

# “WALL STREET, 586 B.C.”

Responsive Reading, “Hope Beyond Despair” (Lamentations 3:1-6, 16-18, 21-26, 40) <sup>1</sup>

Do any of us remember what happened on October 19, 1973? That was the day that the famous Arab Oil Embargo began, leading to long lines to get even a little gas. Jill and I got married in the middle of that, and I had the gas stolen out of my car while it sat in our driveway. At least the thief didn't puncture the gas tank, which often happened. And of course it was that embargo that led to cars having locking gas tanks.

Other dates of significant economic impact include October 24-30, 1929, the stock market crash that led to the Great Depression, and October 1-10, 2008, the stock market crash that led to the Great Recession. It may be that we are living through somewhat similar days as we sit here this morning.

By my reckoning, the stock market closed on Friday 10% lower than it was at its recent record high, and many of us may be fretting at what is happening to our investments as a result of this “corono-crash.” And then there's always the virus itself . . . .

The “novel coronavirus” that is currently sweeping the world is now just a few miles from us, and likely much nearer. While there have been many deadly viruses loose in the world during my lifetime, I can't remember any health issues of this magnitude close enough to create concern since polio in the 1950's.

Our challenge in such times as these is to live wisely with respect to health concerns and to live faithfully with respect to the natural fears such times engender. So it is that our Scripture reading this morning is “Hope beyond Despair,” and the title of this sermon is “Wall Street, 586 B.C.” So what's up with 586 B.C.? I'm glad you asked!

I expect that you have seen by now that the biblical prophets, both “major” and “minor,” were chiefly engaged in calling Israel and Judah to repentance in order to forestall God's judgment on their idolatry and other sins. Neither nation repented in any significant or lasting way, and in the year 722 B.C., the Assyrians conquered and deported the ten northern tribes of Israel. They have never been heard from again.

The prophets continued to call the southern kingdom of Judah to repentance, but their pleas largely fell on deaf ears. Eventually, God's judgment came in the form of the Babylonian army, which besieged the city of Jerusalem for over two years, from January 15, 588 B.C. to July 18, 586 B.C., at which time the city walls were breached.

During this siege, life within the city became so harsh that people even resorted to cannibalism, and dead bodies were left to rot in the streets. Once the walls were breached, Solomon's Temple was destroyed and the rest of the city burned to the ground on August 17, 586 B.C. All hope was gone. Here's what the news might have reported that afternoon:

The Babylonian army has breached the walls of Judah's capital city of Jerusalem, having held the city under siege for more than two years. Judah's King Zedekiah tried to escape under cover of darkness, but Nebuchadnezzar's troops captured him on the plains of Jericho and brought him to Nebuchadnezzar at his camp at Riblah. There Nebuchadnezzar forced Zedekiah to watch as all his sons and the other leaders of Judah were executed. Then they gouged out Zedekiah's eyes, bound him in bronze chains, and led him away to Babylon.

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<sup>1</sup> A sermon by Dr. David C. Stancil, delivered at the Columbia Baptist Fellowship in Columbia, MD on March 8, 2020.

Nebuzaradan, Nebuchadnezzar's Captain of the Guard, has burned down the Jewish Temple, the royal palace, and destroyed all the houses and all the important buildings in the city. The army has completely destroyed the city walls and has pillaged everything of value.

This afternoon, the last of the Jews began a forced march to an internment camp near Babylon. Stay tuned and we'll keep you up-to-date with the latest developments in this most recent conquest and acquisition by Nebuchadnezzar's growing empire. This is NPR (from Jeremiah 52).

As awful as that is, try to imagine what it would have been like to know with absolute certainty that this was going to happen forty years ahead of time. Even worse, imagine warning your family, friends, neighbors, and government officials about this coming destruction, but being ridiculed instead of being taken seriously. That's what Jeremiah was experiencing when he wrote, "*My heart, my heart—I writhe in pain! My heart pounds within me! I cannot be still. For I have heard the blast of enemy trumpets and the roar of their battle cries*" (Jeremiah 4:19).

It is for all these reasons that Jeremiah is often called "the weeping prophet" and "the prophet of the broken heart." The two books we have from Jeremiah in the Bible both focus on the destruction of Jerusalem. The book of Jeremiah predicts it, and the book of Lamentations looks back on it. Known as "the Book of Tears," Lamentations is a dirge, a funeral song written for the fallen city of Jerusalem.

Lamentations is a carefully-constructed, elaborate work. In Hebrew, the first four chapters in Lamentations are acrostic poems. Each verse in each chapter begins with a successive letter of the Hebrew alphabet. Chapter 3—our text this morning—has 66 verses rather than 22 because it is a triple acrostic: the first three verses begin with the equivalent of *A*, the next three with *B*, and so on.<sup>2</sup>

Throughout the poem, Jeremiah heaps metaphor upon metaphor, drawing images, as it were, from whatever realm imaginable in an effort to give voice to the agony he felt. Early on in the work, Jeremiah lamented, "*Does it mean nothing to you, all you who pass by? Look around and see if there is any suffering like mine, which the LORD brought on me when he erupted in fierce anger*" (Lamentations 1:12).

A similar expression of unspeakable grief came from one of the ambulance drivers who responded to the Sandy Hook massacre in Newtown, Connecticut in 2012:

"We don't train for something like this—nobody does. And my wife is a teacher at Sandy Hook. She knew all 20 children by name as well as the staff. . . . Here in Newtown, we go to the store and see memorials to the victims. We walk down the street and see markers on the porches of those who lost a child. *It's like a bell jar has been placed over the town, with all the oxygen pumped out. We can't breathe for the grief.*<sup>3</sup> That's what Jeremiah was trying to express, too.

Let me share a few more verses that illumine more of the trajectory of Jeremiah's mournful poem. After that I'll try to bring the whole thing closer to home:

1. "*If people crush underfoot all the prisoners of the land, if they deprive others of their rights in defiance of the Most High, if they twist justice in the courts—doesn't the Lord see all these things?*" (3:34-36).

<sup>2</sup> This was a typical form of Hebrew poetry. Other examples of acrostics are Psalms 37, 119, and 145, and Proverbs 31:10-31. In terms of content, Psalm 22 may be the closest to Lamentations.

<sup>3</sup> Philip Yancey, "National Tragedy and the Empty Tomb," *Christianity Today*, 3-28-13.

2. “[Judah] defiled herself with immorality with no thought of the punishment that would follow” (1:9).
3. “I begged my allies for help, but they betrayed me. My priests and leaders starved to death in the city, even as they searched for food to save their lives” (1:19).
4. “How the gold has lost its luster! Even the finest gold has become dull. The sacred gemstones lie scattered in the streets” (4:1).
5. “See them lying in the streets—young and old, boys and girls, killed by the swords of the enemy” (2:21).
6. “Joy has left our hearts; our dancing has turned to mourning. The garlands have fallen from our heads. Weep for us because we have sinned” (5:15-16).

Now let’s try those six statements again, not as they were written long ago, but as they might be written this week:

1. If a nation spends more time and money on locking people up than on developing strong families that don’t produce criminals, if the rich get “justice” while those with public defenders do not, doesn’t the Lord see these things?
2. If a nation disregards the guidance God has given for human life, whether at the personal, local, or national level, it’s absurd to think that God’s moral laws can be ignored without consequence.
3. When the consequences of such living begin to come due, appeals to other nations are futile, since they’ve all been doing the very same things, and every boat is sinking.
4. When people, families, and nations build their values and culture on greed, self-interest, and dishonesty, every goal they live for is certain to collapse, like castles built on sand.
5. While it may be that some of the false prophets of greed may themselves escape the consequences of their theft, it is certain that those consequences will fall on young families, on the retired, on those with fixed incomes, on their own children and on their children’s children.
6. Darkness has fallen. Our houses, our businesses, our investments, our leveraged assets are all “underwater.” The party’s over. All is lost.

Do you begin to get the feel of Lamentations?

There’s certainly still a place for prophets who call entire nations to repentance, as Martin Luther King, Jr. did fifty years ago; and God continues to call out leaders from time to time to “stand in the gap” for the nation (Ezekiel 22:30). You and I need to be serious about the business of praying for our leaders and for our nation, especially in such times as these, and we do well to be in frequent contact with those who represent us; but our most productive effort may lie in another direction. I want to highlight two things on which to focus our minds in such days as the ones in which we live.

The first thing of which I want to remind us is that **most of us experience dark times** in our lives, and some of those seasons are very dark, indeed. We may be cast into darkness by financial reversal, by the diagnosis of dread disease, by intractable pain, or by other causes without number. After their twenty-seven year-old son took his own life after a long struggle with mental illness, Kay Warren, wife of Pastor Rick Warren, offered these suggestions about how to walk with one another in the Darkness:

The truest friends and ‘helpers’ are those who wait for the griever to emerge from the darkness that swallowed them alive without growing afraid, anxious or impatient. They

don't pressure their friend to be the old familiar person they're used to; they're willing to accept that things are different, embrace the now-scarred one they love, and are confident that their compassionate, non-demanding presence is the surest expression of God's mercy to their suffering friend. They're okay with messy and slow and few answers . . . and they never say 'Move on.'<sup>4</sup>

Building on this, when Anne Graham Lotz, daughter of Billy and Ruth Graham, was seventeen, she was driving too fast down a winding mountain road near their home and ran into one of their neighbors, Mrs. Pickering. Anne was afraid to tell her father about the accident, so she spent the rest of the day avoiding him. When she finally came home, her father was waiting for her in the kitchen. Here's what happened next:

"I paused for what seemed a very long moment frozen in time. Then I ran to him and threw my arms around his neck. I told him about my wreck—how I'd driven too fast and smashed into the neighbor's car. I told him it wasn't her fault; it was all mine. As I wept on his shoulder, he said four things to me":

- "Anne, I knew all along about your wreck. Mrs. Pickering came straight up the mountain and told me—and I was just waiting for you to come and tell me yourself."
- "I love you."
- "We can fix the car."
- "You are going to be a better driver because of this."

Then Anne said, "Sooner or later, all of us are involved in some kind of wreck [auto or otherwise, and] it may be your own fault or someone else's. When the damage is your fault, there's a good chance you'll be confronted by the flashing blue lights of the morality police. But my father gave me a deeper understanding of what it means to experience the loving, forgiving embrace of my heavenly Father."<sup>5</sup>

The wonderful news about our Heavenly Father is that when we "crash and burn," when we are overcome by life's Darkness, He sends an ambulance, not a firing squad. And that's what Jeremiah finally affirmed in his lament. Hear those wonderful words once more:

*<sup>21</sup> Yet this I call to mind and therefore I have hope: <sup>22</sup> Because of the LORD's great love we are not consumed, for his compassions never fail. <sup>23</sup> They are new every morning; great is your faithfulness. <sup>24</sup> I say to myself, "The LORD is my portion; therefore I will wait for him. <sup>25</sup> The LORD is good to those whose hope is in him, to the one who seeks him; <sup>26</sup> it is good to wait quietly for the salvation of the LORD (Lamentations 3:21-26).*

The second thing I ask you to remember this morning is "**the LORD's great love.**" The word being translated as "great love" is a word that really means "**Covenant Love.**"<sup>6</sup> Last week we considered the major covenants of the Bible, ending with the New Covenant inaugurated by our Lord's Crucifixion and Resurrection.

Jeremiah lived in times much more difficult than ours currently are. As he continued his lament after the "Collapse of 586," wondering what it all meant and where it was all headed, he reaffirmed his faith in God, even in the midst of such absolute disaster.

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<sup>4</sup> Alex Murashko, "Kay Warren Says 'Don't Tell Grievors to Move On' as 1-Year Anniversary of Son's Suicide Approaches," *The Christian Post*, 3-16-14.

<sup>5</sup> Adapted from Anne Graham Lotz, *Wounded by God's People* (Zondervan, 2013), pp. 155-156.

<sup>6</sup> See also Exodus 34:6-7.

Jeremiah's contemporary, Habakkuk, expressed similar, nearly unbelievable, faith: "Even though the fig trees have no blossoms, and there are no grapes on the vine; even though the olive crop fails, and the fields lie empty and barren; even though the flocks die in the fields, and the cattle barns are empty, yet I will rejoice in the LORD! **I will be joyful** in the God of my salvation" (Habakkuk 3:17-18).

My friends, Jeremiah's Great Lament can remind us to walk gently with one another through life's "vales of tears" and "valleys of shadow." We all hurt somewhere, virus or no virus. And Jeremiah reminds us that God's faithful, covenant love for us embraces us always, whether we feel it or not:

*The LORD your God is with you.  
He is mighty to save.  
He will take great delight in you.  
He will comfort you with His love.  
He will rejoice over you with singing.*  
(Zephaniah 3:17).

Amen, and Amen.

# Hope beyond Despair

One: *<sup>1</sup> I am the [one] who has seen affliction by the rod of the LORD's wrath. <sup>2</sup> He has driven me away and made me walk in darkness rather than light; <sup>3</sup> indeed, he has turned his hand against me again and again, all day long (Lamentations 3:1-3).*

Many: ***<sup>4</sup> He has made my skin and my flesh grow old and has broken my bones. <sup>5</sup> He has besieged me and surrounded me with bitterness and hardship. <sup>6</sup> He has made me dwell in darkness like those long dead (Lamentations 3:4-6).***

One: *<sup>16</sup> He has broken my teeth with gravel; he has trampled me in the dust. <sup>17</sup> I have been deprived of peace; I have forgotten what prosperity is. <sup>18</sup> So I say, "My splendor is gone and all that I had hoped from the LORD" (Lamentations 3:16-18).*

Many: ***<sup>21</sup> Yet this I call to mind and therefore I have hope: <sup>22</sup> Because of the LORD's great love we are not consumed, for his compassions never fail. <sup>23</sup> They are new every morning; great is your faithfulness. <sup>24</sup> I say to myself, "The LORD is my portion; therefore I will wait for him" (Lamentations 3:21-24).***

One: *<sup>25</sup> The LORD is good to those whose hope is in him, to the one who seeks him; <sup>26</sup> it is good to wait quietly for the salvation of the LORD (Lamentations 3:25-26).*

Many: ***<sup>40</sup> Let us examine our ways and test them, and let us return to the LORD (Lamentations 3:40).***

One: The Word of God for the People of God.

Many: **Thanks be to God!**

