

Sermon #1,171: Lamentations 3:22-25
11-25-15, Thanksgiving Vespers, Bethany-Princeton MN
(Hymns: #461, 63, 464, 565)

DAILY MERCIES AND COMPASSIONS

Prayer: Almighty God, heavenly Father, whose mercies are new to us every morning: You abundantly provide for all our wants of body and soul, even though we **have** in no way deserved Your goodness. We pray You, give us Your Holy spirit, that we may heartily acknowledge Your merciful goodness toward us, give thanks for all Your benefits, and serve You in willing obedience. For Jesus' sake we pray. Amen!

Lamentations 3:22-25 (v. 22-23). Through the LORD's mercies we are not consumed, because His compassions fail not. They are new every morning; great is Your faithfulness. Lord, this is Your Word and these are Your words. Sanctify us by the truth. Your Word is truth. Amen.

Dear fellow redeemed, citizens not only of this country but of the heavenly country: Grace, mercy, and peace to you from our merciful God.

Isn't it strange that the Old Testament reading for the Thanksgiving celebration is from a book of the Bible called Lamentations?

Actually the book is called "The Lamentations of Jeremiah." It is a reference to a historical event. Jeremiah was the prophet when the people of Israel were taken into captivity in Babylon by King Nebuchadnezzar, which included the destroying of the city of Jerusalem, including the temple of Solomon. Jeremiah sat in the empty streets, and he wept many tears, and he wrote the five sad poems that make up the book of Lamentations. Because of this book he is called "the weeping prophet."

But this book is in the Bible not as a relic of history but because it has something important that God wants to teach people of all times. So the question is what this has to teach us at Thanksgiving? Well, the truth is that we rather easily talk in a shallow way about "our blessings." It is tempting to judge from the up-and-down circumstances of life – sometimes down and getting downer – that we don't have as many blessings for which to be thankful. Too much to cry about and not enough laughter makes us think that maybe we have more curses than blessings.

So we must enter the world of Lamentations to understand why God is giving these words to us. We have to gaze with Jeremiah at what he was seeing – or not seeing – that filled his eyes with tears.

When Jeremiah wrote these words he was looking where the temple used to be. The temple was gone. Jeremiah's eyes were filled with its absence. It's just like New York City residents after 9-11-01, who had been used to the Twin Towers and were suddenly mesmerized with their absence. Or like the people in Paris right now who walk past demolished buildings. Or so many people during the holidays who have lost loved ones, and see empty places at the table or in the house.

It was like that for Jeremiah. It's important for us to picture in our minds the temple he was no longer seeing. The Bible says that ***“King Solomon surpassed all the kings of the earth in riches.”*** The riches were seen especially in the temple. The description in the Bible almost makes your eyes hurt with the brightness of the gold: ***“The whole temple he overlaid with gold ... He overlaid with gold the entire altar ... Solomon had all the furnishings made for the house of the LORD: the altar of gold ... the table, of gold; the lampstands of pure gold,”*** etc.

But Solomon's riches included also many wives given to him by pagan rulers. These were not among the blessings God gave him; this was against God's command to him. This is a reminder that we're not to delude ourselves into thinking that things God forbids are among His blessings to us. The Bible says: ***“His wives turned his heart after other gods.”*** God punished these sins in succeeding generations. Israel kept getting worse, turning to idols, worshipping power, not listening to prophets who preached the need to repent, as Jeremiah did.

The long book of Jeremiah is full of this. It is a noisy book. Jeremiah warns of God's judgment. The people laugh and mock. The powerful Babylonian army attacks. Jeremiah urges repentance. The people shout him down, and put him in a deep well. The Babylonian army comes into Jerusalem. They have no mercy on anyone, kill all the men of war, turn the temple into ashes, and leave with all the people.

Lamentations is not a noisy book. Where the temple was, it is silent. Where there were homes, there is stillness. The streets are empty. The only sound is Jeremiah weeping: ***“How lonely sits the city that was***

full of people! How like a widow is she. Is it nothing to you, all you who pass by? Behold and see if there is any sorrow like my sorrow, which has been brought on me, which the LORD has inflicted in the day of His fierce anger” (La 1:1, 12).

Jeremiah does not say that God just allowed this evil to happen to them. God did it to them, the Babylonian army was His instrument, but not because He had stopped loving them. God’s decision to have the temple and Jerusalem destroyed and send them all to Babylon, this is called “chastening.” The Bible says this is what a loving father does: ***“Whom the Lord loves he chastens ... If you endure chastening, God deals with you as sons” (He 12:6-7).*** God’s chastening of Israel was to show them they did not need armies or gold or powerful allies or kings. They needed Him. Stripped of everything, finally they could see that.

This leads us to our own situation, when we are tempted to weep and lament, or to complain bitterly about what is in front of us, or what or who we are painfully aware we have lost or is absent from our life, and how we think we don’t have as many blessings to give thanks for. The fact that we know in our sins we do not deserve anything good from God does not prevent us from bewailing each dark moment as it flies, and offering up never-ceasing moans and sighs.

These verses from Lamentations 3 help cure us of this. God gives us His promise through the words of the prophet: **Through the LORD’s mercies we are not consumed, because His compassions fail not. They are new every morning; great is Your faithfulness.**

These words help us particularly to adjust our vocabulary. I still like the word blessings. That is what they are. But Jeremiah redefines the blessings with two lovely words: *mercies* and *compassions*. The daily “blessings” are daily mercies and daily compassions.

Mercy is something given to someone who needs pity, who can’t offer anything in return. Another word for God’s mercy is “loving-kindness,” which might be my favorite word in the English language. But Jeremiah writes not, ***“through the Lord’s mercy,”*** but: **“Through the Lord’s mercies,”** plural, **“we are not consumed.”** These are God’s tender mercies. Every little kindness, which is a sign of His grace.

The other word, *compassion*, is something given to someone who is suffering. It is the word used so often to describe Jesus, how He felt people's suffering not just in His spirit but also in His body, physically. Another way of saying it is: He felt it in His guts. Again Jeremiah does not write, "**His compassion fails not,**" but "**His compassions,**" plural, "**fail not,**" they don't end. Every tiny bit of your suffering, the Lord feels in His guts, and He offers you separate and distinct outpourings of compassion to cover every single episode of suffering which you undergo. He even says that these outpourings "**fail not,**" they do not end. Wow.

What is amazing is that you find this in the middle of the great book of laments. In fact you find it right in the middle. It is the center of Jeremiah's little book, which is a message in itself. In the middle of your laments, sufferings, and crises what do you find? God's mercies and lovingkindnesses. God's compassions and expressions of understanding.

This is portraying the cross of Christ. In the midst of sins and sorrows and the misery of a fallen world, He planted His cross. In the midst of the thieves He was crucified. There is Jesus in the midst of you.

There are five chapters in Lamentations, two shorter ones to begin with, lament after lament; two shorter ones to end, lament after lament; but right in the middle one long chapter 3, and right in the middle of that chapter the words: "**the Lord's mercies ... His compassions ... great is Your faithfulness.**" All His promises are kept in Jesus. His faithfulness is Jesus. These words are about Jesus. The mercies, compassions, are centered in Jesus. From Him flow forth all the daily mercies, daily compassions, daily blessings that are showered by God upon you.

The great Scandinavian Lutheran hymn writer Thomas Kingo wrote a long hymn about Jesus' Passion, 29 verses, a prime number. Right in the middle – v. 15 – are these words, with which we close:

On my heart imprint Thine image,
Blessed Jesus, King of Grace,
That life's riches, cares, and pleasures
Have no power Thee to efface.
This the superscription be: Jesus, crucified for me,
Is my Life, my hope's Foundation,
And my Glory and Salvation. Amen!