

Sunday Morning March 11, 2012

The Steadfast Love Of The Lord

Lamentations 3:19-24

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The Steadfast Love Of The Lord

Lamentations 3:22-23

The text for this morning's lesson is Lamentations 3:19-24. We just recited two of those six verses set to music. At the conclusion of our message we'll sing another musical version of the same verses. I'll just read the chorus.

***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!***

This is one of my favorite verses of the Bible because it underlines some precious and powerful principles about the God we serve and the life he gives us to live.

Today we'll spend a few minutes looking at what these two short verses teach us about the steadfast faithfulness of God's love, mercy and forgiveness.

Now, the name of the book is Lamentations. That should give you some kind of hint about the content. A lamentation is an expression of sorrow or grief, with an underlying sense of regret.

This book contains five poems, or five laments, written after the siege of Jerusalem. This was the lowest point in Judah's history.

The capital city had been invaded by the Babylon army and was completely destroyed. The people were murdered, or were captured and taken to Babylon to work as slaves.

The prophet Jeremiah had predicted this would happen because for generations the people had lived in rebellion to God.

Again and again we read the summary of a king's reign: He did what was evil in the sight of the Lord, just as his ancestor's had done. [cf. 2 Kings 23 - 25]

As a whole, the people of Judah had turned away from God and were living ungodly lives. I mean that their society had become decadent. There was the shedding of innocent blood. There were unholy alliances with foreign nations.

They honored false prophets who refused to call for accountability. They mocked and scorned Jeremiah for preaching the Word of God. Wide-spread idol worship was developed and sanctioned by civil and religious leaders.

God's plan for his people is that they live in unity, in peace and prosperity, and that justice roll like a river and righteousness like a mighty stream. That's God's plan.

But in Judah there wasn't justice. There was greed, and corruption among the religious leaders, among the political leaders, and among the people.

Finally, it got to the point where God said, "I can no longer be a part of what you're doing." He left them to their own devices. The city of Jerusalem was destroyed and the people were taken captive.

And that's when Jeremiah wrote Lamentations. It's important to know this background ... because it gives today's text so much more impact.

The deplorable moral and religious situations that led up to this tragic destruction of Jerusalem and deportation of God's chosen people reinforces our appreciation of the steadfast love of the Lord and the greatness of his faithfulness.

This is an upbeat statement of faith and confidence at a time when the facts seemed to defy such a view of either the present or the future.

In the Lamentations of Jeremiah we see an illustration of the fact that hope can remain in spite of experiences that are heartbreaking.

Jeremiah is known as "**The Weeping Prophet**"—but his fountain of bitter tears never blinded him to the vision of a better day—a positive conclusion for his people.

And I think it's important to the strengthening of our own faith and hope and love and confidence to be reminded of the steadfast love and faithfulness under these horrible conditions.

It's important to understand that the lives of the people of Judah had come to ruin through their own fault, in spite of repeated warnings -- and in spite of the fact that their destruction was their own fault, God continued to extend his mercy.

I know some people consider that response a weakness, especially when faithfulness in loving the rebellious becomes an issue that we have to deal with.

At some point, we're more inclined to say, "enough is enough—they made their own bed, let them sleep in it." Peter wanted to know how many times he had to forgive his brother.

The Pharisees said 3 times, so Peter doubled it and added one for good measure. Jesus said, "Not 7 times (which you know is the symbolic number of completeness) but 70 times 7."

In other words, "The steadfast love of a Christian never ceases; his mercies never come to an end; they are new every morning. Great is thy faithfulness."

Their experience reminds me of so many people that I meet today who make a mess of their lives through foolish decisions, rebellious decisions, selfish decisions, and sinful decisions.

They do wrong, they know it's wrong, and they do it anyway. As a result, their lives unravel. I'm sure you know or have known people like that.

In fact, I would imagine that each and every one of us has lived this same kind of experience in one way or another, at one time or another in some measure or another.

We get stubborn and we get headstrong and we decide that we're going to do things our own way on our own terms ... until life shows up to give us a reality check.

Some of us grow out of our jackass stage—for others it becomes so much more serious and heartbreaking.

I've known single people who refused to pay any attention to the information readily available to them when it comes to their social life –

They date who they want to date instead of who they *ought* to date; their attraction is based on looks and income rather than character and spirituality; and they end up miserably married.

To be fair, there are also many who, through no carelessness of their own were courted by nice Dr. Jekyll then find themselves living with Mr. Hyde. That's frequent enough to be the plot of lots of movies.

It isn't right for us know-it-all's to rub salt in the wounds of people like that. After extensive counseling I've given my blessing to some couples who eventually found themselves in really lousy situations.

The movie, "Sleeping With The Enemy" comes to mind. I wish it were just a movie. One young couple I married several years had a conclusion to their marriage none of us had even considered—and the wife shot the husband dead.

We've all known people who were so in love with material possessions that they spent every penny on this toy and that toy until they were leveraged to the hilt and finally it all came crashing down on them.

I've seen people do this with their health and their relationships and their careers and their finances and their families and their spiritual lives -- until finally everything falls down around them and they're left with the pieces.

Now, the Bible makes it very clear that we all have something in common: We've all been there, to one extent or another—nothing nearly as tragic as some, but we all know what immediate desire of any kind can do to our actual values and priorities.

An important part of restoration is the willingness to take responsibility for your actions and take ownership of the results you've created for yourself. That gives you the ownership of taking corrective action.

Some people are never willing to do that. It's always someone else's fault. The message of the book of Lamentations is that the people of Judah need to understand that they brought this situation on themselves.

And here is where today's text becomes so precious and so powerful. Even though the people of Judah had defied God for generations, he still wasn't through with them.

Even though their rebellion had brought about the destruction of Jerusalem, he still wasn't through with them. The candle had not yet burned out. The door had not yet closed. God was still reaching out to his people.

Listen to how the words of Jeremiah from Lamentations 3:19-24 ***"I remember my affliction and my bitterness, the wormwood and the gall! My soul continually thinks of it and is bowed down within me.***

But this I call to mind, and therefore I have hope: The steadfast love of the Lord never ceases, his mercies never come to an end; they are new every morning; great is thy faithfulness. The Lord is my portion, says my soul, therefore I will hope in him."

On this you can build your life. These words from Lamentations remind of us three things about the faithfulness of God.

When we read this verse, I want direct your attention to these three facts. First of all, remember that...

A. God's love will never change.

Even when, by any other standard, you don't deserve to be loved, God keeps loving you. *"The steadfast love of the Lord never ceases..."*

What we claim to be love is often conditional. Our love is often temporary. For some, "I'll love you forever," means, "I'll love you until you disappoint me ... I'll love you until it becomes inconvenient ... I'll love you until it's easier not to love you."

We tend to love one another with a limited, short-term, easily-shakable, easily-breakable love. God's love is unshakeable.

God's love is unwavering. His love is not only long-term, it's permanent. It's forever. And this promise to the people of Judah proves it.

If ever a people didn't deserve to be loved, it was this ungrateful bunch. God provided for them again and again and again ... and they turned their backs on him again and again and again. And still the prophet is able to declare: God's love is steadfast. It never ends. Never ever.

I know that some hear the gospel and think, "God can't possibly still love me. I know what I am. I know what I've done. He can't love me still."

But he does. And some of you know someone close to you who believes the same thing -- they believe that their

mistakes are too ugly and their sins are too sinful for God to ever love them again.

You have the chance to remind them: God's love knows no limits, and it knows no end. He doesn't love you or me because we're lovable. Neither does he love us because we're good. What does the Bible say?

But God shows his love for us in that while we were still sinners, Christ died for us. (Romans 5:8)

God's love is the most solid thing in your life that you can count on. He could not love you more, and he will never love you less.

When you meditate on this verse, remember that God's love will never change. Secondly, remember that ...

B. You will have all the mercy you need.

Jeremiah said, "His mercies never come to an end." Just like people think they can exhaust the love of God, they think they can exhaust the mercy of God.

They say, "I have committed this sin so many times, there is no way God is going to forgive me ever again." A Christian writer says,

I became a Christian when I was 15. Before my 16th birthday, I was sure that I used up my limit of God's mercy. I mean, good grief, it had been six months -- why was I still sinning every day? Shouldn't I be holy by now? It's been thirty-something years since then, and I'm still not where I want to be or where I think I ought to be. But one thing I've learned: you can't outlast God's mercy. It'll be there as long as you need it.

Some people say, "Wait a minute. If that's the case, what's to prevent you from sinning all you want and asking forgiveness again and again?"

I've never liked this argument, but whenever I talk about the unlimited mercy of God I feel like I need to address it. Paul did too.

In celebrating the grace of God, some even went so far as interpret it as meaning they should sin more so God's grace would abound more.

Of course, Paul and you and I think that conclusion is really stupid and totally anti-scriptural—but there is a very large religious group today that teaches that Adam's fall was a blessing for us.

But if you have the "cheap grace" view of sin and forgiveness, you need to understand first of all, that this is not like pulling the wool over the eyes of your parents or your school-teacher or your boss.

You're not tricking God. He can't be taken advantage of. He knows real gold from fool's gold. But extending grace to repeat offenders is the most expensive thing God has ever done.

He knows what's in your heart. If you're playing games with him, he knows how to make things real. Just ask the people of Judah.

This isn't about tricking God into forgiving you one more time so that you can go out and sin some more. It's about knowing that when you struggle with your brokenness and your weakness, when you disappoint yourself once again, and disappoint others once again, and fall short of God's ideal once again, that he will extend his mercy once again and help you get back on your feet once again and he'll give the chance try ... once again.

In the book of Romans, Paul talks about this. He says...

I do not understand my own actions. For I do not do what I want, but I do the very thing I hate... I have the desire to do what is right, but not the ability to carry it out. (Romans 7:15, 18)

If Paul struggled with this, then you and I certainly will, too. What is our hope? The mercy of God, the never-ending mercy of God, extended to us through his son Jesus Christ.

The Bible only puts one condition on mercy. Do you know what it is? It is that you show mercy to others.

Jesus said... ***Blessed are the merciful, for they shall receive mercy.*** (Matthew 5:7)

And, if you need motivation to support a steadfast love for those who sin against you, try a little gratitude—God has already gone beyond the 70 times 7 for me.

I don't really like to remind you of this, but if what I've suggested thus far about maintaining a faithful, steadfast love for others that never ceases, you need to keep in mind what James said on the subject:

¹² Speak and act as those who are going to be judged by the law that gives freedom, ¹³ because judgment without mercy will be shown to anyone who has not been merciful. Mercy triumphs over judgment.

If you need God's mercy, show mercy to others. You will discover that his mercies never come to an end.

Here's the third thing I want you see.

C. Every day is a new beginning.

...they are new every morning...

It doesn't matter what happened yesterday, because you can't do anything to change it. It's gone. It can't hurt you anymore.

And if you messed up yesterday, today you can say, "That part of my life is over, today I'm going to do better."

That's why I think it's such a great idea to repeat this verse or one like it first thing in the morning. Somehow, we need to develop the habit of reminding ourselves as early as possible that we're working with a clean slate and unlimited possibilities.

Have you ever noticed that during the first few weeks of the new year, you still have the habit of writing last year's date?

It's like we subconsciously hang on to the past – and we let old thought habits influence what we think about today. I'm encouraging you to break the connection to yesterday, and learn to focus on today, everyday.

The most important day for any Christian is today. It does no good to wallow in the regrets of yesterday or cower in fear of tomorrow. Today is all that matters. And with God, everyday is a new day.

CONCLUSION

So what do these statements teach us? They teach us about the endless possibilities that exist in a life with God. He will always love you, and nothing will ever change that.

He will always forgive you, he will always pick you up when you fall, he will give you another chance to get it right, and nothing will ever change that.

And every day he gives you a new day, a new life, a new chance to be all that you are capable of being, and to do all that you are capable of doing.

At times when you are struggling to stay the course—to keep your commitments when you are discouraged by the unkind results of your efforts to hold things together and move forward, these verses on which we've based our message this morning may be the most important, most comforting, most inspirational in the Bible for you.