

How to Find Hope in Suffering

Group Leader Podcast - Episode 9

Announcements

Hey everyone and welcome to episode nine of the Group Leader Podcast. Hope you enjoyed the eclipse earlier this week. Our staff gathered to watch it, and I couldn't help but think of the power and majesty of God as I looked through those glasses protecting my eyes.

Before we get going with this episode's topic, I want to remind you that GroupLink is coming up next week. It's next Thursday night. If you haven't already, please let me know if you're coming, and if you are how many people can your group would like to bring in.

And if there's anyone you know who would benefit from joining a group then please encourage them to register. These events actually run better the more people we have, because it allows for more diversity in the kinds of groups available.

One last thing. Stick around at the end of the podcast because I've added some reflection questions for you to go deeper with today's episode. I want you to walk away from listening to this podcast with a sense of what God might be calling you to do or think or change, and I think those questions will help encourage that.

Alright, that does it for announcements. Let's jump into this week's topic.

Introduction

There's a lot to be happy and thankful about this time of year. New beginnings, kids moving up a grade, football coming back, and a sense of fresh beginnings in the air.

But maybe you don't feel that way. Maybe you feel quite the opposite—you can't think of anything to be thankful for, your life feels like it's not going anywhere, or the walls seem to be crumbling around you. Maybe you're not quite depressed, but you're pretty close. Your spiritual life is far from vibrant; you feel numb to what's going on around you.

It's easy to feel like you're the only one that feels that way when you're in one of these seasons, but you're not alone. For 80 years, young Americans have been getting [more anxious and more depressed](#). We're literally the most anxious people that have ever lived.

But despite the high percentage of us who struggle with anxiety or depression, or who are going through a season of grief or simply feel overwhelmed, there's still a stigma. When all we want to

do is crawl under the covers, we don't really feel like talking about it. And most people don't know what to do or say if you do bring up feelings of anxiety, depression, or the like.

So we suffer in silence. Our deepest hurts go unspoken and our deepest fears go unknown.

To make things worse, we have this wracking sense of guilt because we think our faith requires is to be happy and joyful. We think our inability to handle suffering means we're somehow inadequate. All these emotions and thoughts pile on our shoulders and we can find ourselves in a downward spiral, struggling to find happiness and contentment with where we are.

A personal journey

I know what it's like to have those thoughts and emotions because I've been there. I recently went through a season of anxiety and grief. There were days when I wanted nothing more than to stay in bed all day and hide from all the responsibilities of my life. There were days when I could hardly pay attention to my kids, listen to my wife, or complete anything in front of me. I was lost in my thoughts, and they weren't taking me anywhere good.

The best word I found to describe my state was *acedia*, an old word that means spiritual or mental sloth, or apathy. *Acedia* is a state of languor or torpor, a state of unconcern or dissatisfaction with one's condition or action in the world. It feels like you're standing still, watching the world go on around you.

One of the biggest barriers to taking action when you feel like that is the inertia you have to overcome to get started on anything. But I finally got so tired of feeling that way that I decided to search the Bible for what God had to say about my state. Before long, God led me to what was for me an undiscovered gem in the middle of what seems like the most depressing book in all the Bible—Lamentations.

Finding hope in Lamentations

Before I read from it, it helps to have some context for what's going on. Though we don't know for sure, most scholars think the book of Lamentations was written by the prophet Jeremiah as the city of Jerusalem was being sacked by King Nebuchadnezzar and the Babylonian army.

You may heard Jeremiah referred to as the weeping prophet—that's because he was given an incredibly difficult assignment by God. He was to be a lone voice calling the nation of Judah, in particular the city of Jerusalem, to repent from idolatry and injustice and start serving God. That's not much different from most prophets, but God told Jeremiah one more thing—that no one would listen to him. No one would heed his advice and change their behavior. That meant God would execute judgment on the nation and its people, and Jeremiah would only be able to watch it all happen.

Lamentations is the culmination of Jeremiah's ministry. It's the moment where his city is being invaded, his people are being slaughtered or carried off into exile, and the temple was destroyed. The walls were, quite literally, crumbling around him. He wrote Lamentations to record his feelings of lament for his people, his city, and himself.

So if you've ever felt like the walls were crumbling around you and everything was going wrong, Lamentations has something to say to you.

Here's the part that drug me out of my spiritual languor. Jeremiah writes,

- ¹⁷ my soul is bereft of peace;
I have forgotten what happiness is;
- ¹⁸ so I say, "My endurance has perished;
so has my hope from the Lord."
- ¹⁹ Remember my affliction and my wanderings,
the wormwood and the gall!
- ²⁰ My soul continually remembers it
and is bowed down within me.
- ²¹ But this I call to mind,
and therefore I have hope:
- ²² The steadfast love of the Lord never ceases;
his mercies never come to an end;
- ²³ they are new every morning;
great is your faithfulness.
- ²⁴ "The Lord is my portion," says my soul,
"therefore I will hope in him."
- ²⁵ The Lord is good to those who wait for him,
to the soul who seeks him.
- ²⁶ It is good that one should wait quietly
for the salvation of the Lord.
- ²⁷ It is good for a man that he bear
the yoke in his youth.
- ²⁸ Let him sit alone in silence
when it is laid on him;
- ²⁹ let him put his mouth in the dust—
there may yet be hope;
- ³⁰ let him give his cheek to the one who strikes,
and let him be filled with insults.

³¹ For the Lord will not
cast off forever,
³² but, though he cause grief, he will have compassion
according to the abundance of his steadfast love;
³³ for he does not afflict from his heart
or grieve the children of men.

—Lamentations 3:17-33

There are four truths in this passage that bring hope in times of suffering.

1. Right knowledge of God leads to hope in God

The first truth is that right knowledge of God leads us to hope.

Jeremiah starts out with some pretty dark language. He said, “my soul is bereft of peace; I have forgotten what happiness is.” He has no peace in his life. At the deepest levels of who is in, in his soul, he has no peace, only anxiety and desperation. Which is why he has forgotten what happiness is. He simply can’t seem to find happiness with all the chaos going on around him.

Jeremiah goes on to say, “My endurance has perished; so has my hope from the Lord.” He’s saying, “I just don’t have it in me to keep going. My endurance has failed and I don’t know how to keep moving forward.”

And more importantly he feels like he has lost hope in God’s promises. He’s lost hope that God knows what he’s doing, and that he’s just and righteous and good. He’s lost hope that God will one day turn their mourning into joy.

He goes on to say, “Remember my affliction and my wanderings, the wormwood and the gall! My soul continually remembers it and is bowed down within me.” Jeremiah is begging God not to forget all the persecution and grief he’s faced as he was obedient to God’s call on his life. He’s crying out to God, “Don’t forget what I’ve been through! I definitely haven’t forgotten!”

Before we get to this first truth, let me point out what Jeremiah did here. He called out God for his plans. He expressed his frustration and confusion with how God chose to execute his purposes. And you can do the same.

The book of Lamentations, as well as many of the lament psalms, show us a healthy way to express our frustrations to God and to pour out our hearts before him. That’s a healthy thing to do, and if you’re in the midst of a season like Jeremiah’s then you can do the same.

What makes Jeremiah's cry to God healthy is what comes next. Verse 21 marks a turning point in the book of Lamentations. Jeremiah turns from his disbelief in what's happening around him, and instead reminds himself of what he knows about God.

He says, "But this I call to mind, and therefore I have hope." Let's stop there. Transition words are so important to pay attention to in the Bible. They mark things like transitions or contrasts that often help you understand what the author is saying.

Jeremiah starts this sentence with "but," meaning despite what he said before, he's choosing to do something different. That "something different" in this case is calling to mind what he knows about God, and when he does that he recovers his hope.

Pay attention to the order: first, Jeremiah reminds himself of what he knows to be true about God, then he recovers his hope.

So often we want a step to take, an action plan to follow, something to help us feel like we're making progress. But the first step to finding hope in times of suffering isn't an external action—it's an internal one. Jeremiah stops his mental spiraling and forces himself to remember what he knows to be true about God.

A.W. Tozer wrote, "What comes into our minds when we think about God is the most important thing about us."¹ Tozer knows that without a right understanding of God, everything else will go awry. That's because we will never rise above our understanding of the Almighty.

What we think about God affects not only our theology, but how we live our lives. If you think God is an angry father who's out to get you, you live in constant fear and dread. That fear and dread drives you to make decisions with timidity and always be looking over your shoulder.

If you think God is all love and no justice, you can't imagine a God who would send people to hell. If that's what you think then you'll end up with a low view of sin or thinking everyone goes to heaven as long as they're trying to be nice.

What we think of God affects how we live.

The key to hoping in God in the midst of suffering is calling to mind the right knowledge of the Lord. And by right I mean knowledge of the Lord according to what the Bible tells us. When we call to mind the things about God which are actually true, then we find ourselves able to cling to hope when everything is falling apart around us.

Jeremiah goes on to remind himself of some of those right things about God, which brings us to our second truth.

¹ A.W. Tozer, *The Knowledge of the Holy*

2. God's faithfulness encourages ours

God's faithfulness encourages ours. After determining to set his sights on the right knowledge of God, Jeremiah starts naming aspects of God's character. He writes, "The steadfast love of the Lord never ceases; his mercies never come to an end; they are new every morning; great is your faithfulness."

Jeremiah is reminding himself that God's love is fixed and unwavering; it isn't fairweather or half-hearted. God's love for his children is steadfast and absolute. That doesn't mean God doesn't discipline his children. On the contrary, it is *because* he loves his children that he disciplines them.

I have to explain this to my kids all the time when they have to be disciplined. They can't understand why someone who loves them would punish them, but I know it's because I love them and because I want them to learn how to be a person of integrity and character that loves God and loves their neighbors that I have to discipline them.

When you're in a dark pit of anxiety or depression like Jeremiah was, the knowledge that God's love is fixed on you, that it's not dependent on what you do or who you are, will drive you to hope in his deliverance.

Then Jeremiah says God's mercies never come to an end, and in fact they're new every morning. It might not feel like it when you're suffering, but God's mercies are all around you.

It is by his mercy that you're breathing. It is by his mercy that you have a house, a job, clothes, food, and friends or family. It is by his mercy that the world keeps spinning and the sun doesn't burn us up.

And no matter how terrible today is, God's mercies start anew with the rising of the sun each day. That is good news when you feel stuck. God's mercies never stop coming, and because he is unchanging and eternal then we can be sure they'll never stop coming with the dawn of a new day.

Next, Jeremiah reminds himself that God's faithfulness is great. And it truly is great. God's faithfulness to keep his promises, to never stop loving us, and to redeem us have the power to drive us to our knees in thanksgiving. One of the great hymns comes from this line, called Great is Thy Faithfulness. It's chorus cries out,

"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!

All that we need, God has provided. Not all we want, but all we need. He has been and always be faithful to his people and his character.

Knowing that God’s love is never ceasing, that his mercies never come to an end, and that his faithfulness is great drove Jeremiah to declare, “The Lord is my portion.” That’s a weird phrasing to us, but what he means is that God is enough. He is all Jeremiah needs, all he wants, and with God alone Jeremiah will be satisfied.

Since God is all he needs and since God is faithful to him, Jeremiah says, “therefore I will hope in him.” God’s faithfulness encouraged Jeremiah’s faithfulness, and it encourages ours as well.

To recap to far: right knowledge of God leads us to hope in God, and God’s faithfulness encourages ours.

3. Hope is developed through waiting

Now for our third truth: hope is developed through waiting. Hope is developed through waiting.

If you’re going through a season of suffering or some kind of trial, the last thing you want to do is be patient, to wait. You want deliverance now. You want the suffering to stop and things to get better.

That’s exactly how I felt until I read these words from Jeremiah:

²⁵ The Lord is good to those who wait for him,
to the soul who seeks him.

²⁶ It is good that one should wait quietly
for the salvation of the Lord.

²⁷ It is good for a man that he bear
the yoke in his youth.

²⁸ Let him sit alone in silence
when it is laid on him;

²⁹ let him put his mouth in the dust—
there may yet be hope;

³⁰ let him give his cheek to the one who strikes,
and let him be filled with insults.

—Jeremiah 3:25-30

As soon as I read those words for the first time I knew I had been going about my waiting wrong. I was complaining to my wife, I was moody all the time, I was grumpy and hard to get along with.

And that such a contrast to what Jeremiah says here. He says, first, that the Lord is good to those who wait for him, to the person who seeks him. God is showing us something through Jeremiah's words here that is crucial to finding hope in suffering. God is showing us that he develops hope in us through waiting, through our patience.

We often come to Jesus asking him to change our circumstances. We just want out of the suffering, out of the grief, out of the trial. But if we're thinking like God, we should be praying something different. We should be praying, "Change me, not my circumstances."

If we're after the same thing in our lives as God, if we know what he's doing even when we can't understand it, then we can rejoice in times of suffering when they come. We can find hope in suffering when it comes. That doesn't mean we can't collapse over being betrayed, or weep over losing a friend. It just means we count the development of hope a joy. It means we beg God for the wisdom to see how he wants to refine us through the suffering.

If you ask God for this kind of wisdom, he will give it to you (Jas. 1:5). It won't happen overnight, and it won't be easy. There will still be incredible pain. But if we can learn to set our hearts and minds on seeking God in times of suffering, he will develop hope and patience and character in us.

But remember how Jeremiah says to endure the suffering—quietly. He said,

²⁶ It is good that one should wait quietly
for the salvation of the Lord.

²⁷ It is good for a man that he bear
the yoke in his youth.

²⁸ Let him sit alone in silence
when it is laid on him;

²⁹ let him put his mouth in the dust—
there may yet be hope;

³⁰ let him give his cheek to the one who strikes,
and let him be filled with insults.

—Jeremiah 3:25-30

I know... some of that sounds really weird. But here's what God is telling us through Jeremiah. He's saying it is good for us to quietly endure the suffering we experience. That doesn't mean

you don't talk about it with God (obviously, that's what Jeremiah is doing here), and it doesn't mean you don't talk about it with your spouse or trusted friends or advisors.

It means you don't take the disposition of complaining and whining. It means you're not woe-is-me about everything going on in your life. Again, that doesn't mean you aren't supposed to feel, of course you are. God made us emotional beings. That's part of our identity and personhood.

But while we can't control the emotions we feel, we can control our response to those emotions. We can choose to be miserable, or we can choose to find joy. We can choose to be negative about very negative circumstances, or we can choose to stay positive about what's ahead. We can choose to be frustrated with God and stop trusting that he knows what he's doing, or we can choose look to God and trust his plans. We can choose to live in despair, or we can choose to live with hope.

4. Hope is grounded in eternity

That brings us to our fourth and final truth from this passage, that hope is grounded in eternity. Jeremiah determined not to lose hope in God and to set his sights on things above, and to do so quietly and patiently. Then he closes with these words:

³¹ For the Lord will not
cast off forever,
³² but, though he cause grief, he will have compassion
according to the abundance of his steadfast love;
³³ for he does not afflict from his heart
or grieve the children of men.

—Lamentations 3:31-33

This is good news. My suffering, your suffering, will not last forever, God says. Though we are grieved today, that grief will not last forever, because he is a compassionate God and great is his faithfulness. He has set his sights on loving you, and his love that never stops is abundant. There is more than enough.

All the suffering, all the grief, we experience may very well be allowed by God, but what's happening to you is not from his heart. He does not set his sights on harming you, but loving you. You may be in a time of great distress, but God wants to forge in you a hope that can't be taken by anything life can throw at you. He wants to develop on you a hope outside this world.

He will not leave us to suffer forever, though he may for a while longer. Jeremiah wasn't delivered right away. In fact, it got worse for him. He was put into a pit, put into stocks, then he

was taken against his will to a foreign country. Tradition has it that he was stoned to death by his fellow countrymen who were tired of hearing his pronouncements of judgment.

So what does that mean? Was Jeremiah's hope misplaced? Was he a fool to find hope in the midst of suffering that never let up?

No. Because Jeremiah's hope was grounded in eternity. He knew that this life is not all there is. He knew he would one day enjoy eternity with God, free from all the trials and suffering he faced while on earth.

This is critical to understand if you're going to find hope in your suffering. When we're saved through Christ, three things happen: we're redeemed from our sins, our lives are resurrected in the here and now, and our eternity alongside Christ in heaven is secured. The gospel redeems us from our past, renews us in the present, and resurrects us in the future.

Ultimately, our hope in Christ is rooted in knowing we'll spend eternity with Christ. Yes, we all want to be comfortable and happy in this life, and hopefully God blesses you that way. But our hope cannot be rooted in anything of this world. Everything in this world can and will be taken from us, so nothing in this world is capable of bringing us hope.

Whatever you're suffering through right now is difficult. It may be hard, it may be stressful, it may be debilitating. But if your hope is simply in your situation changing, then you will never find peace.

Jeremiah found peace because he knew his hope was in something outside the control of everything in this world. No man, no empire, no disease, no sickness could take it from it. That's why he said, "will have compassion according to the abundance of his steadfast love." And the fullest expression of that compassion is found in the sacrificial life, death, and resurrection of Jesus.

The fact that Jesus lived a sinful life, died a sacrificial death, was resurrected from the dead, and is now seated at the right hand of God is proof that God's is overflowing with steadfast love and compassion. And he has poured it out on you and me.

This is how the Apostle Paul could say,

"For I am sure that neither death nor life, nor angels nor rulers, nor things present nor things to come, nor powers, nor height nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord."

—Romans 8:38-39

Conclusion

Let's recap. Our four truths based on Jeremiah 3:17-33 are:

1. Right knowledge of God leads to hope in God
2. God's faithfulness encourages ours
3. Hope is developed through waiting
4. Hope is grounded in eternity

If you're going through a difficult season, take heart in your suffering. Know that you're not alone. And remember that God wants to cultivate in you a hope that is fixed on him, where no one else can touch it.

Reflection questions

Here are some questions to help you reflect on what we discussed.

1. What comes to mind when you think about God?
2. We should look to God for our hope, happiness, significance, and security. Where have you misplaced your hope and trust? (Maybe in your kids' ability to behave or perform in school, your job or a project you're working on, or affirmation from your spouse, family, or friends.)
3. What are some ways God has shown you his faithfulness in the past 24 hours? In the past week? (Think of the groceries you just bought, the car you're driving, your health, your paycheck, your kids, and most importantly your relationship with Jesus.)
4. With your previous answers in mind, now what comes to mind when you think about God?