message than someone who seems not to have a problem in the world. And God has a way of using our brokenness to help other people. It becomes a platform; it makes us more useful to him. And that's not – that's not my way. My way is for me to be insanely wealthy and powerful so that I can dispense help as though I'm Daddy Warbucks just handing out – handing out dollars. Or Scrooge McDuck, sitting on an enormous pile, which I then can dribble out. That appeals to me! Doesn't that – wouldn't you like to come and visit me if I was like a trillionaire? I could have fun giving you stuff. Wouldn't that be fun? Not God's script; no.

And so, I limp along with you; trusting in this wonderful trifacta: The unconditional love of God, a hurting heart from the one who internalizes my pain and feels it too, and someone who is rock steady in his purpose. Great is your faithfulness! You never give up on me. Even though I falter, you never do. That's the meaning of his very name. His name, Yahweh, is based on "I Am," the rock steady God who doesn't flinch or falter; who has rock steady purposes running throughout the entire stream of human history. And has been laser focused on the reconciliation and winning back of his lost children. One by one, he gets us back. And the blood of Jesus flows backward and forward in time and has arrived here to you and to me through his wonderful word.

Therefore, "I'm going to say to myself, 'The Lord is my portion.'" In other words, if I have a relationship with God, everything else will fall into place. "The Lord is my portion; therefore I will wait. The Lord is good to those whose hope is in him." Here's the trifacta of what I'm going to do now going forward into this new year. Hope. He's – God's going to be active in my life and he's going to give me far more than I deserve. One of the reasons I get in such foul attitudes, mental attitudes, and get paralyzed is I have such terrible amnesia about how I've been spoiled rotten the previous year. And I invite you to take a little inventory of how much you have and realize that you will be given even more in the coming year. My hope, Lord, is in you.

"To the one who seeks him." Left to my own devices, my default switch is set to seeking my agenda; what I want. Let me invite you to organize your coming year around the Lord and seek him out. How do you seek God? You know, Jesus himself ran into hundreds and hundreds – probably thousands – of people who wanted to seek God by having him do magic tricks to prove that he really was God. And he never would perform for people who wanted signs and so, I counsel you to look away from being a sign-seeker and saying, "Well, I'll be," – putting conditions on God like, "Well, I'll believe you better, I'll follow you more closely, if," and then you lay out like Jason and the golden fleece – or Gideon and the golden, sorry, Gideon and the golden fleece kind of thing – where if you do something miraculous, then I'll do this. He doesn't play games like that. But I invite you, rather, to look at what he's done for you and then say I'm going to seek you. I'm going to pay attention to your word. I'm going to fill up on your wonderful supper and be absolutely confident in our relationship. And then I'm going to keep

my eyes open to look for opportunities to serve you and to allow other people you may be sending to help me.

“It’s good to wait quietly for the salvation of the Lord. It’s good for a man to bear the yoke.” So I’m going to hope, I’m going to seek him, and I’m going to wait quietly. We all want heaven on earth and not a one of us is going to get it. But I will tell you this: We get little tastes of heaven. As God’s working aligns with our lives and as we align our lives with God’s agenda, we’ll see little sparks and gleams of heaven, as we are more interested in his agenda than our own.

Today is a day to pick one thing in your life that you know you’d like to be different. Today is a day if there are broken things and messes in your life that are your fault, today is the day to tell God, “I take responsibility and I’m sorry.” Today is the day to say, “I’m sorry,” to someone that you think you may have wounded or who thinks you wounded him or her. Say, “I’m sorry.”

Today is the day to give a compassionate ear to someone with whom you’re angry, who has hurt or wounded you, and to give that person a chance to say I’m sorry to you. To get close enough to say, “I’m listening. What have you got for me?” Today is the day to say, “Lord, washed in your forgiveness, I can let go of the mess and depression and the fog I feel like I’m in. Today, I’m stepping out into your sunshine. What have you got for me today?” Not what do I want from you today? But what have you got for me today? What have you got for me this year? How may I be useful to you? And then pay attention. And you know what? Resources just seem to come together at times like that.

Lord, great is your faithfulness. Thank you for mercies and compassions new every morning. Especially this morning. Happy New Year, everybody!

Pastor Jeremy Mattek

A number of years ago, there was a study done called "Cradles of Eminence" by Victor and Mildred Goertzel in which they studied the family backgrounds of 300 of the most successful people in the history of the world. Names like Gandhi and Winston Churchill and Albert Schweitzer; very well-known names who had accomplished a lot. And what they found in their study was over three-quarters of the people on this list, over three-quarters of the 300 most successful people in the history of the world, had family backgrounds that were severely troubled by broken homes, abuse, or poverty. In other words, some of the greatest advancements in the history of our world came from people who basically the world at one point gave up on.

Today, Pastor Jeske reminded us that the greatest advancement in the history of the world came from a man that people sometimes still give up on. Through the compassion, through the love and through the faithfulness of our God shown in Jesus Christ, God has given you a way to start each new day in this new year with confidence, with a way to release guilt from your shoulders, with a way for your hearts to be filled with peace and joy; all through our Savior Jesus.

Lord Jesus, we're so grateful for the fresh start you give us each morning; your love, your faithfulness, and your compassion and go with us each day. Help us to keep our eyes fixed on the cross every day of this new year so that every day we might be awakened to your grace and inspired by your great love for us. In your name we pray, Amen.

I'm Pastor Jeremy Mattek with Time of Grace and it all starts now.