

A Heart That Does Not Afflict Willingly

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Bible Text: Lamentations 3:33
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We turn in God's holy word to Lamentations 3. Right after Jeremiah, referred to as the Lamentations of Jeremiah. We read the whole chapter of Lamentations 3 and the text is verse 33. But first, we read the whole chapter.

1 I am the man that hath seen affliction by the rod of his wrath. 2 He hath led me, and brought me into darkness, but not into light. 3 Surely against me is he turned; he turneth his hand against me all the day. 4 My flesh and my skin hath he made old; he hath broken my bones. 5 He hath builded against me, and compassed me with gall and travail. 6 He hath set me in dark places, as they that be dead of old. 7 He hath hedged me about, that I cannot get out: he hath made my chain heavy. 8 Also when I cry and shout, he shutteth out my prayer. 9 He hath inclosed my ways with hewn stone, he hath made my paths crooked. 10 He was unto me as a bear lying in wait, and as a lion in secret places. 11 He hath turned aside my ways, and pulled me in pieces: he hath made me desolate. 12 He hath bent his bow, and set me as a mark for the arrow. 13 He hath caused the arrows of his quiver to enter into my reins. 14 I was a derision to all my people; and their song all the day. 15 He hath filled me with bitterness, he hath made me drunken with wormwood. 16 He hath also broken my teeth with gravel stones, he hath covered me with ashes. 17 And thou hast removed my soul far off from peace: I forgot prosperity. 18 And I said, My strength and my hope is perished from the LORD: 19 Remembering mine affliction and my misery, the wormwood and the gall. 20 My soul hath them still in remembrance, and is humbled in me. 21 This I recall to my mind, therefore have I hope.

Now the next part.

22 It is of the LORD'S mercies that we are not consumed, because his compassions fail not. 23 They are new every morning: great is thy faithfulness. 24 The LORD is my portion, saith my soul; therefore will I hope in him. 25 The LORD is good unto them that wait for him, to the soul that seeketh him. 26 It is good that a man should both hope and quietly wait for the salvation of the LORD. 27 It is good for a man that he

bear the yoke in his youth. 28 He sitteth alone and keepeth silence, because he hath borne it upon him. 29 He putteth his mouth in the dust; if so be there may be hope. 30 He giveth his cheek to him that smiteth him: he is filled full with reproach. 31 For the Lord will not cast off for ever: 32 But though he cause grief, yet will he have compassion according to the multitude of his mercies. 33 For he doth not afflict willingly nor grieve the children of men. 34 To crush under his feet all the prisoners of the earth, 35 To turn aside the right of a man before the face of the most High, 36 To subvert a man in his cause, the Lord approveth not. 37 Who is he that saith, and it cometh to pass, when the Lord commandeth it not? 38 Out of the mouth of the most High proceedeth not evil and good? 39 Wherefore doth a living man complain, a man for the punishment of his sins? 40 Let us search and try our ways, and turn again to the LORD. 41 Let us lift up our heart with our hands unto God in the heavens. 42 We have transgressed and have rebelled: thou hast not pardoned. 43 Thou hast covered with anger, and persecuted us: thou hast slain, thou hast not pitied. 44 Thou hast covered thyself with a cloud, that our prayer should not pass through. 45 Thou hast made us as the offscouring and refuse in the midst of the people. 46 All our enemies have opened their mouths against us. 47 Fear and a snare is come upon us, desolation and destruction. 48 Mine eye runneth down with rivers of water for the destruction of the daughter of my people. 49 Mine eye trickleth down, and ceaseth not, without any intermission, 50 Till the LORD look down, and behold from heaven. 51 Mine eye affecteth mine heart because of all the daughters of my city. 52 Mine enemies chased me sore, like a bird, without cause. 53 They have cut off my life in the dungeon, and cast a stone upon me. 54 Waters flowed over mine head; then I said, I am cut off. 55 I called upon thy name, O LORD, out of the low dungeon. 56 Thou hast heard my voice: hide not thine ear at my breathing, at my cry. 57 Thou drewest near in the day that I called upon thee: thou saidst, Fear not. 58 O Lord, thou hast pleaded the causes of my soul; thou hast redeemed my life. 59 O LORD, thou hast seen my wrong: judge thou my cause. 60 Thou hast seen all their vengeance and all their imaginations against me. 61 Thou hast heard their reproach, O LORD, and all their imaginations against me; 62 The lips of those that rose up against me, and their device against me all the day. 63 Behold their sitting down, and their rising up; I am their musick. 64 Render unto them a recompence, O LORD, according to the work of their hands. 65 Give them sorrow of heart, thy curse unto them. 66 Persecute and destroy them in anger from under the heavens of the LORD.

So far we read God's holy and infallible word.

The text is verse 33,

33 For he doth not afflict willingly nor grieve the children of men.

Beloved congregation of our Lord Jesus Christ, with this sermon this evening, we're going to do something different than what we've been doing so far in our series. This evening we're going to take a glimpse, not into the heart of Jesus, but into the heart of God. It's really not different because Jesus is God and God reveals himself through Jesus and when you look at Jesus' life, Jesus' life brings a sharpness to our vision of the heart of God. We've seen that in this series. We've even, in fact, said, we've looked at the heart of Jesus and then we've even said, that's the heart of God towards you, beloved. But this evening, we're going to do something slightly different because we're going to look at a passage that doesn't speak, first of all, about Jesus, but that speaks, first of all, of God. And there are a few very powerful passages in scripture that speak about the heart of God and Lamentations 3:33 is one of those passages. And that might not be so evident when we first read the text, but literally the text reads like this, "For he does not afflict from the heart." That's literally the text. It speaks here in the text of the heart of God very literally. God does not afflict from the heart. God does not afflict willingly from the will. He does not afflict from the will, from the heart. Lord willing, in the future, we might look at another passage from Hosea that also speaks of the heart of God. But we also want to come to the end of our series soon. We are, hopefully by Pentecost Sunday, we are going to wrap up our series.

But now let me step back and let me ask you, beloved: how do you view the heart of God? Especially when we read a book like Lamentations, and we see the judgments of God falling upon God's people, how do you view the heart of God? I wonder if there are more in God's church that struggle with how to view the heart of God. Some maybe say to themselves, "I view God as cold and distant." Or, "I view God as this terrible God of justice and vengeance and wrath and anger, who destroys sinners." Or maybe others might say, "I wonder if God cares. Does God care about my situation, right here and right now?" Or maybe there are some who say, "I just don't know how to view the heart of God. I'm lost and I'm confused. It seems like sometimes I can't even see God." Well, here in this passage, we get a glimpse into the heart of God and what the passage is emphasizing is this: God's heart is a heart of compassion and God's heart is a heart of love. When you see Jesus in the New Testament, and you see in Jesus a heart that is meek and lowly, a heart that is compassionate, a heart that is touched with the feeling of our infirmities, a heart of tender kindness, well, then we need to understand that's also what we see in God in the Old Testament. In fact, and in a sense we might say, of course that's what we see in God because it's God who gives all these promises concerning Jesus in the Old Testament, and it is God who sends Jesus in the fullness of time to be that Savior for his people, and all of this shows you the heart of God.

So this evening, we just look at this verse and this striking language, "For he does not afflict from the heart." We take as our theme "A Heart That Does Not Afflict Willingly," and we look at two things. I gave the bulletin information incorrectly, just two things: the meaning and then the application. Before we get into the specific meaning that's captured in the text, that God does not afflict willingly, let's look first at two other things that are important to look at and, first, I want to point out a few things about the book of

Lamentations itself. We don't look at the book of Lamentations very often, so it's good to do this.

Lamentations was written, we may presume, by the prophet Jeremiah after the fall of Jerusalem in 586 BC. In the book of Jeremiah, Jeremiah had foretold the destruction and fall of Jerusalem and now here in the book of Lamentations, kind of as an appendix to the book of Jeremiah, Jeremiah expresses the pain of the event itself, after it happens. King Nebuchadnezzar had come up against Jerusalem and utterly destroyed the city. He destroyed the temple. He tore down the walls. He burned down all the large houses, and he took God's people into captivity. Jeremiah himself is left behind and so here in the book of Lamentations, here you see Jeremiah sitting in the ash heap, on the ruins of the beloved city of God, grief-stricken, lamenting the downfall of Jerusalem, and of course, lamenting the downfall of the church, because that's what Jerusalem was.

The book of Lamentations itself is divided into five chapters, five chapters, which are actually five distinct poems. If you notice, chapters 1, 2, 4, and 5 each have 22 verses and that's because there are 22 letters in the Hebrew alphabet. And in each of these chapters, chapters 1, 2, 4, and 5, each verse of the chapter starts with a different letter of the Hebrew alphabet. These poems are acrostics, just like some of the Psalms are acrostics. Think of Psalm 119. Well, if you notice, chapter 3 doesn't have 22 verses in it, it has 66 verses in it, because in chapter 3 you have the center of the book. And in chapter 3, there's not just one verse for each letter of the Hebrew alphabet, there's three verses for each letter of the Hebrew alphabet. So this is a very organized and structured book. Five lamentations set to poetry with the climax in chapter 3, and then if you look at the overarching structure of the whole book, then you see that the text that we've chosen for the sermon tonight is not just in the very center of the third poem, it stands in the very center of the entire book. We could say this verse that is our text for this evening not only stands at the heart of the book of Lamentations, but it expresses the heart. It's a summary of the whole book of Lamentations.

So that is the first thing we need to point out. That's very significant for our understanding. And then second, having pointed out those few things about the book itself and about our text for this evening, let's get into the text. The second thing I want to point out is this: notice what is implied in the text. The text says, "For he doth not afflict willingly nor grieve the children of men." Before we look at that language of "afflict willingly," notice what is implied. What is implied is this: God is indeed the one who afflicts and that's obvious throughout the entire chapter and throughout the entire book. It is God who has done these things. It is God who has raised up Nebuchadnezzar to destroy Jerusalem, and it is God who has burned Jerusalem down to the ground. It is God who has brought all this misery upon the city, and it is God who has brought all this misery upon Jeremiah.

How does Jeremiah put it in verse 1? "I am the man that hath seen affliction by the rod of his wrath." Verse 4, "My flesh and my skin hath he made old. He hath broken my bones." Verse 13, "He hath caused the arrows of his quiver to enter into my reins, my gut." Verse 15, "He hath filled me with bitterness. He hath made me drunken with wormwood." It's the Lord who has done all these things. You see those women over there among the

ruined ashes, boiling their little babies in hot water, and then eating their babies? You see the priests over on this side slaying the innocent right in the midst of the street? You see the enemies chasing God's people into the wilderness? And then you see Jeremiah staggering through the city, covered in ashes, seeing all these things taking place before his very eyes? It is God who has done these things. The Lord hath accomplished his fury. The Lord hath poured out his fierce anger. It is the Lord who has done this.

God is the one who afflicts, and God is the one who grieves the children of men, and I think when it's put that way, then you can start to appreciate the struggle that Jeremiah is experiencing really his whole life as the weeping prophet. And you can begin to understand the pain Jeremiah is experiencing. This is God's doing. This is what God has done. Our God, our Jehovah, the God of Judah. But that's how it is, isn't it? We can say the same thing about our lives too, isn't it? Isn't it the same thing? The pain in my life. I have to say this to myself and remember. The pain in your life. The chronic back pain. The backstabbing or manipulating friend. The people-pleasing boss who makes your work life miserable. The wayward child that you grieve over. The vomiting at two o'clock in the morning. The unrelenting darkness of depression. The aching loneliness. The fear and confusion. The Lord has done it.

The Belgic Confession, when it talks about the doctrine of providence, puts it this way, "We believe that the same God, after he had created all things, did not forsake them or give them up to fortune or chance, but that he rules and governs them according to his holy will, so that nothing happens in this world without his appointment."

The good comes from God, and the bad comes from God. That's what is implied in the text, "For he doth not afflict willingly." It is God who is doing this. God is the one who afflicts. "I form the light and create darkness. I make peace and create evil calamities. I, the Lord, do all these things." And that is a hard-hitting truth and Jeremiah is experiencing this truth very acutely. Jeremiah himself knows that the Lord is doing all of this and he knows that the Lord is doing all of this because of the sins of the people. Jeremiah had warned the people over and over again, "Repent! God threatens judgment. You think you're good, but you're not. Turn from your sins!" And the people didn't repent. Life was too good for them to repent. They had too many earthly things to lose if they actually did repent. Probably the biggest thing that they would lose was their social standing within Judah itself. This was a proud and arrogant people. And now what does Jeremiah see but all his prophecies being fulfilled and it is devastating.

But now even as hard-hitting of a truth as that is, there is also unspeakable comfort. Even just in that thought, we're not right at the main point of the text yet, but even in this thought, that God is the one in control of all these things. For God's people, in Jesus Christ, there is comfort for as the Belgic Confession itself goes on to say, "This doctrine affords us unspeakable consolation, since we are taught thereby that nothing can befall us by chance, but by the direction of our most gracious and heavenly Father, who watches over us with a paternal care, keeping all creatures, that is all created things, so under his power, that not a hair of our head, for they are all numbered, nor a sparrow can fall to the ground without the will of our Father." And now that's what leads us into the main thing

we want to consider this evening. "For he doth not afflict willingly." He afflicts, yes. He is the one doing it but he does not afflict willingly. He does not afflict from the heart.

Well, now we ask, what does that mean? Well, let me put it right before you, and then step back and walk through it a bit more slowly. What it means is this, that when God, your Father, brings affliction into your life and mine, he does so with a certain sense of reluctance. Now understand, God is not reluctant about the ultimate good that is going to be brought about through the pain and that is indeed why God is doing it, because the good he will bring through it but at the same time, there is something within God that recoils at the idea of sending us afflictions. To use an expression from Hosea, his heart recoils within him at the thought of it.

Now here we need to appreciate that we are speaking anthropomorphically. We are assigning human qualities to God. Or perhaps to be more accurate, we are speaking anthropopathically. That is, we are assigning human emotions to God. And that's really what God himself is doing in this passage, and he does it throughout the scriptures. He's coming down to our level, and he's using an expression that we as humans can understand and identify with, and he's applying that expression and that idea to himself and he's saying, "My people, this is how it is with me." Oh yes, God is not a man. God is the ever-blessed God but still, this is how God your Father chooses to speak to you. And even though it's a figure of speech, there is truth in what God is revealing to us when he speaks with these figures of speech. We don't dismiss these as mere figures of speech. No, but God is communicating truth through the figure of speech. He's revealing something about his heart by the language he uses.

When God brings affliction into our lives, he does so with a certain sense of reluctance. Or, we could say, in a sense, he doesn't do it from the heart. So what does that mean? That's what the text says. So what does that mean? Well, what is the heart? Well, the heart is the very center of your existence. The heart is the center of your entire life. And now, in the Bible, God speaks of himself as having a heart. In Genesis 6:6, we read, "And it repented the Lord that he had made man on the earth, and it grieved him at his heart." It hurt him at his heart. Genesis 8:21, we read, "And the Lord smelled a sweet savor, and the Lord said in his heart, I will not curse the ground any more for man's sake." In Jeremiah 32:41, God has very striking language. He says, "Yea, I will rejoice over them to do them good, and I will plant them in this land assuredly, with my whole heart and with my whole soul."

And when you look at the heart of God, then, God has a heart, as he uses that figure, when you look at the heart of God, what do you find? Do you find fury? Do you find wrath? Do you find a vengeful spirit? No. And when you look at the heart of God, do you find a cold heart? A distant heart? Some kind of heart of stone? A machine? Is God just this mighty force that is pulling the levers and pulleys, making the whole world spin around, and all the while, he is detached from the real pain and anguish we feel under his hand because he doesn't care? Because, after all, God doesn't have a heart? No. But when you look at the heart of God, what you find is this: mercy, love, compassion. A holy love, and a holy mercy and compassion and that's the point of the passage. God's heart is a heart of mercy. God's heart is a heart of compassion.

Look at verse 32, "But though he cause grief, yet will he have compassion according to the multitude of his mercies." He causes grief, and yet while he causes real grief, he has compassion. He has abundant compassion. Why? Why does he have compassion? For, verse 33, for when he afflicts his people, he is not afflicting them from the heart. His anger lasts a moment, but his mercy is from everlasting to everlasting. That's at the heart of who God is.

Now, we should probably be careful, because what we need to remember is this, this is where the figures of speech are challenging for us as mere men. God is never conflicted within himself. There is no tension within God himself. God's mercy and his justice are never at odds with each other. What the Belgic Confession also teaches us, besides the providence of God, is right away in Article 1, the Belgic Confession teaches us that God is a simple being, and what that means, Catechism students, you remember, is that God's attributes are all one in him. All his attributes are a package. You can't pit one attribute against the other. You can't divide God up into parts.

And now, when you look at the heart of God, who is a simple being, what do you see? What you see is this. What God wants you to see is this: mercy, kindness, love and righteousness. And what God's simplicity really means is this: God isn't just a merciful God, God is mercy, God is love, God is kindness, and God is righteousness. And God's mercy is a righteous mercy and his righteousness is a merciful righteousness. Everything about God in his heart is characterized by mercy. That mercy comes to expression in different ways. Sometimes God sends afflictions, and he brings devastating things our way, but even though he caused grief in his heart, there is mercy. As Micah 7:18 puts it, he is the God who delights in mercy. This is what he takes pleasure in, mercy. Ezekiel 33:11 says he does not delight, he does not take pleasure in the death of the wicked. What he takes delight in is this: mercy.

Now, to fill this out, to make this tangible for us, let me give you a few examples because it is kind of hard to express, so let me give you examples. Just think, first of all, of God's decrees of election and reprobation. God's decrees of election and reprobation are not two equal parallel decrees so that God elects some random people to heaven, and then at the exact same time, God reprobates random others to hell. No. That's the kind of caricature that the Arminians were trying to peg on the Calvinists at the Synod of Dort. No. Reprobation and election are not two parallel independent decrees. Rather, reprobation and election are inseparably connected and they are inseparably connected in this way: God's decree of reprobation serves his decree of election. His decree of reprobation serves his decree of election, and the point of saying that is this: at the heart of who God is, is not a God who reprobates but a God who elects, who elects to save an unworthy, sinful people to show forth the praises of his grace and glory. And then think about it, why does God ordain the fall into sin and all the miseries that come upon us as a result of the fall? Not just so that there's lots of misery, but so that God's heart of mercy and his heart of love and compassion might, in the end, even be put on greater display, and we might experience it more fully. And that's the same truth that this passage is teaching us. All these things, even this grief, it's serving to show God's mercy. In his heart, he's the God of mercy.

To use another idea from scripture, in Ezekiel 33:11, we read that God has no pleasure in the death of the wicked. Now, that needs to be explained properly. We could take a whole sermon to do that. But the point is, God does not take pleasure in death, in and of itself. God is not the God of death and the God of darkness. God is the God of life. God is the God who takes pleasure in repentance, not sin. He takes pleasure in obedience. And he's the God who takes pleasure in saving people. Yes, he's sovereign over death. He rules over death. He rules over darkness. He creates the light and the darkness. But he is the God of life. God does not take pleasure in sin and destruction in and of itself. He uses it and he delights in how these things also serve him in all things, but in his heart, in his heart he delights in life. He delights in love and obedience and mercy. He creates life and he says it is good. And then man plunges himself into sin and God saves and that is good to him. And he recreates life.

That's at the heart of God and if I may add something very important, what I also need to add is this, that in the text, the statement here has reference to God's people. His people, his children to whom he is the perfect loving Father. He is good to all but in the text, the application is actually for his people. Verse 31, his people whom he will not cast off. He will not cast them off. He's talking about his people. Verse 32, according to his mercies. According to the multitude of his mercies. That's referring to his covenant. his covenant mercies he has compassion. And so now here in the text, it's referring to God's people and what God is saying in the text is this, "When I bring all this affliction and suffering upon you, Jeremiah, and I bring all this suffering and affliction upon my people, I do it with reluctance. I do it in a sense unwillingly. I do it as a means to an end and not as an end in itself. I have good things in store and I'm using this to get to that good end. And in that sense, I am well pleased with what I am doing. I don't hesitate in what I am doing. I know what I'm doing. This is for your good and your salvation. And yet in a sense, it hurts me to do it. It's not natural," if we want to speak anthropomorphically. "It's not natural for me to do this." But like a loving father who lovingly disciplines his children and he is pained even as in love he knows what's good for his child that he brings that upon his child. That's how God is. "By nature, I am gentle and compassionate, kind and slow to anger." And there are many passages in which God reminds us of that and God says, "When I afflict you, it's because I love you."

Or consider putting it this way, again speaking anthropomorphically so we can understand it. This is what God does. I feel we have the liberty to do this. In God, there are some things, I'm speaking anthropomorphically but just listen, in God, there are some things that pour out of God more naturally than others. God is unswervingly just. Oh yes, he is. But what is his disposition? What is he on the edge of his seat eager to do? If you were to catch me off guard, what is going to leap out of me before I have time to regain composure? Well, it will likely be grouchiness or impatience. That's my disposition by nature. If you could catch God off guard, what leaps out most freely from God? Blessing. The desire to swallow up his children with joy and his loving embrace. In fact, that's what he's working towards. That is even what he's working towards with all the struggles and sorrows of our lives so that in the end, we might be swallowed up in his joy and be

embraced in his loving embrace to all eternity in the highest sense possible. That's his purpose.

That's what's at the center of his heart and if you have any question about this, all you need to do is look to the cross of Jesus Christ. Consider for a moment, what is this all about, right? This is where we as Christians sometimes need to get back to the gospel, don't we? What is this all about? What is God pointing us to on every page of scripture again? What is at the center of all of history? What does God want you to hear in the preaching every week again? Oh yes, God is just. God is powerful. God is wise. God is glorious. But even all these attributes are highlighted in this, "Look at the mercy I show you in the cross of Jesus Christ. Look what I did. I myself came down in the likeness of sinful flesh to save a sinful people. Oh yes, if I just wanted to be just, I could condemn the whole human race. And oh yes, the wicked world is left without excuse. And yes, my fury falls upon all my enemies." All these things are true, but in a sense, these things are secondary things. What is central to God is the glorification of his name and the salvation of his people, a salvation that is accomplished through the greatest possible expression of love that can be shown in all the world, God in the flesh, dying for sinners whom he has made his friends.

That's who your God is, beloved. I want to emphasize to you again, when you are discouraged, when you are down, when you are questioning God's ways with you, when you feel justice and vengeance and wrath, and you are depressed and you feel you're in need of help, look to the cross. That's where God would have you look and see the heart of God in the cross. Really, this is what our whole series is about, beloved, glimpses into the heart of Jesus, glimpses into the heart of God. Think about it from this point of view. I almost feel like we have to persuade ourselves of these things. But think about it then, in God's eyes, what is the greatest gift? Is the greatest gift power, able to do whatever you want? The greatest gift is love. In God's eyes, what is the keeping of the law? Is the keeping of the law always being right, with every jot and tittle, tithing my mint, my cummin and my other spices? Love! In God's eyes, what is the fruit of the Spirit? Winning the argument, or love? And what is the story that's going to be told unto all eternity? The story of God's judgment on the wicked? The story of God's love towards sinners, and the wonder of his grace in substituting the just one for the unjust and that shows you the heart of God. God's heart is a heart that does not afflict willingly. That's the meaning of this text. You can understand for Jeremiah how important it was to know these things, in his own peculiar circumstances.

Well, now, what is the application? I have three things. For starters, the first thing, the application is this, recognize this about your God, beloved, recognize it: he is the God who loves. And I think a large part about recognizing this involves actually humbling ourselves. That's what's going on here. Humble yourselves in this sense. Recognize that God is much wiser in his dealings with you than you would be if you had your own will done. It's like we have to become children again, don't we? We have to become like little children, have childlike faith. When we go through afflictions, we have to humble ourselves and become as little children again and again and receive this chastening as from the hand of a loving Father. And without questioning, without rebuffing, without

attitude, we must humble ourselves and recognize God is love. God is my Father. His heart is a heart of mercy. And he knows exactly what he is doing right now in my life.

Beloved, that is exactly what Jeremiah is doing in this passage. This is the very center, the very pinnacle of the whole book of Lamentations, and at the very center of the whole book, Jeremiah is holding on to this truth and he is exalting this truth if only we could see it in the Hebrew, Jehovah is the God of mercy, whose compassions will not fail. He is faithful. Great is his faithfulness. You know, from that point of view, this book of Lamentations can be viewed as one of the supreme examples in the Old Testament of a person having amazing faith in God. We know it's by inspiration of the Holy Spirit. I don't mean to minimize that. But look at Jeremiah. Such destruction. Such sorrow. Such pain. But still, what's the heart of God? What's the heart of my God? A heart of mercy. Jeremiah clings to that.

So believer here tonight, whatever is going on in your life, whatever setbacks, whatever struggles, know this: God is motivated by mercy. He is doing something with it. He is not a do-nothing God. He is doing something with it for your good. Now that doesn't mean we never have to take any action and just say God is sovereign. I think sometimes that's the greatest struggle that the Christian has, right? What do I actually do now in this situation? Where do I go? I know he's sovereign. I know that he's dealing with me in mercy but now what decision do I actually have to make because if I take this step, it's going to definitely lead down this pathway and I don't know where this pathway leads. And this, maybe I know where this ends up, but maybe my conscience won't allow me to go there. What do I do? How long do I wait? How long do I pray for patience? And when do I actually have to start to act? Just know this, child of God, your Father has a heart of mercy and should you go through very hard times, times of poverty, times of sickness, times of enduring great reproach, God, God has a heart of mercy.

So recognize that and then do his will. That first of all, that's the application. Second, I think the application is also this. If there are any unbelievers here in church this evening, if there are any who are walking impenitently in sin, the question comes to you very forcefully: why will you die in your sin? Why do you ignore God's bidding to come unto you? Why do you not turn from your sins? You're seeing who God is from his scripture. Maybe there are some here this evening who call themselves Christians, and they talk an upright talk, maybe they even go to Bible study, maybe they send their children to the good Christian school, maybe they are very prosperous in their work, but they're not walking an honest walk with the Lord. They've got sins that they're keeping in their back pocket. Why will you not turn? If you are not a Christian, and a Christian is one who is turned and does turn, if you are not a Christian, then God is not your Father. Then the hard things that are coming your way are coming from an angry God. Why will you not turn? God's heart is a heart of mercy. All who come to him, he will in no wise cast out. That's what the Son of God said.

Why will you not be honest with your sins with the Lord? You keep carrying out that sinful behavior, that bitter spirit, that poison that comes out of your lips, the lies and the arrogance and the hatred, the hatred that keeps burning in your soul, why do you keep on

with that miserable business? Are you suffering? Are you afflicted? Oh, don't mourn over the sufferings that befall you, but rather mourn over your sins. See how all your affliction is pointing out to you that your sins don't satisfy. Your sins make you miserable. Your misery this evening should be speaking to you that you need a Savior. You need one who can rescue and save. You need the forgiveness of sins and hope. And the only hope there is to be found in this whole world is in the cross of the Lord Jesus Christ. Go to the Lord. He is not a cruel master. He is not a capricious or sadistic God who takes sick pleasure in tormenting people. He is a God of mercy. All who turn from their sins and believe on the Lord and call on his name shall not perish, but have everlasting life.

This is exactly what is going on here with Jeremiah in Lamentations, a people that would not repent and all this judgment comes upon them. Why will you not repent? And this isn't a word just for unbelievers. This is a word for all those who are not walking in the faith. "Repent while it is still called today." That's the second clear application from this whole passage in the light of the whole context. And then third, I think the application could also be this: just as God is a merciful God, so we should reflect that same reality in our interactions with each other and what I especially have in mind this evening is the interaction that parents have with their children. Parents, how, and this is for all of us, but parents, how do you portray God's heart to your children when you discipline them? Do you come off as a vengeful parent? A parent who suddenly bursts out in anger and harsh words, attacking your children with impatience? Do you come off as a parent who's always nitpicking with your children so that you frustrate and you exasperate your children? Are you reflecting God? Or instead, when you discipline your children, do you make it very clear to your children that you are doing this discipline while under self-control and in love? Perhaps even pray with your children as you discipline them. And even there I was reflecting this past week, even the way we use discipline. We think of discipline as the act of spanking. No, discipline means training. Discipline means cultivating. So, do you pray with your children as part of the discipline? Even crying over how painful the discipline sometimes is? That's what God says in all their affliction, he was afflicted.

So we should ask: how does God discipline us? He disciplines patiently. He disciplines not in the heat of the moment, but after much deliberation. He measures very carefully the strikes of the rod that he lays upon his people. Chapter 3, verse 1, "I am the man that hath seen affliction by the rod of his wrath." Yes, the rod of his wrath but those rods of his wrath are carried out with much deliberation and with very much measure. He measures very carefully the strikes of the rod he lays upon his people. He calculates his response to his people's sins very carefully. And then when God goes about disciplining his people, he doesn't enjoy the afflicting aspect of it in itself. It's painful for him. His heart is grieved by it. God does not take pleasure in hearing his children's cries as they smart under his discipline. No, but God has compassion, even as he disciplines. That's why he is disciplining. Oh yes, he disciplines with much determination. He knows what he is doing and he knows the end result will be good. "Now no chastening for the present seemeth to be joyous, but grievous, nevertheless, afterward it yieldeth the peaceable fruit of righteousness unto them which are exercised by that chastening."

God knows that and God knows exactly what he will achieve when he brings us through chastening, and God also disciplines then with great expectation. He's looking for results. And then we could ask ourselves as a congregation, as families, as individuals, we could ask ourselves if we have experienced God's chastening, are we bringing forth the results that God is looking for? Are there good results? Is there a positive change? Or do we just clench our teeth at the chastening and try to move on in the way that we were going on before? All that aside, the point I was originally making here is this: if this is how God disciplines us, this should also be how we discipline our children. We want to teach them who God is as our Father. We know how important it is to know that this is God's approach in dealing with us. I need to know this as a 37-year-old man. Our children need to know that this is also how we are striving to deal with them.

What shall we say in conclusion? I suppose the take-home is fundamentally this: child of God, when you are discouraged, when you are grieving, remember to look at the heart of God and there you see a heart that is more beautiful and more perfect and more merciful than you could ever fully take in. You have all eternity to take it in. Be encouraged, child of God. He is faithful. His compassions fail not. They are new every morning. Great is his faithfulness. Though he cause grief, though he cause grief, yet he will have compassion according to the multitude of his mercies for he does not afflict from the heart, nor grieve the children of men. Amen.

Let us pray.

Our Father, bring us deeper into the truths of thy word, that we might know thee and know thy heart and know thy love towards us in Jesus Christ. We thank thee for this word. Apply it to our hearts and our lives. May we have right thoughts of thee. Thou art indeed a glorious God in every way and we do not seek to minimize thy glory in any way. Cause us to see thy glory as we see it in thy mercy and thy mercy as it's revealed even in thy justice and thy righteousness and all thy attributes. Give us to see the cross of Jesus Christ more and more as thy children. In Jesus' name we pray. Amen.