

Give Thanks to the LORD!

- I. In the midst of affliction  
II. For His compassions are new every morning

*19 I remember my affliction and my wandering,  
the bitterness and the gall.  
20 I well remember them,  
and my soul is downcast within me.  
21 Yet this I call to mind  
and therefore I have hope:  
  
22 Because of the Lord's great love we are not consumed,  
for his compassions never fail.  
23 They are new every morning;  
great is your faithfulness.  
24 I say to myself, "The Lord is my portion;  
therefore I will wait for him."  
  
25 The Lord is good to those whose hope is in him,  
to the one who seeks him;  
26 it is good to wait quietly  
for the salvation of the Lord.*

This morning I'd like to begin with what many people would call an oxymoron. Do you know what an oxymoron is? An oxymoron is created when we take two words with opposite meanings and put them together into one phrase. Let me give you some examples. When we use phrases like: jumbo shrimp, or an open secret, or deafening silence, or clearly confused, or passive aggressive—those are all oxymorons. They're all forms of what we might call a contradiction in terms. Well, today I want to share one more phrase that many people would call an oxymoron. It's simply this: Thanksgiving 2020. Isn't that right? In our world today there are a whole lot of people who are thinking that those two words do not go together. Thanksgiving, in 2020? That's like a contradiction in terms. The idea of being thankful in a year when our lives have been so turned upside down by this pandemic, with all the restrictions and the stress and the unrest – for a lot of people, “thankful” is not the emotion that first comes to mind.

In fact, to a certain extent, maybe we've all shared some of those same sentiments. When you consider that we are on our what? 8th month of wearing masks? When yes, we can come to church, but it's not really the same without all the singing, without a full house, without the fellowship that would typically go on. When you can't gather with your extended family at Thanksgiving, maybe you found yourself thinking, “Is there really all that much to be thankful about this year? Maybe Thanksgiving 2020 really is an oxymoron.”

Actually, I don't believe that's how you're looking at Thanksgiving 2020. And I say that because of your presence here today. I mean, here you are, in person or online, taking time out

of your busy schedule, in the middle of a pandemic, to basically stop and say “thank you” to God. The question is, Why? What reason would anyone have to feel grateful to God when so many things in our lives this year have been so hard, so discouraging, even depressing?

To answer that question, I’d like us to take a little trip back in time, to a year that is going to make 2020 look like a walk in the park. We’re going to pay a visit to ancient Jerusalem in the year 587 BC. And as we look around, we’re going to why the believers then had every reason to do exactly what we are doing today, and that’s to:

### Give Thanks to the LORD!

#### I. In spite of our affliction

#### II. For his compassions are new every morning

The words that we have before us are recorded in the book of Lamentations. Now, maybe you are very familiar with the book of Lamentations. But then again maybe not. Personally, I think I preached on a text from this book like one other time in my life. In fact, someone might say, “We’re going to use a text from Lamentations on Thanksgiving? Do you know what the word Lamentations means? To lament means to cry, to grieve, to wail, to have extreme sorrow. How’s that fitting for a Thanksgiving message?” Well, let me explain.

The book of Lamentations is actually a series of 5 separate poems, most likely written by the Prophet Jeremiah, who is sometimes referred to as the Weeping Prophet. These poems are almost all acrostic poems, which means that each verse begins with a different letter of the Hebrew alphabet, in order. It’s as if the poet wants to lay out the details of something from A to Z. And exactly what is the writer describing? He’s describing the horrific events that occurred in the city of Jerusalem in the days leading up to and including its destruction at the hands of the Babylonians.

Maybe a little history lesson is in order. If you remember, after the death of King Solomon, the nation of Israel was divided into two kingdoms. The southern Kingdom, sometimes called Judah, had its capital in Jerusalem. And from there, a number of kings ascended the throne. Some of them were good and godly. And some of them were very ungodly. Well, over the course of time, the people of Judah began to turn further and further away from the worship of the true God. They began to chase after the gods of sex and economic prosperity. Rather than trusting in their Creator God, they trusted in earthly kings and military alliances. You might say that even though God was a faithful husband to them, they were not faithful brides to him. They cheated on him. They left him to run after other gods. And even though God sent one prophet after another to call them to repentance, they refused to return to the Lord. And so, in the end, God said, in effect, “That’s it. I’ve had enough.” All the blessings that I had once given you—the land of Israel, the royal city of Jerusalem, the breathtaking temple of Solomon—all of it I’m going to take away from you.” How did God put it in 2 Kings 21? *This is what the Lord, the God of Israel says, “I’m going to bring such disaster on Jerusalem and Judah that the ears of everyone who hears it will tingle. I will wipe out Jerusalem as one wipes a dish, wiping it and turning it upside down.” (1 Kings 21:12-13)*

Well, in 587 BC, God fulfilled that promise by using Nebuchadnezzar, the king of the Babylonians, to lay waste to the city of Jerusalem. King Nebuchadnezzar captured the city by first laying siege to it. For two years, the king’s army surrounded the walled city of Jerusalem with the intent of basically starving the people into submission. The inhabitants of Jerusalem were basically locked inside the city for month after month after month, with no way to bring any food in from outside the city. (It’s as if they were quarantined without Grubhub or the pizza delivery guy.)

Seriously, Jeremiah describes what life was like for the inhabitants of Jerusalem when he writes, *Because of thirst, the infant's tongue sticks to the roof of its mouth; the children beg for bread, but no one gives it to them. Those killed by the sword are better off than those who died of famine; racked with hunger they waste away for lack of food from the field. With their own hands compassionate women have cooked their own children, who became their food when my people were destroyed. (Lamentations 4: 4,9-10).*

My friends, this is the situation that caused the Prophet Jeremiah to lament. All around him he saw people who were suffering terribly, people who are dying. They were locked inside the city. The city that was once so powerful, so glorious, so teeming with life was about to become a wasteland. How does the prophet put it in in the opening verses of this book? *How deserted lies the city, once so full of people! How like a widow she is, who once was great among the nations. She who was queen among the provinces has now become a slave. (Lam. 1:1).* Is it any wonder that the prophet laments, when he thinks about all that has gone on in his beloved city, when he thinks about what he himself has suffered as an inhabitant of the city? Jeremiah writes about that in the opening verse of our text. *I remember my affliction and my wandering, the bitterness and the gall. I well remember them, and my soul is downcast within me. (Lamentations 3:19-20)*

Can you blame him? I don't know, as you look at what's going on in our world today, maybe you can empathize with what Jeremiah was feeling. Maybe there are times when your soul is downcast within you. Maybe there are times when you find yourself lamenting, "God, why is this happening? When will this end? Does this have to be so hard?"

My friends, it is against that backdrop of a city under siege, with all the pain and suffering that went with it—it's against that backdrop that Jeremiah suddenly offers a shining ray of hope, for himself and all of us. After recounting all that he had witnessed and endured, the prophet writes, *Yet this I call to mind and therefore have hope.* What is it that gives Jeremiah hope in the midst of his affliction? Well, he tells us. *Because of the Lord's great love, we are not consumed, for his compassions never fail. They are new every morning. (Lam. 3:22,23).*

Do you see what Jeremiah is saying there? He saying, first of all, that if it wasn't for God's undeserved love for sinners like us, we'd all be consumed, as in, we'd all be torched in the fires of hell forever. As sinful human beings, that's all we've earned from a just and holy God. If it wasn't for the grace that God has shown us in Christ, we'd all be goners! That kind of puts things in perspective, doesn't it? No matter how much pain we suffer in life, no matter how bad the pandemic gets, no matter how many setbacks or losses or frustrations we experience in this world, it will never be as bad as an eternity of hellfire. God has rescued us from that, purely by his grace, in Christ.

And, as Jeremiah says, *God's compassions never fail.* In other words, you can always count on God to show you kindness, show you mercy. Notice, that word compassions is a plural noun. It's not like God shows his compassion once, and then he's done. No, his compassions never fail. They never run out. They're like a river that keeps flowing and flowing and flowing. It never runs dry.

And as Jeremiah says, *They are new every morning.* In other words, each day, God shows us his love in a unique way. Each and every day God gives us a fresh start. A clean slate. I don't know about you, but I find that fact incredibly comforting. I think about all the times that I've gone to bed after having a bad day. A day when I messed up, or I let somebody down, or didn't get my work done. And I thought to myself, "Thank God that tomorrow will be a new day. And it will be a better day, because God's compassions are new every morning." And that's a promise

that we can count on, because as the prophet says, *Great is God's faithfulness*. Isn't that the truth? As opposed to you or me, who so often fail to keep our promises, God always keeps his promises.

In fact, that's what leads Jeremiah to say what he does here in a text, namely, *The Lord is my portion; therefore I will wait for him*. In other words, in my Savior God, I have everything I truly need. Or, as the Psalmist Asaph once said about the Lord, *Whom have I in heaven but you? And earth has nothing I desire besides you. My flesh and my heart may fail, but God is the strength of my heart and my portion forever. (Psalm 73:25-26)*

What the psalmist confessed, and what Jeremiah experienced in his life, is what the Holy Spirit leads you and me to cling to as well. And it's simply this: even if God takes everything else away from us, even if we lose our health or our wealth or our freedom or our family (as has happened to believers who have gone before us), God still gives us the greatest gift of all. By having his son live and die in our place, by having the Holy Spirit work saving faith in our hearts, God has given us a sure and certain hope of life forever with him in heaven. We can know that even if our own lives here on earth are still feeling the effects of sin, and death and decay, our lives in heaven will be filled with life and joy and peace.

Think about it this way. All God owes us is hell. But instead of hell, he's given us heaven. You might say that God has prepared this big beautiful cake for us to enjoy. That cake is far more than we deserve. But then on top of the cake God spreads all this frosting. And the frosting on the cake represents all the wonderful things that God has given us here on earth, between now and the time we eat the cake. The frosting on the cake is the families we are a part of, the friendships we enjoy, the job that allows us to provide for our needs. The frosting is a beautiful sunrise, with ducks in the air, clean air to breath and a heart that still beats. The frosting is teachers who are amazing, healthcare workers who go above and beyond, and law enforcement officers who risk their lives to keep us safe. The frosting is more kinds of foods than I can imagine, more clothes than I can wear and a country where still enjoy freedom of speech and the freedom to worship. All these and more are the icing that God has put on the cake he has prepared for us, even in this year of the pandemic.

So what do you think? Is the phrase Thanksgiving 2020 an oxymoron? Is it a contradiction in terms? No, it certainly isn't. In fact, it's just the opposite. Those two words go together like a hand in a glove. Or should I say, they go together like turkey and stuffing, like mashed potatoes and gravy, like the apple pie and ice cream. And now that I got your mouth watering, let me say one last thing. No matter what you have on the Thanksgiving menu this year—or don't have, no matter who's going to be with you, or won't be—there's one thing you can be sure of. God, in his great love and compassion, has already given you and me everything we need to have a truly thankful Thanksgiving, yes, especially in the year 2020. To God be our thanks and praise! Amen.