

Surprised by Grace

Text: Lamentations 3:22-26

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Transcription of the spoken sermon

The steadfast love of the Lord never ceases, his mercies never come to an end; they are new every morning; great is thy faithfulness... It is good that one should wait quietly for the salvation of the Lord. Lamentations 3:22-26

Sometimes a light surprises the Christian while he sings;
It is the Lord, who rises with healing in His wings:
When comforts are declining, He grants the soul again
A season of clear shining, to cheer it after rain.

William Cowper has captured the theme of this message beautifully in these lines. He lived from 1731 to 1800 and was England's most honored poet between Pope and Shelley. He was a frail child and very sensitive. His mother died when he was a child of six and near the end of his life he remarked there had never been a day when he had not mourned her death. His father sent him to law school, but the prospect of appearing for his final exam so frightened him that he suffered a mental breakdown and even attempted suicide. For 18 months he was placed in an insane asylum. He found a personal relationship with Jesus Christ through reading Romans. Having recovered, he was befriended by the family of a clergyman, Morly Urwin, and when Urwin died, John Newton, the converted slave trader become Anglican pastor and author of "Amazing Grace," invited Cowper to come to Olney, England, Newton's parish. For the last two decades of Cowper's life, he was a close personal friend of Newton. With Newton, Cowper cooperated in producing *Olney Hymns*, a collection of 349 hymns.

Cowper's own personal experience finds expression not only in the hymn cited above but, for example, in "O For a Closer Walk With God."

Return, O Holy Dove, return,
Sweet messenger of rest!
I hate the sins that made thee mourn
And drove thee from my breast.

And in "God Moves In A Mysterious Way."

Ye fearful saints, fresh courage take;
The clouds ye so much dread
Are big with mercy, and shall break
In blessings on your head.

In a word, the one who trusts in the good and gracious God is not spared the troubles and anguish common to humankind; the child of God, however, knows more than the awful darkness; *the child of God also knows what it is to be surprised by grace.*

Sometimes a light surprises a Christian while he sings – or prays, or reflects on the past mercies of God. And the light which scatters the darkness ushers in "a season of clear shining." The experience is one of sheer grace; it comes in the wake of an anguish and despair which seemed beyond resolution; it comes when one has lost all hope and cannot imagine that things will ever come right, that one's heart will ever be mended, that one will ever again know joy and rejoicing.

Unpredictably, unexpectedly, light returns, the woundedness heals and grace is experienced. God intervenes; one is assured anew of a mercy that never fails and a steadfast love that never wavers and a faithfulness that remains rocklike.

So to experience grace is to find life transformed, reality transformed. One moves from disarray, disorientation to new orientation and all one can do is praise God out of a heart saturated with gratitude.

In our study of the Psalms we have traced the rhythm of human experience that is never static but rather dynamic, in motion.

Sometimes life is experienced as harmonious and well-ordered. Meaning is secure and purpose in life clear. One trusts in the wise and gracious rule of the Sovereign Creator. But sometimes the roof collapses, the bottom drops out and order turns to chaos. The dark night of the soul knows only anguish - and as noted in our study of Psalm 88, the darkness sometimes settles in with no relief, no resolution.

But, thank God, in our common human experience there more often follows a scattering of the darkness, a burst of light, the promise of joy and a new orientation – the surprise of grace.

The Psalms are a mirror of Israel's spiritual experience; they are a portrait of the way life is for us all. Life is lived not so much in one state or the other, but in the dynamic movement from orientation through disorientation to new orientation.

That is the way life is and the Bible is a very honest book and the Old Testament a very wholesome portrayal of human experience before the face of God.

This message celebrates the surprising grace of God that effects healing and wholeness, the grace that is not at our disposal, not ours to control or manipulate, not predictable or expected – the grace which is the intervention of the faithful God Who comes to us out of the darkness, Who meets us in the darkness, Who transforms the darkness into light.

Although we have been tracing this pattern in the Psalms, and there are many examples of the surprise of grace in the Psalms, I have chosen my text from the Book of Lamentations. The whole book is poetry, five poems, elegies that give expression to the deep anguish of the people of God over the devastation of Jerusalem through the destruction ordered by the Babylonian King Nebuchadnezzar after the siege of 587 was successful and the Holy City was finally taken. The walls were torn down, the Temple burned, the best of the citizenry taken away and the city left a smoldering shambles. The situation, the historical context out of which this grief pours, is given in the book of II Kings 25:8-12:

In the fifth month, on the seventh day of the month, in the nineteenth year of King Nebuchadnezzar, king of Babylon - Nebuzaradan, captain of the guard, an official of the king of Babylon, entered Jerusalem. He burned down the house of Yahweh, and the King's house; and all the houses in Jerusalem, including every great man's house, he set on fire and burned. The whole army of the Chaldeans tore down the walls of Jerusalem, all around... The rest of the people who were left in the city, and those who had deserted to the King of Babylon, and the rest of the populace, Nebuzaradan, captain of the guard, took to Babylon as prisoners. The captain of the guard left only some of the poorest in the country to tend the vines and farm the land.

Lamentations supplies the meaning of this historical data. As one commentator says,

It is first of all a recital of the horrors and atrocities that came during the long siege and its aftermath, but beyond the tale of physical suffering it tells of the spiritual significance of the fall of the city. For the ancient people chosen by Yahweh it meant the destruction of every cherished symbol of their election by God. In line after line the poet recalls all the precious, sacred things which had been lost or shattered: the city itself, once "The perfection of beauty, the joy of the whole earth;" the city walls and towers, once the outward sign that "God is in the midst of her," the King, "The anointed of Yahweh, the breath of our nostrils"; the priests, and with them all festive and solemn worship; the prophets, and with them all visions and the living word of God; the land itself, Israel's "inheritance" from Yahweh, now turned over to strangers; the people - dead, exiled, or

slaves in their own land. Every sign that had once provided assurance and confidence in God was gone. (Anchor Bible, *Lamentations*, p. XV)

To the survivors these poems in Lamentations served as a means by which to bring to expression an almost inexpressible sorrow. Their grief was deep - beyond words; yet these words gave vent to the anguish and as we noted last week, when in the darkness, it is so important to bring to expression the anguish - to bring it into the presence of God Who is experienced as absent, yet present in the absence.

So much for the historical context and the deep spiritual malaise the events of 587 created in the experience of Judah. *What we are focusing on in this message is not the darkness which provides the backdrop, but rather the surprise of grace, the return of hope.* From near total despair, the person described by the poet wins through to confidence that God's mercy is not at an end and that his steadfast love will not fail nor his faithfulness falter.

In chapter 3, the first 16 verses portray vividly the terrible suffering the person has experienced; verses 17-20 describe the resulting despair and then, in an amazing turnabout, verses 21-25 speak of renewed hope that rises from the remembrance of the mercy of God.

In verses 1-16 the author is saying, "This is what any human being may be called to endure." Verses 17-21 are a transitional bridge which portray the despair and despondency which results from the onslaught of suffering. But even in the darkness of despair, the one who trusts in God will wait.

With verse 22 we have the breakthrough, the surprise of grace. And the surprise of grace is a renewed sense of the mercy or the steadfast love of the Lord. The Hebrew word is *hesid*, "steadfast love" or "loyal love" or "mercy."

The remembrance of the steadfast love of the Lord is the basis for renewed hope. *Hesid* describes God's faithful and merciful love which is promised and may thus be expected even when there is no tangible sign of its presence. *Hesid* speaks of more than an emotion; it is the loving and merciful action of God which transforms reality.

In the darkest hour Israel remembered the steadfast love, the mercy of God. The reality of the God of covenant grace returned to flood the soul of the sufferer; he was surprised by grace and found his hope renewed; he found the grace to wait patiently for the salvation of God. To his surprise, a new and unexpected possibility shows itself. God's mercy is not at an end; God's compassion will not fail. He breaks forth in exclamatory praise, "Great is Thy faithfulness." In the wake of the new realization there is amazement, joy, gratitude and praise.

This is an expression of biblical faith at its heart, at its most profound depths. It rests on the sure mercy, the steadfast love of the faithful God. It was when the

grief had been brought to speech in the presence of God, that the writer was no longer mesmerized by the darkness but once again remembered the true nature of the Covenant God. Suddenly a light surprised him and that light was a prelude to a season of clear shining. This mercy of God was not spent, exhausted; rather, embracing the darkness and permeating the darkness was that mercy which was new every morning. Now the sense of the faithfulness of God returns and hope once again floods the soul.

In human experience we find that there are periods of anguish but we find, too, that there is a grace that comes to us from beyond ourselves, that effects healing in the midst of brokenness and creates hope in the most desolate human situations.

The movie, "Choices of the Heart," was rerun on TV last week. It is the story of Jean Donovan, one of the four women brutally slain in El Salvador a few years ago. She was narrating her experience showing the terrible poverty, the violence and fear that stalked the lives of the people. But she pointed to the children in tattered rags, playing in the dusty rubble of their poor neighborhood and remarked how amazingly they lived with hope. "They know," she said, "the roses will bloom again."

It seems that hope thrives best in the darkness awaiting the light. And it is true - there is a positive, healing power that gives buoyancy to the human heart even in the darkness.

I re-read M. Scott Peck's *The Road Less Traveled*, remembering his discussion of grace which he defines as a powerful force originating outside of human consciousness which nurtures the spiritual growth of human beings. As a medical person trained in the natural sciences, he witnesses to a miraculous power which cannot be located as to origin or source nor explained in any scientific fashion, but which he has, nonetheless, experienced for himself and as operative in the patients he has dealt with in his psychiatric practice. He is ready, for himself, to identify the source of grace as God.

This, of course, is precisely the witness of the Scriptures. It is not simply that there is a force that is on our side; it is that there is a gracious God Who is for us. It is not that the darkness is not threatening, that the anguish is not real; it is that there is One Who invades the darkness and by the transformation of grace changes the reality of our situation. It is not simply that time heals all wounds; it is that God graciously heals us and brings us toward wholeness, just when it seemed all hope was gone.

In the previous message I found the epitome of the experience of Psalm 88 in the crucifixion of Jesus who cried out, "My God, why...?" and died in darkness, alone. Within the framework of history there was, neither for the psalmist nor for Jesus, a resolution. But, we can move beyond history now to the ultimate word, the event of Easter morning. God raised Jesus from the dead. That is the last word, a

word far too good to limit to Easter. Each Lord's Day is an Easter celebration, a celebration of the bedrock of our confidence; our trust is in the God Who transforms reality, the God Who raises the dead.

Sometimes we marvel at the resiliency, the buoyancy, the toughness of the human spirit. It is really amazing and awesome. But that is not so much a characteristic of the human spirit; it is a testimony to the steadfast love of the Lord Whose compassion never fails, Whose mercy is new every morning, Who is great in His faithfulness.

Sometimes hope is almost gone. Sometimes despair completely overwhelms. What then?

Wait.

Why?

Because,

The Lord is good to those who look for Him, to all who seek Him; It is good to wait in patience and sigh for the deliverance by the Lord.

Again, that Hebrew word, "wait," can also be translated "hope," or "wait with expectation," because His mercy is not over.

Sometimes a light surprises;
Sometimes we are given "a season of clear shining;"
Sometimes we are surprised by grace because God is good and gracious.

He is our God.