

God Has Not Forgotten You

Lamentations 3:49-26

Sermon preached by Charles C. Williamson

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There have been entirely too many times over these past few of months that Lee and I have found ourselves meeting with a family who is grieving the death of a loved one. Whenever we meet with a family under those difficult circumstances, we always ask them to share with us some of the special memories they have of this one who has died. And almost without fail, before long they are telling stories. These stories bring laughter, tears...and comfort. I have come to believe that this story-telling can have a healing effect on the family as they look back through their tears and remember those times when they have been aware of God's presence in their lives.

Memory...remembering...these play an important part in our faith life. For the Hebrew people, with their thousands of years of history, remembering their past helped to shape their faith for living in the present. They often recalled events of long ago as if they had happened yesterday.

That was certainly the case when they looked back the many years to when their ancestors were living in Egypt.

For the Hebrew people there had been a time when their life in Egypt had been good. They lived in peace; they had food to eat; they could worship as they wanted. They had babies and raised families; they were fruitful and multiplied. Life was good.

Unfortunately, it didn't last.

There came a pharaoh who saw the growing number of Hebrews living in Egypt as a threat, and decided the best way to deal with that threat was to make slaves of the Hebrews. So he forced them into hard, backbreaking labor. Under the demanding eye of Egyptian taskmasters, they built cities—Pithom and Rameses. The Jewish historian Josephus said that Hebrew slaves were used to help build the famous pyramids of Egypt. But this hard labor did not break the spirit of the Hebrews, so the pharaoh made things more difficult for them. The slavemasters became ruthless and cruel. They forced the Hebrews to make bricks without straw, trying to make their lives bitter with hard labor. Eventually, the pharaoh issued an order that all male children born to a Hebrew mother were to be put to death.

Their grief was unimaginable. Surely for those Hebrews living in slavery in Egypt, there were times that they wondered: where is God in all this? Has God had abandoned us?. Has God forgotten us?

But that time in Egypt was not the only time in the collective memory of the Hebrew people that they wondered if God had forgotten them.

This passage I read from the book of Lamentations came from another dark time in their history. With a name like "Lamentations" you don't expect it to be telling about happy times. These songs that make up the book of Lamentations were composed when the nation was under attack. First it had been the Assyrian army which had conquered the northern half of the country; and now it was the Babylonians. The army had surrounded the city of Jerusalem and laid siege to the city. For the Hebrews, trapped inside the city

walls, it was a hopeless situation. The Babylonians could simply wait them out, until their supplies of food and water ran out. It was a slow, agonizing way to lose a war, but that's what was happening. It was only a matter of time before the city fell and the people shipped off as exiles to Babylon.

How had things gone so wrong? They had once been a powerful and respected nation in that part of the world, but now everything had turned to dust.

As they looked over the walls at the waiting Babylonian army, they couldn't help but wonder: where is God in all this? Has God abandoned us? Has God forgotten us?

Now turn the page of the calendar another several hundred years. Here are Jesus and the disciples are seated around the table in the upper room. The mood is somber and serious. Jesus has told them that soon he would suffer and die. In an act of humility and service, he has washed their feet. He has spoken about the fact that one of them would betray him, and in shock one by one they ask, "Is it I?" This was to be their last meal together.

Try to imagine that you were one of the disciples seated there that night. Some three years earlier, this stranger had called you to follow him, and even though you weren't exactly sure why, you dropped what you were doing and followed. For the next three years your life was devoted to him—watching the way he showed love for all people, even those people that you thought weren't very loveable; listening as he talked about a loving God who cares for us so much that he's even numbered the very hairs on our heads. These three years with him had transformed your life: the things that previously you had thought were important weren't so important any more. And the things that you had once thought didn't really matter had become of utmost importance.

But now all that was coming to an end. Had it all been a waste? Had you given your life to nothing? Where's God in all this? Had God deserted you? Abandoned you? Had God forgotten you?

In the darkest times of our lives, we sometimes wonder if God has forgotten us.

In the middle of dark times, the writer of Lamentations says: "The thought of my affliction and my homelessness is wormwood and gall. My soul continually thinks of it and is bowed down within me." But then he remembers: "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 your faithfulness. "The Lord is my portion," says my soul, "therefore I will hope in him."

The Hebrew people, looking back on the dark days of their slavery in Egypt, remembered. They remembered that God did not abandon them in their distress, but God redeemed and delivered them, and brought them into the Promised Land, a land flowing with milk and honey. The steadfast love of the Lord never ceases.

The Hebrew people, looking back on that terrible time when they were defeated in war by the Babylonians and had to live in exile, remembered. They remembered that God did not abandon them, but brought them back home, and restored the land to them. God's mercies never come to an end.

And the disciples.... On that Sunday morning when the women went to the tomb to tend to the dead body of Jesus, they discovered that the tomb was empty, and they

were asked, “Why do you look for the living among the dead?” As that Easter Sunday morning dawned, it slowly dawned on them that God had not forgotten them...far from it. God was working through the risen, living Christ to bring hope and good news.

Yes, there have been many times in the lives of God’s people that we have wondered where is God in all this? Has God forgotten us?

But every time we have seen that God, who is faithful and merciful, is working God’s good will for us.

Now here we are gathered around Christ’s table. Many of us come to the table today carrying various burdens. For some of us the burdens seem pretty great, maybe even unbearable. And it’s easy for us to wonder, “Where is God in all this? Has God forgotten us?” Here at this table, we get the resounding answer: “No, God has not forgotten us. God is with us. God sent Jesus, the Son of God, to live and die and live again for us. “The Lord is my portion,” says my soul, “therefore I will hope in him.”

Come to this table, for here you receive God’s grace and mercy; here you find hope. Thanks be to God.✠