

SUMMER A3 - When God is Not What is Expected

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Date: 11 January 2015

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[0 : 00] Our friends, it's a long reading, why don't you stand and pray with me. Please stand. Let's pray.

Our Father, I pray that the words that I speak might now be from you. May you graft your word into our hearts and work in us so as to bring forth in us the fruit of good works.

And we pray this for the honour and praise of your name through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen. Please sit down. Another rather wrenching passage, isn't it?

But I'm going to start in a different place. It was a pivotal moment. The people of God had been rescued from slavery in Egypt by a series of spectacular signs. Wonders had been performed by God at the hand of God.

And they had marched through the Red Sea as though it were dry land. The sea had swallowed up Pharaoh's armies. And now they were at Mount Sinai. God had met with them.

[1 : 07] He had entered into covenant with them. They had pledged obedience to him in Exodus chapter 24. The elders had gone part way up the mountain and had actually seen God. And they'd eaten with him.

And then the glory of the Lord settled on the mountain. And it looked as though the whole mountain top was just going to be was just covered with a consuming fire. God beckoned Moses to come up further to him.

And Moses did. And he stayed there for 40 days and 40 nights receiving instructions from the Lord. And in Exodus 32, the people down the bottom of the mountain began to get fidgety.

They began to wonder if something had happened to Moses. He'd been gone a fair time by this time. They began to also wonder what had happened to God. So they asked Aaron, Moses' brother, to make them gods.

And what he said was, well, why don't you just pull all your gold ornaments? And he fashioned them, the gold, into an idol in the shape of a calf. And then he told the people that this is the God who brought them up out of Egypt.

[2 : 12] And they partied before him and worshipped him. He told them to build an altar. He announced this huge celebration. Meanwhile, up on top of the mountain, God tells Moses what is going on down the bottom.

He tells Moses that basically, well, what is happening is they've broken the first two commandments. While God is delivering the whole ten of them up the top of the mountain, they're breaking them down the bottom.

He says his inclination is to totally wipe them out in his anger and then push on ahead just with Moses himself. Moses is horrified and he intercedes.

And he begs God to turn away his anger. He urges him to repent, to relent, as it were, and to remember the covenant he made with Abraham, Isaac and Jacob.

And phenomenally, God listens. He relents from wiping out the people. He even agrees that he'll send an angel. Eventually, he agrees that he'll send an angel to guide and protect the people.

- [3 : 14] But he also warns that he'll punish the people for their sin. And in chapter 33, Moses asks God to reveal himself to him. And God agrees to that as well.

And it happens in Exodus 34, a landmark passage in the book of Exodus. God passes before Moses. And as he does, he proclaims his nature with these very famous words.

The Lord passed before him and proclaimed, the Lord, the Lord, a God merciful and gracious, slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love and faithfulness.

Keeping steadfast love to a thousand generations. Forgiving iniquity. Actually, the word generations is not there, but it is in Deuteronomy. It's implied, I think, here in Exodus.

Forgiving iniquity and transgression and sin, yet by no means clearing the guilty, but visiting the iniquity of the parents upon the children and children's children to the third and the fourth generation.

- [4 : 15] So God's steadfast love is a thousand times more than the three or four times that he might not forgive. That is, he might punish sin.

By the way, I want to just repeat it using the special Hebrew word that is used in this declaration. The Lord passed before Moses and proclaimed, the Lord, the Lord, a God merciful and gracious, slow to anger and abounding in *chesed* and faithfulness.

Keeping *chesed* to the thousandth generation. That word is God's, is totally surprising, unexpected, overwhelming, unobligated love and kindness.

It is a special word that Israel then used of God. So, I want you to look up your, your Bibles at these verses.

Have a look at Exodus 34, 6 and 7. And I want you to allow these words to imprint themselves on your memory. So Exodus 34, someone got a page number they can yell out to me?

- [5 : 25] 90, page 90. I want you to look at them and notice what they say. You see, these verses capture the nature of God as seen in the incident of the golden calf.

And look closely at what they say. First of all, you'll see that they use that special name for God, the Lord or Yahweh. We think that's how it's pronounced, but they didn't pronounce it for a long while because they were scared of misusing it.

So we don't exactly know that that's the way it was pronounced, but let's say Yahweh is the closest we think we can get to it. So that's the first thing. They use the special name of Yahweh. The second, they tell us that this Lord, Yahweh, is merciful.

He's gracious. He's slow to anger. He's abounding in *chesed* and faithfulness. He is someone who forgives iniquity and transgression and sin. Oh, he does punish sin. But notice the contrast that I pointed out earlier.

He shows love or *chesed* to thousands of generations. His judgment on sin is restricted to just a few. Can you hear what God is saying about himself?

- [6 : 27] His nature is overwhelmingly on the side of love, mercy, forgiveness. He may punish sin. His judgment, though, is his strange work, as Isaiah calls it.

He must do it because he is just. If there's a way out of it, he will take it. After all, his nature is to have mercy and to exercise steadfast love. God's people here in Exodus know this because they have just experienced it because God has turned away his wrath from them.

He has relented concerning disaster. He's allowed himself to go. He has said he will go with them, though they don't deserve it. He had every right to utterly destroy them.

And they had broken covenant. He had right to walk away from it. But he didn't. He relented concerning judgment. Friends, this story and this statement about God that are contained in Exodus 32 to 34 shaped Israel's understanding of God.

Time and time again in the Old Testament, they quote this statement in Exodus 34 or the story or they allude to it and they hang on to it.

[7 : 35] They rely on it. But they did even more than that. They began to be complacent on the basis of it. They began to think and act as though the second half of the statement about God did not exist, that he didn't punish sin to the second and third generation.

They began to think as though God would always relent as he had done back there in Exodus 32 to 33. He would never punish them. But God had been clear here in this passage.

He would punish. And eventually he did. Eventually, though, he relented again and again and again and again. He did raise up the foreign nation. He promised in you might remember in Deuteronomy that we looked at.

And that foreign nation, as we saw, invaded God's land and destroyed God's city and desecrated God's temple and dethroned God's king. Psalm 89 talks about throwing the crown of God's king to the dust.

There was no relenting or turning back. And it devastated God's people. And the people of God began to wonder if God had perhaps forgotten the first half of Exodus 34, 6 to 7.

[8 : 41] Whether he'd got a bit unbalanced, as it were. It looked as though he'd done what he threatened to do in Exodus 32, but relented of. And Lamentations explores this whole concept, this notion, this idea.

So let's turn to Lamentations 3 and see what we learn from the prophet. Now, I'm going to take a quick run through it to summarize it for us. I like to give you the big picture so you can go and then look at the details and work it all out.

But before we do this, I want you to notice some special details and things. Some are hidden from English readers. For example, do you remember how many letters I told you there were in the Hebrew alphabet?

22. And do you remember that that's structured a few of the chapters? They were structured around this alphabet. There are 22 verses or multiples of it. Chapters 1, 2 and 4 have each verse starting with consecutive verses of the alphabet.

But check out how many verses there are in this chapter. A long reading, wasn't it? 66 verses. In other words, 3 times 22. Now, the way this functions is in this way.

[9 : 49] The Hebrew equivalent of A has 3 verses associated with it. The Hebrew equivalent of B has 3 verses associated with it. And so on until we traverse 3 by 22, 66 verses.

But there's more. Each verse has two lines in it. And the first line has three words or accents in the first line in it. And then two in the second.

So, as you can see, putting things into 3 is very special about this chapter. Why? I'm not exactly sure, but it is. There is the emphasis. There's an emphasis on 3s.

The next thing I want you to notice, the next special thing about this chapter, is the strong start with the word I. Did you hear it as we read it out? The word I goes from verse 1 through to verse 24.

It drops out in little places, but nevertheless, it's dominated by I. And the I changes to we in verse 22 and also in verses 40 to 47.

[10 : 48] However, back in verses 48 to 66, we return to we again. I think this is used to bind together the prophet represented by I and the people represented by we.

And what the prophet is saying or what the writer is saying is that the prophet stands as one with the people, united with them. He represents them and they epitomize him.

We've already observed this thing, haven't we, in chapters 1 and 2. Here it is again, but it's much darker this time. In one sense, the prophet here, I think, is a forerunner of the great prophet Jesus who suffers in the place of his people.

So this prophet stands in the place of the people, speaks their words for them. Here's the word of God, as it were. Here's what God is going to do back to him.

He goes through their horror. He experiences their grief. He suffers for them and in their place. So that's some special things to be aware of. Now let's get back to the chapter itself.

[11 : 50] Perhaps you remember the previous chapters. As we've gone through the book, we've already had something of a transition, haven't we? You might remember how the poet started out, or the prophet, started out in chapter 1 with being an observer of the grief of his people.

By the end of chapter 2, he's fellow complainer with the people. Now a further transition occurs. Now he steps forward. As representative Israelite, he lets us into his own personal grief.

He gives us his own personal reflection on it. And we become observers as he focuses on his own grief. He puts it right out there in the public domain for us. He exposes us to it for many, many, many verses, nearly 40.

Let's see what he's got to say. First, I want you to observe the references to he. There is a he who has acted upon him. This he has driven me away.

Verse 2. Made me walk in darkness rather than light. Verse 2. Turned his hand against me again and again all day long.

[13 : 03] Verse 3. Made my skin and flesh grow old. Verse 4. Broken my bones. Verse 4. Besieged and surrounded me with bitterness and hardship.

Verse 5. Made me dwell in darkness like those long dead. Verse 5. Verse 6. Walled me in so that I cannot escape.

Verse 7. Weighed me down in chains. Verse 7. Barred my way like with blocks of stone. Verse 9. Made my paths crooked.

Verse 9. Been like a bear lying in wait or a lion in hiding. Verse 10. Dragged me from the path. Mangled me and left me without help.

Verse 11. Drawn his bow and made me the target of his arrows. Verse 12. Pierced my heart with arrows. Verse 13. Filled me with bitter herbs and given me gall to drink.

[14 : 01] Verse 15. Broken my teeth with gravel. Verse 16. Trampled me in the dust. They're very strong words. You know the teeth in gravel trampled me in the dust is sort of what happens when a person falls face down.

And you walk on their head. It's very rough language. Now as we read him pour out his grief. We know who the he is don't we?

We know who the he is. But the he who mistreats the prophet is not named by the prophet. But then in verse 18 he is named.

The he who's done the persecuting. We find out is God. And in fact it's not just any God. It's Yahweh. The Lord. It's the Lord. You can see the name there.

Named in Exodus 34. The same one that we heard about from Exodus 34. And this Lord. This Yahweh. Has driven him to hopelessness. Look at verse 18. My splendor is gone.

[15 : 04] And all that I had hoped from Yahweh. You see he'd been led to expect. That Yahweh. Would not treat him this way.

Now look at verse 19. There's a change in the poet. Now I can't help thinking that the change is brought about by the mention of the Lord's special name. And you know what I discovered this afternoon.

Just putting the finishing touches on this. We get in the Hebrew alphabet. At this verse. To the letter that starts the word kesed.

And guess what the first letter. What the first word is in this verse. Let me show you what I mean. First he tells us he remembers his affliction. 19 and 20. Then he tells us that he moves on to make a decision to change.

In verse 20. He remembers the things of the preceding verses. But look at verse 21. He tells them that he calls to mind something that appears to be different. Let me tell you what the different thing is.

[16:08] The very next word that appears at the beginning of the very next verse is. Kesed. God's steadfast love.

The core of God's revelation of himself. Back in Exodus 34. That is what he calls to mind. He calls to mind God's overwhelming steadfast love.

He calls to mind something specific. And that specific thing changes everything. Can you see what he calls to mind? I think it's the this recounted.

First Hebrew word is that Hebrew word that's translated steadfast love. Kesed. The very same word used of God's steadfast love in Exodus 34. It is the word in the Old Testament used to describe God's character.

It means God's surprising, as I said, undeserved, unobligated, overwhelming kindness and love. And it's clear that the prophet has Yahweh's revelation to Moses in Exodus 34 in mind.

[17:12] And you can see this by the fact that in 22 and 23, he repeats a number of the other words that are used in Exodus 34. He talks about God's love, his compassions, his faithfulness.

I wonder if you can see what's going on. You see, the prophet's focus has shifted. He has, for a moment, taken his eyes off suffering. And he's refocused on what he knows of God to be true.

He's done what I suggested on Wednesday that we should do. He has gone to the things he knows to be sure. He has called into mind God's character revealed in the Exodus.

And he perceives that what he has experienced at the hand of God is his strange work, his alien work. He reminds himself that at the core of God's existence is his disposition.

Not to do judgment. That's a foreign work. At the core of his disposition is to do chesed. To do love. To do kindness.

[18:14] To do mercy. He is the Lord, the Lord, the gracious and compassionate God, slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love and faithfulness. Here's Yahweh, Yahweh. A God merciful and gracious, slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love and faithfulness.

Friends, our prophet has just rehearsed and grieved over one of the bleakest moments in the history of God's people. And perhaps the bleakest.

And yet because of God's revelation of himself in Exodus. Our prophet slash poet is confident that Yahweh, Yahweh, a God merciful and gracious, slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love and faithfulness will rise to the surface even here.

In exile. In exile. Because God cannot go against his character, friends. Mercy, compassion and steadfast love will triumph over judgment.

It will. It must. For this is God's inclination. These things are at the center of his character and nature. This is what he does.

[19 : 30] They may have pushed him to the limit as it were and they may have over relied on it. But even here after he's punished. The prophet knows. It will overwhelm again.

And God will forgive. But we're not finished with this. This prophecy, this poem yet. Let's move on. See what the poet has to say. You can see from verses 24 to 27 that he has moved on in his thinking now.

What he recalled in verses 22 and 23 has enabled him to have a new look at things, a new perspective. He knows what God is like at the core of his being. He knows what he that he is is for his people.

And so now he can hope and wait. Eventually, he knows God will be the God of Exodus 34, 6 to 7. Listen to verses 31 and 33.

Look at them with me. For no one is cast off by Yahweh forever. Though he brings grief, he will show compassion. So great is his unfailing love.

[20 : 35] For he does not willingly bring affliction or grief to anyone. Let alone his people, as it were. By the way, that last word in chapter 30, in verse 32, unfailing love, you guessed it.

Kesed. It's that word that we've come across time and time again. So the prophet has rallied, you see, because of Exodus 34. However, despite the fact that he's moved on, we're still not there yet, are we?

No, there is one more thing to be dealt with. You see, if we've just listened to the poet in verses 1 to 18 without listening to the rest of the book, we might have thought that he was describing undeserved punishment.

But look at verses 38 and 39 and 42. The poet acknowledges the presence of sin. He asks why the living should complain when punished for their sins.

He notes the presence of sin. He does it again in verse 34. And he then observes that suffering is not undeserved. And so now that he's confessed his sin, another transition in his poem can occur.

[21 : 44] The poet has expressed his partnership with the people in their suffering. He's shown that both he and they can hope in God's love. He's expressed partnership with the people in their sin.

He earlier had said he's a sinner as well. And so now he can urge them to turn to God whose nature is to love and forgive. Look at 40 to 42. Let us examine our ways and test them.

And let us return to the Lord. Let us lift up our hearts and our hands to God in heaven and say, We have sinned and rebelled and you have not forgiven.

Now the rest of the poem proceeds in the same way as it did in the first half with one exception. In the first half, the focus was on the poet himself, one individual.

In the second half, the focus is on the people with the poet as one of them. There's a lament that God has seemed to act contrary to expectation. That is, he didn't forgive as he was expected to.

[22 : 41] But then there's a change of mood from despair to hope. And then there's confidence that God is indeed for his people. And verses 55 to 60 make clear that God has heard the cry of his people.

He's taken up their cause. Look at these verses with me and just soak them in. I called on your name, Lord, from the depths of the pit. You heard my plea.

Do not close your ears to my cry for relief. You came near when I called you and you said, Do not fear. You, Lord, took up my case and you redeemed my life.

Lord, you have seen the wrong done to me. Uphold my cause. You have seen the depth of their vengeance and all their plots against me. friends a very very significant thing has happened in this chapter on wednesday night we saw god's people view god as their enemy he they thought he was decidedly against them and the prophet took that up in chapter 3 verses 1 to 11 now the poet has turned things around you see god may have seemed to have been against them for the reality of his character but the reality of his character and his disposition is that in fact he is for his people not against them and that is what will eventually triumph and god's people can be sure of this because god's nature is still to have mercy he is the god of exodus 34 friends let's see what we can learn from this for us i wonder if you can see the central theological point of this passage can you hear what the poet prophet is telling us can you hear what god is telling us through this god is telling us that there will be times in our personal lives when god is not what we expect him to be or perhaps better not who we expect him to be there will be times in our corporate lives when god is not who we expect him to be and it may be as it is here that is it may be that god is expressing his strange work of judgment in our lives or it may be as in the book of job that we are experiencing suffering that is entirely undeserved but when such things occur where do we go where should we run to whom should we turn well a poet here tells us we should run to god we should turn to what we know to be true of god and we should go back to the certainties we know about god and we should speak to god about it it's these certainties that we know about god that will give us hope and confidence in our darkest hours and we can know you see that while we trust in god his judgment can never be the last word we hear from him we who know the cross know that judgment in relation to us can never be the last word that we hear from him that will only happen should we desert him those who hope in him will eventually find him to be no longer against them but will experience him being for them now i want you to think about yourself for a moment or us to think think about ourselves you see we're not old testament people so what's our spiritual equivalent to exodus 34 if they kept going back to this one place in history and if you read the psalms the more you read the psalms the more you read your old testament the more you find israel going back to exodus 34 so what's the spiritual equivalent of exodus 34 where do we go when things are not as we would expect them to be and when god is not who we would expect him to be well the new testament's very clear isn't it we go back to the cross and we stand at the base of it and we look up to it and we see what is done there we reflect on what we see there and there we see that we were rebels against god we were sinners and we deserve judgment but god relented from sending judgment he turned his anger away from us and in overwhelming and surprising love he forgave us unobligated undeserved unearned total gift he turned away his anger from us in overwhelming and surprising love he forgave us and this assures us that there's a future

there is a hope you see god cannot in the end be against us his children he is for us after all if he gave up his son he will not withhold anything good from us any present badness friends cannot triumph god is for us he overwhelmingly loves us we know this because of the cross and listen to paul make exactly the same point in romans 8 why don't you turn with me to this magnificent passage romans 8 22 and i don't have a page number but you go past the gospels then acts and you get to romans you'll be all right page number anyone 1134 look at it romans 8 22 we know that the whole creation has been groaning as in the pains of childbirth right up to the present time not only so but we ourselves who have the first fruits of the spirit grown inwardly as we wait eagerly for our adoption to sonship the redemption of our bodies for in this hope we were saved but hope that is seen is not hope at all who hopes for what they already have but if we hope for what we do not have yet have we wait for it patiently and then down to verse 31 what then shall we say in response to these things if god is for us who can be against us he who did not spare his own son but gave him up for us all how will he not also along with him graciously give us all things who will bring a charge against those whom god has chosen it is god who justifies who then is the one who condemns no one christ jesus who died more than that who was raised to life is at the right hand of god and is also interceding for us who then shall separate us from the love of god in christ from the love of christ shall trouble or hardship or persecution or famine or nakedness or danger or the sword as it is written for your sake we face death all day long we are considered a sheep to be slaughtered no no in all these things we are more than conquerors through him who loved us friends we need to learn from lamentations three in our darkest hour we need to return to known truths about god we need to come those truths need to come to us when nothing looks possible in our worst adversity when there looks as though there is no hope no sun on any distant horizon when comfort and comforters are lacking when friends and counselors have nothing to say and have run out of words when hope seems empty god does offer a sure word of hope and it's a word of his love pronounced on the cross and it does the friends it does not answer the questions we have about our situation it doesn't come to us when we think god has deserted us that is it does come to us when sometimes we think god has deserted us and and it can come to us in that in that situation it doesn't answer all the it doesn't give all answers to everything it doesn't say well this is happening because of that but it does offer a true hope that will never give way it does offer us if i can put it a place of shade in the fierce heat of suffering when everything seems as though there is no place to run and that shade is the knowledge that our lord is the god of love and he is faithful and he's gracious and he's full of compassion

[31 : 28] and friends i want to say that to you to some of you here tonight that you know i know just because we've got this many people here that there are some of you who think that there is no shade to run to at the moment inevitably in a group like this there'll be people like that there is no place to go and that god has not treated you as you think he should well i want to tell you that our god is faithful he is gracious he is full of compassion he is all that he is on the cross he's the god and father of our lord jesus christ and he is overwhelming in his compassion and kindness and when you grasp that then even if you can only just bleed it out you can say with paul no no in all these things we are more than conquerors through him who loved us for we are convinced that neither death nor life nor angels nor demons nor the present nor the future nor any powers nor height nor depth nor anything in all creation will be able to separate us from the love of god that is in christ jesus our lord let's pray our father we thank you that in the cross we know that you love us father you know that at times in our life we have doubted that that some of us may even now be doubting it father we pray that you would help us to fly find shade in the fierce heat of suffering when overwhelmed by it either now or in the future may we come running to you with the knowledge that you are the god of love the god we see in the death of your son the god we know we pray because you have raised us from the darkness of death and seated us with you in the heavenly places the god we know is faithful and gracious and full of compassion for you are the god and father of our lord jesus christ please help us father to remind ourselves of these things as your ancient people reminded themselves of these things and father we pray this in the name of jesus amen uh friends i do just want to say one more thing which i i know i've said before but i'll say it again that is but did you notice that the prophet doesn't not say it he says it to god if god makes no sense he says it to god he says i don't understand and it's okay don't put your head in the sand as it were put your head up and talk to god about it and then go to the place where he says to put your feet firmly and that is to put your feet firmly on all that he has given us in jesus and through jesus and stand on that as though there's no other place to go now there's opportunity for you to ask questions if you'd like to if you do loud voice though so the question is uh god um in exodus 34 it says you know god shows uh his mercy to thousands of generations compared to three to four generations uh is that um literally true or is it you know

more metaphorical or whatever i i think it is metaphorical it's it's to show that um like the thousand generations is not restrictive but it's to say that the comparison is so overwhelming it's beyond comparison i think that's what's being meant and i think israel relies upon that you see it relies upon the fact that sure you know he might punish us but his overwhelming disposition is going to be to forgive us um uh i'm not sure it's in scripture but certainly in the prayer book where it says that his mercy triumphs over judgment i think that's what it's saying overwhelmingly triumphs would be perhaps better um it's it's it's just where all the weight lies yeah so i think that's my best response is to try and capture the incomprehensiveness of god's mercy and kindness yep thank you any other questions comments oh good well let me tell you what we're doing in the next two studies so you've got a feel for it we're going to try and wrap up laments itself uh on wednesday i think this is what we're going to do we'll see how we go in my preparation so it's going i'm going to try and cover chapters uh four and five wednesday night that's uh that's at uh 7 45 um and then on sunday night i'm going to try and take a big look we've done some of this as we've gone along and this is why i'm a bit flexible about what i'm going to do um i thought what we'd try and do is see just the significance of laments for christian faith um i do think it's very significant um it shows us lots of theological things that uh and practical things and so i i thought i'd try and put them all together in one place for next sunday night so hopefully that will be helpful for you i think there's lots of pastoral things lots of theological things lots of practical everyday things that we'll learn uh that we should have learned as christians from this and i think if i could put them in one package for you on the last night that would uh that would probably help not only that it's what the advertising says i'll be doing next sunday night so