

## Quiet Desperation And Solid Hope

As each church year draws to a close, the traditional focus of the church has been on what we call the endtimes.

Technically speaking, the endtimes began when Jesus died on the cross and the signs he had prophesied appeared.

Darkness covered the earth, an earthquake shook Jerusalem and dead people rose to new life.

So when we speak of the endtimes we are actually referring to the period of time between Jesus death and his return at the end of the ages when he takes all of those who have believed in Him to be with him in heaven.

The common name we give to this is the period of the New Covenant, or the age of grace.

So when we say that we focus on the endtimes, what we really mean is that we are focusing on the conclusion of the endtimes which is called the parousia, when Jesus will return in glory and judgment, this world will pass away, and a new heavens and a new earth will be born.

In keeping with this we focus on *hope*, because hope is what enables us to see beyond this world into eternity, when we will behold with our eyes what we now can see only by faith.

Hope is a blessing of supreme importance to our Christian lives, because we live in a fallen world where at times we are beleaguered by troubles which can drag us down.

We can become like one of the people a 19<sup>th</sup>-century American philosopher by the name of Henry David Thoreau was referring to when he wrote, "*Most men live lives of quiet desperation.*"

After nearly thirty years of pastoral ministry, I would say that Thoreau had it right.

However calm and confident people may seem on the outside, inwardly we are all troubled by anxieties and doubts and fears.

We worry about our jobs, our marriages, our children, our retirement savings, our mortgages, our health, the future of our country and the future of the world.

And as if that were not enough, we also struggle with temptation.

A person can be tempted by alcohol or drugs or lust or lying or greed or anger—we are all drawn to one sin or another and at times that can drive us to quiet desperation.

“Quiet” because we dare not divulge it to others, and “desperation” because we can’t seem to control it.

Life has a way of beating us up, doesn’t it?

The loss of a job, tension in our marriage, a wayward child, the erosion of our savings, illness, injury—“things” happen which force us to confront the fact that we are not in control.

And that can be a scary thought.

So between internal struggles and external problems, living in this world can sometimes seem like walking down a dark alley.

And, as I said last week, this can pose a larger problem for a believer, than for an unbeliever.

An unbeliever who has chosen to believe that there is no God in heaven who loves him and cares for him, isn’t necessarily surprised when things go wrong.

For him it’s just a bad toss of the dice.

But a Christian has to deal with the fact that while God loves him, he allows bad things to happen to him—and that can be hard to understand.

Today’s *Old Testament* lesson from the *Book of Lamentations* is a good example.

Jeremiah, the author, plainly states that God not only *allows* suffering to come upon those who serve Him—sometimes He causes it.

Listen to how he describes how God has treated him: *“I am the man who has seen affliction by the rod of his wrath. He has driven me away and made me walk in darkness rather than light; indeed, he has turned his hand against me again and again, all day long.*

The 'He" in all these statements is God.

God had called Jeremiah to be a prophet to Judah during its final days, to warn the Judeans of their sins and urge them to repent.

But every time Jeremiah pleaded with the people to give up their pagan ways and turn back to God he was rewarded for his efforts by being cursed, persecuted, abused and all but killed.

So Jeremiah knew what it meant to suffer.

And I daresay that we all have felt like Jeremiah at one time or another.

That God was allowing hardship after hardship to fall upon us.

That like Jeremiah, we feel neglected by a God from whom we expected blessings rather than hardship.

And we silently cry out: WHY? WHY THIS? WHY NOW! Why Me? **WHY??!**

My dear Christian friends, the problem is not that God is inattentive or unmerciful; the problem is that we are blind.

The sin which we carry around in our flesh blinds us to God's mercies and love!

Even pagan philosophers have unanimously concluded that man cannot know or comprehend the mind of God, yet we foolishly and continually pass judgment on His divine actions with our flawed human minds.

The problem is not with God; the problem is with us—or, more specifically, with our flawed perspective.

The fact that we can't always understand God's plan doesn't mean that He doesn't have one!

He not only HAS a plan, He has the best possible plan for your life!

And He has provided a way for you to know that this plan exists and to stay in touch with it day by day.

That way is called "hope."

Hope is one of the three great gifts Paul describes which should govern the life of the believer.

*"These three abide: faith, HOPE, and love."*

Now if faith is how we **receive** God's grace, and love is how we **show** God's grace to others, hope is how we **live in** God's grace, day by day.

Someone once wrote, *"Hope may be the very stuff of which the soul is made."*

And that is why in the midst of all his suffering Jeremiah clung to hope.

Listen to his anthem of hope in the midst of suffering:

***"I remember my affliction and my wandering, the bitterness and the gall.  
I well 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 great love we are not consumed, for  
His compassions never fail. They are new every morning;  
Great is your faithfulness. I say to myself, 'The Lord is my Portion;  
therefore I will wait for him...  
The Lord is good to those whose HOPE is in him."***

HOPE is the knowledge God has implanted in our soul that He has a divine purpose for our lives.

Hope is KNOWING that *"...in all things God works for the good of those who love Him, who have been called according to HIS purpose."*

Hope is God reaching down into our souls and strengthening our faith.

Hope is a cable spun of divine steel which tethers us to God's promises.

Hope anchors us in eternity and keeps us from being led astray by the deceptions of a fallen world which is passing away.

Hope is spiritual bedrock; the solid deposit of the Holy Spirit in our hearts and minds that reminds us that what God ordains is ALWAYS good, and that *"...he Who has begun a good work in us will carry it through to completion."*

*Hope is faith applied to the future.*

Why does God bring affliction upon his people?

Jeremiah writes: *“Though God brings grief, he will show compassion, so great is his unfailing love. For He does not willingly bring affliction or grief on the children of men.”*

If God does not willingly bring affliction and grief upon us, then why DOES he bring it?

My friends, you are not going to like this answer.

But here it is: ***He brings grief and affliction upon us to help us learn to love this world less, so that we will love his kingdom more.***

The kingdom of heaven and the kingdom of this world are two entirely different kingdoms.

And we are only able to enter the kingdom of heaven to the degree that we are willing to leave behind the kingdom of this world.

And that's hard for us to do.

We like this world!

We know it's corrupt and deceitful and full of wickedness, but we like it anyway.

In fact, we love it—and in our flesh prefer it.

That's why we get uncomfortable and stiff-necked when we hear things like: *“If you want to be perfect, go, sell your possessions and give to the poor, and then come, follow me.”*

Things like, *“If your hand causes you to sin, cut it off and throw it away. It is better for you to enter life maimed than to have your whole body thrown into eternal fire.”*

Things like, *“If anyone would come after me, he must deny himself and take up his cross and follow me. For whoever wants to save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for me will find it.”*

Most Christians spend more time and effort trying to ignore these verses—or explain them away—than they do trying to understand them, because they don't tell us what our itching ears want to hear.

But though they may not tell us what we **want** to hear, they do tell us what we **need** to hear.

And what we need to hear is the truth.

Put as simply as possible, whoever would follow Jesus, must follow Jesus.

And since we are not by nature inclined to do that, God helps us by allowing afflictions to settle upon us which show us the deceitfulness of life in this fallen world and REDUCE us to hope.

I don't know about you, but I find that my hope burns brightest when I have run out of every other kind of fuel.

When all my plans have crumbled and my prospects have turned to dust, I have nothing left but HOPE.

Just as the dross has to be burned away to reveal the gold, our love of this world has to be burned away in order for us to see the beauty of the kingdom of heaven.

Looking back on his life, Martin Luther realized that it had been during times of affliction and despair that he felt closest to the God.

That is not a kind of wisdom we like.

It's certainly not a kind of wisdom we would have invented for ourselves.

But it IS God's wisdom.

And it's the Gospel truth.

Amen.

