

Homiletics Analysis: Lamentations 3

Content & Intent

Broader Unit — Lamentations as a Whole: Lamentations is a collection of five acrostic or formally structured poems composed in the aftermath of Jerusalem’s fall to Babylon in 586 BC. The book is a sustained theological reckoning with catastrophe — not a denial of suffering, not a flight to easy comfort, but a disciplined, liturgical act of bringing devastation before the LORD. Chapters 1, 2, 4, and 5 survey the destruction from varying angles: the desolation of the city, the wrath of God, the shame of exile, the prayer of a broken remnant. Chapter 3 stands at the structural and theological center of the book. It is the longest chapter (66 verses, one for each letter of the Hebrew alphabet, tripled), the most intensely personal, and the one that contains the book’s only sustained movement from lament toward trust. Chapter 3 does not resolve the book’s grief — chapters 4 and 5 return to lament — but it provides the theological fulcrum on which the whole book turns.

This Text — Content: Chapter 3 opens with the voice of a man (*geber*, a term emphasizing strength or manhood, used ironically here) who has seen affliction under the rod of God’s wrath (v. 1). Verses 1–18 are an extended catalogue of suffering — darkness, wasting flesh, siege, imprisonment, crushed bones, gall and bitterness, shattered hope. The imagery is deliberately comprehensive and extreme: God has driven him into darkness (v. 2), worn away his flesh (v. 4), walled him in (vv. 7–9), torn him like a bear or lion (v. 10), made him a laughingstock (v. 14), filled him with bitterness (v. 15). The section concludes in verse 18 with the speaker’s confession that his hope has perished. This is the nadir.

Then — without transition, without explanation, without external change in circumstances — comes the pivot of the entire book. “This I call to mind, and therefore I have hope” (v. 21). What does he call to mind? The *hesed* — the steadfast love — of the LORD. Verses 22–33 are the theological center of Lamentations: the LORD’s covenant mercies are not exhausted, they are new every morning, His faithfulness is great, the LORD is good to those who wait for Him. The man disciplines himself to hope, to wait quietly, to bear the yoke in youth, to trust in God’s fundamental character rather than in his present circumstances.

Verses 34–39 move to a broader reflection on divine sovereignty and theodicy: the LORD has not approved oppression and injustice (vv. 34–36); nothing happens apart from His sovereign word (vv. 37–38); and therefore complaint against God is misplaced — what a man should do is examine himself in light of his sins (v. 39). Verses 40–47 call the community to corporate repentance and renewed lament — “Let us test and examine our ways, and return to the LORD” (v. 40). But the prayer is met with silence: God has covered Himself with a cloud (v. 44), made the people scum and refuse (v. 45), and the enemies have triumphed (vv. 46–47). The corporate lament gives way in verses 48–54 to renewed personal anguish — weeping, sinking in the pit, nearly perishing.

Then, in the second pivot of the chapter (vv. 55–66), the man cries out from the pit and the LORD answers: “Do not fear” (v. 57). The LORD has taken up his cause, redeemed his life. On this basis — not on the basis of changed circumstances, but on the basis of the LORD’s past faithfulness and covenant character — the man calls for God to act against his enemies (vv. 59–66), closing the chapter with confident petition.

This Text — Intent: God is not merely informing His people that suffering can be endured — He is teaching them *how* to survive catastrophe without losing faith. The intent is to model and instill a specific spiritual discipline: the deliberate, willful act of recalling the LORD’s *hesed* when everything in your experience argues against it. The pivot of verse 21 — “This I call to mind” — is not passive remembrance but an act of the will. God is calling His people to practice this discipline: to look away from their circumstances, to look toward His character, and to find there the only ground on which hope can survive devastation. The chapter also intends to correct a common collapse in suffering: the assumption that if God is present and sovereign, suffering proves either that He is absent, or that He is cruel, or that hope is irrational. Lamentations 3 refuses all three conclusions while refusing to deny the reality of the suffering.

Subject Sentence: Covenant mercy found at the bottom of the pit — hope reborn from remembered *hesed*.

Primary Claim: When suffering has consumed every experiential ground for hope, God calls His people to the deliberate discipline of remembering His *hesed* — and declares that this, not changed circumstances, is where hope lives and where faith survives catastrophe.

Interpretive Evaluation

The identity of the “man” in verse 1: A significant interpretive question is whether the *geber* of verse 1 is (a) the prophet Jeremiah speaking in his own person, (b) a representative or typological figure standing in for the nation of Israel, or (c) a composite voice that allows both individual and corporate identification. The shift from singular to plural in verses 40–47 and back to singular supports option (c). The Reformed reading — following Calvin, Clowney, and most contemporary evangelical scholarship — treats the voice as deliberately representative: a single man whose suffering embodies the community’s suffering, whose discipline of hope models what the community must practice, and who in his willingness to descend into the pit and yet recall God’s *hesed* anticipates the pattern of Christ’s own descent and vindication. The Jeremican authorship tradition is respected but not hermeneutically controlling — whether Jeremiah is the speaker, the speaker speaks as Israel and for Israel.

The pivot in verses 22–33 — is this genuine hope or a coping mechanism? Some historical-critical scholars have treated the *hesed* passage as a liturgical insert, inconsistent in tone with the surrounding lament and therefore from a different source or a later addition. This reading must be **refuted**: it fails on literary grounds (the acrostic structure of the chapter runs continuously through the pivot, binding it formally to what precedes and follows), on theological grounds (the pivot is not the resolution of suffering but the model for surviving it — it does not deny the surrounding lament), and on canonical grounds (the same pattern — lament, deliberate recall, renewed petition — structures Psalms 42, 43, 73, and 88). The shift in tone at verse 21 is not evidence of different authorship; it is the *point*. The deliberateness of the turn (“This I call to mind”) is precisely what makes it theologically significant.

Arminian/Wesleyan reading: Some within the Wesleyan tradition read the corporate repentance section (vv. 40–47) as the hinge of the chapter — humanity’s turning to God precedes and conditions His response. On this reading, the movement of the chapter is: suffering → repentance → renewed divine favor. This reading **qualifies but overreaches**. Repentance is clearly present (v. 40–42) and appropriate, but the chapter’s structure does not support making human turning the condition of divine *hesed* — the *hesed* passage (vv. 22–33) appears before the corporate repentance call, and the LORD’s response in verse 57 (“Do not fear”) appears to precede any described change in circumstances. The ground of hope is the LORD’s character (*hesed*, *emet*, faithfulness), not the adequacy of Israel’s repentance. The Wesleyan emphasis on the genuine importance of repentance is worth retaining; the conditioning structure it imposes does not hold.

Dispensational reading: Some dispensational interpreters read Lamentations 3 as primarily addressed to Israel’s future tribulation experience, with the *hesed* passage functioning as prophetic consolation for a future remnant. This reading **acknowledges** that the corporate dimension of the text is real and that its ultimate fulfillment extends beyond the immediate post-587 context. However, treating it primarily as future prophecy evacuates its present force as a model of faith for any believer in any time of covenant crisis. The Reformed reading holds the historical particularity (Jerusalem’s fall) and the canonical generalizability (the model of faith in catastrophe applies to any covenant believer in extremity) together, without collapsing either into the other.

The theodicy section (vv. 34–39): Verse 39 — “Why should a living man complain, a man, about the punishment of his sins?” — has been read by some interpreters as a general suppression of complaint: suffering is deserved, so be quiet. This reading must be **refuted** as a misreading of the chapter as a whole. The chapter is itself an extended lament — complaint before God is modeled throughout. Verse 39 is not suppressing lament but redirecting complaint from horizontal murmuring (against God’s justice) to vertical examination (of one’s own sin). The distinction is between *grumbling* — which assumes God owes us something different — and *lament* — which brings suffering honestly before God while trusting His character. The chapter models the latter throughout.

Key Canonical Support

- **Psalms 42–43:** The refrain “Why are you cast down, O my soul... hope in God” (Ps. 42:5, 11; 43:5) mirrors exactly the structure of Lamentations 3:21 — the deliberate, willful act of commanding one’s own soul to hope in God’s character when circumstances produce only despair. These psalms confirm that Lamentations 3’s pivoting discipline is not unique but belongs to a deep pattern of biblical spirituality.
- **Psalms 88:** The one lament psalm in the Psalter that does not pivot to praise — it ends in darkness — stands as the counterweight that confirms Lamentations 3’s pivot is genuine, not mandatory. God honors both the full lament and the lament that finds *hesed* in the dark. Both are legitimate before Him.
- **Exodus 34:6–7:** The LORD’s own self-declaration of His character — “The LORD, the LORD, a God merciful and gracious, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love (*hesed*) and faithfulness (*emet*)” — is the theological ground of Lamentations 3:22–23. What the man calls to mind in the pit is not a vague religious hope but the covenant character God has specifically declared about Himself. The *hesed* passage is the Exodus 34 declaration remembered in the ruins.
- **Romans 8:18–39:** Paul’s movement from present suffering to confident hope through the lens of God’s sovereign, electing love provides the New Testament structural parallel to Lamentations 3. The “nothing shall separate us from the love of God” of Romans 8:38–39 is the New Covenant articulation of what the man in Lamentations 3 is clinging to by faith — that God’s *hesed* is not terminated by suffering, not interrupted by catastrophe, not exhausted by sin.
- **Hebrews 12:1–11:** The discipline of the Lord as evidence of sonship — “the Lord disciplines the one He loves” — provides the New Testament interpretive frame for Lamentations 3:27–33 (the yoke, the bearing of affliction in youth, the LORD not willingly afflicting). Suffering is not God’s abandonment; it is, within the covenant, evidence of His ongoing engagement with His people.

Aim: To lead the reader through the structure of faith-in-catastrophe — from honest descent into the pit, through the deliberate discipline of recalling God’s *hesed*, to renewed petition grounded not in changed circumstances but in unchanging covenant character.

Content Table

Verse(s)	Content	Notes
1–3	The man introduces himself as one who has seen	<i>geber</i> = man of strength; the irony is deliberate —

Verse(s)	Content	Notes
	affliction under God's wrath; God has driven him into darkness	strength means nothing against divine wrath
4–6	Physical wasting, fleshed worn away, bones broken; dwelling in darkness like the dead	Imagery of death-in-life; "darkness" echoes Psalm 88
7–9	Walled in, chains of bronze, blocked paths; prayers blocked, roads crooked	God Himself as the one who has imprisoned him — the most disorienting element
10–13	God as bear and lion, tearing and dragging off the path; pierced with arrows	The imagery of divine predation — God as enemy — represents the maximum theological crisis
14–16	Made a laughingstock; ground down with gravel; covered in ashes	Shame added to physical suffering
17–18	Soul bereft of peace, prosperity forgotten; "my endurance has perished; so has my hope from the LORD"	The nadir — explicit statement of hopelessness; v. 18 is the turning point's setup
19–21	Remembering the affliction and bitterness; the soul bowed down — "yet this I call to mind, and therefore I have hope"	The pivot; "call to mind" (<i>yasib el-libbi</i>) = active recall, not passive memory
22–23	The steadfast love (<i>hesed</i>) of the LORD never ceases; His mercies never come to an end; they are new every morning	The theological center of Lamentations; <i>hesed</i> = covenant faithfulness, loyal love
24	"The LORD is my portion, says my soul, therefore I will hope in him"	Echoes Psalm 73:26 and the Levitical inheritance formula — God Himself as the inheritance
25–27	The LORD is good to those who wait; good to seek Him quietly; good to bear the yoke in youth	Three-fold "good" — a counter-declaration to the accumulated suffering

Verse(s)	Content	Notes
28–30	Sitting alone in silence; bearing the yoke; offering the cheek; being filled with insults	The discipline of patient suffering — not passivity but trusting endurance
31–33	The LORD will not cast off forever; though He causes grief, He will have compassion; He does not willingly afflict	The theological resolution: discipline is purposeful, not final; affliction is instrumental, not terminal
34–36	The LORD does not approve of oppression, injustice, or the perversion of a man's cause	Theodicy statement: God's sovereignty does not mean He endorses every evil He permits
37–39	Who commands and it happens? The LORD. Both good and bad come from the Most High. Why should a living man complain about his punishment?	Divine sovereignty over all events; v. 39 redirects complaint toward self-examination
40–42	Call to communal self-examination — “let us test our ways and return to the LORD” — followed by confession	Shift from singular to plural; the individual's discipline becomes the community's discipline
43–47	God has covered Himself with anger; He has not forgiven; He has made Israel scum; enemies have triumphed	The pivot does not eliminate renewed lament; the darkness returns; God's face is still hidden
48–54	Rivers of tears; the pit; the dungeon stone; “I am cut off”	Personal anguish returns; the second descent; echoes of vv. 1–18
55–57	Calling on the LORD's name from the pit; the LORD heard; “Do not fear”	The second pivot — from descent to deliverance; “Do not fear” as God's direct word
58–60	The LORD has taken up the man's cause; He has redeemed his life; He has seen the wrong done to him	Past-tense confidence; speaking of deliverance before it is fully visible

Verse(s)	Content	Notes
61–63	The LORD has heard the taunts and schemes of the enemies	Confident enumeration of enemies' actions — now submitted to God's awareness and action
64–66	Imprecatory petition: repay them; curse them; pursue and destroy them from under the LORD's heavens	The lament closes with confident petition, not despair; the imprecation is grounded in God's justice

Divisions Table

Division	Verses	Label
1	1–18	The Descent: Suffering Comprehensive and God-Directed
2	19–33	The First Pivot: Deliberate Recall of <i>Hesed</i> and the Discipline of Hope
3	34–39	The Theodicy Interlude: Sovereignty, Justice, and Redirected Complaint
4	40–47	The Corporate Turn: Communal Repentance and Unanswered Prayer
5	48–54	The Second Descent: Personal Anguish Returns
6	55–66	The Second Pivot: Cry from the Pit, Divine Answer, Confident Petition

Subject Sentence & Primary Claim (*restated*)

Subject Sentence: Covenant mercy found at the bottom of the pit — hope reborn from remembered *hesed*.

Primary Claim: When suffering has consumed every experiential ground for hope, God calls His people to the deliberate discipline of remembering His *hesed* — and declares that this, not changed circumstances, is where hope lives and where faith survives catastrophe.

Applications (Five)

1. Suffering does not mean God has abandoned His covenant with you — but you will have to choose to believe that against all experiential evidence. (*Mind/Belief*) The man in Lamentations 3 is not comforted by the arrival of new evidence that God loves him. No angel appears. No circumstance changes. The *hesed* he recalls in verse 22 is the same *hesed* that was true in verse 1 when God was driving him into darkness. The discipline required is not waiting until your situation changes — it is choosing, in the darkness, to believe what you know about God’s character rather than what you feel about your circumstances. If you are in a season where God feels absent, hostile, or indifferent, Lamentations 3 does not tell you those feelings are wrong — it tells you they are not the final word. The final word is *hesed*. Choose to believe it before you feel it.

2. Learn to preach to yourself — the pivot of verse 21 is a discipline, not a feeling. (*Mind/Belief*) “This I call to mind” is an act of the will. It is not a description of how the man felt — it is a description of what he did. He turned his attention away from his suffering and toward what he knew to be true about God. Martin Luther described this as *disputatio* — argument against despair. John Calvin called it the exercise of faith in the absence of feeling. If you are waiting to feel hopeful before you act hopeful, you have the order reversed. The discipline Lamentations 3 models is to recall God’s character, confess it aloud, and let the feeling follow the act of faith — not to wait for the feeling to authorize the act.

3. The LORD’s *hesed* is new every morning — which means you are not carrying yesterday’s deficit into today. (*Affections/Worship*) “They are new every morning” (v. 23) is one of the most underpreached lines in Scripture. It does not mean the LORD replenishes a supply that was running low. It means His covenant love comes fresh to each day, each situation, each person, without depletion. You are not approaching a God who has spent His patience on your last crisis and has little left for this one. You are not wearing out His mercy. This should produce worship — not merely intellectual assent. Sit with this truth long enough to let it change the emotional register of your prayer. You are not going to God as a supplicant who has already asked too much. You are going to One whose mercies cannot be exhausted.

4. Examine your ways before you examine God’s. (*Will/Behavior*) Verse 39 does not suppress lament — the chapter is full of lament. But it redirects the natural human instinct, in suffering, to put God on trial. “Why would God let this happen?” is often a question that is really a charge: God is wrong, or unjust, or cruel. Lamentations 3:40 calls the community to a prior question: “Let us test and examine our ways.” Before you finish your indictment of God’s management of your life, ask whether there are patterns of sin, rebellion, or spiritual neglect that are part of the story. This is not victim-blaming — the man in this chapter is suffering enormously and his lament is entirely validated. It is a call to the spiritual practice of honest self-examination: take your sin seriously before you take God’s silence as the main problem.

5. Bring your enemies to God — don't just endure them. (*Will/Behavior*) The closing imprecation (vv. 64–66) is often skipped or spiritualized into irrelevance in modern exposition. But it is the chapter's final act and it is load-bearing. The man names his enemies, names what they have done, and asks God to deal with them justly. He does not take revenge. He does not despair. He prays with confidence that God has seen the wrong (v. 59), that God will act (v. 64), and that justice will come (v. 66). If you are in a situation of genuine injustice — where someone has wronged you, mocked you, or worked against you — Lamentations 3 does not call you to pretend it doesn't matter. It calls you to do something harder: bring it to God with the confidence that He has seen it, and let your petition to Him replace your impulse to retaliate or despair.

Theological Importance

Theological Importance: Lamentations 3 delivers one of the most important theological claims in the Old Testament about the relationship between God's sovereignty and human suffering: that God can be simultaneously the agent of affliction and the ground of hope, without contradiction. The *hesed* passage (vv. 22–33) does not deny the suffering catalogued in verses 1–18 — it sits beside it. The LORD who drove His servant into darkness is the same LORD whose mercies are new every morning. This is not inconsistency; it is the covenant God who disciplines His people within the relationship, not outside it. Verses 31–33 make the theological argument explicit: the LORD does not cast off forever; though He causes grief, He will have compassion; He does not willingly (*millibo*, “from His heart”) afflict the children of men. Suffering, within the covenant, is purposeful and bounded — it is not the expression of God's fundamental disposition toward His people. His fundamental disposition is *hesed*.

Reformed Theological Significance

Reformed Theological Significance: Lamentations 3 is a paradigmatic text for the Reformed understanding of *fiducia* — the trust component of saving faith — tested under fire. The Westminster Confession's definition of faith includes not only assent to what God has revealed but also trust in God's person and character when circumstances resist that trust. The discipline of verse 21 — “This I call to mind” — is precisely the exercise the Confession has in view: faith as an act of will, grounded in the objective covenant character of God, not in subjective experience or felt assurance. The chapter also displays the Reformed integration of divine sovereignty and human lament: God's absolute sovereignty over all events (vv. 37–38) does not suppress complaint but redirects it — lament is fully appropriate before God, while grumbling against His justice is not. Most significantly, the structure of the chapter — descent, recall of *hesed*, renewed petition, confident close — anticipates the Christological pattern: Christ descends into the uttermost darkness (the cross), cries from the pit (“My God, my God, why have you

forsaken me?”), is heard by the Father, and rises in vindication. The *geber* of Lamentations 3 is the figure that Christ fulfills — the one who bears affliction to the uttermost and is vindicated by the *hesed* of the LORD.

Main Takeaway

God’s *hesed* — His covenant faithfulness, His loyal love — is the one thing suffering cannot touch. It is not delivered through your circumstances; it is declared in His character. When the darkness is complete and hope has perished from your mouth (v. 18), the only move left is the move of verse 21: turn your mind away from what you feel and toward what you know. His mercies are new this morning. Not because anything changed overnight. Because He is who He is, and He cannot be otherwise.

Preaching/Teaching Pitfalls

Preaching/Teaching Pitfalls:

- **Preaching verses 22–23 in isolation from their context.** “Great is Thy Faithfulness” is one of the most beloved hymns in the Protestant tradition, drawn directly from Lamentations 3:22–23. The danger is preaching this passage as if it were a standalone declaration of God’s goodness divorced from the ruins surrounding it. The *hesed* of verses 22–23 is magnificent precisely *because* it appears in verses 22–23 — in the middle of one of the most extreme lament passages in Scripture, surrounded by darkness, bitterness, and shattered hope. Strip it from its context and it becomes a pleasant sentiment. Keep it in context and it becomes a lifeline thrown into a pit. The preacher must take the congregation down into the pit (vv. 1–18) before allowing them to hear the *hesed* passage — otherwise the theology is true but weightless.
- **Treating the pivot of verse 21 as emotional rather than volitional.** The text says “This I call to mind.” It does not say “Then I felt better” or “Then the grief lifted.” A common homiletical error is to present the pivot as the moment when the man’s emotional state changed. It didn’t — or at least, the text does not present the emotional change as what made the difference. What changed was where he directed his attention. Preaching the pivot as emotional will mislead congregants who are in deep suffering into thinking they need to feel differently before they can hope. Preaching it as volitional gives them something to do: choose to recall what you know about God’s character, right now, regardless of what you feel.
- **Using verse 39 to suppress lament.** “Why should a living man complain?” has been used pastorally and homiletically to tell suffering people to be quiet about their pain because they deserve it. This is a profound misreading. The entire chapter

is an act of complaint — structured, honest, relentless complaint before God. Verse 39 redirects the direction of complaint (away from charging God with injustice, toward examining one's own ways) but does not suppress it. A preacher who uses this verse to silence pain or hurry people past grief has mishandled the text and may cause real damage to those who most need to hear that lament is valid before God.

- **Skipping the second descent (vv. 48–54) in order to get to the resolution.** After the sustained beauty of the *hesed* passage and the theodicy interlude, many preachers rush to the confident close (vv. 55–66) and treat the second descent into anguish as an inconvenient interruption. This is homiletically and pastorally costly. The return of lament in verses 48–54 — after the hope of verses 22–33 — is one of the most realistic and pastorally important features of the chapter: the recall of *hesed* does not produce permanent emotional resolution. The grief returns. The pit reappears. The discipline of hope is not a one-time event; it is a practice that must be returned to repeatedly. Preaching the second descent honestly prepares congregants for the realism of faith in suffering — hope is not a feeling you achieve once and keep; it is a discipline you practice again and again.
- **Missing the Christological pattern in the *geber* figure.** The figure of the man who descends to the uttermost darkness, is nearly cut off, cries from the pit, and is heard and vindicated by the LORD is a type that reaches its fulfillment in Christ's descent into death and resurrection vindication. A Reformed exposition of Lamentations 3 that does not trace this pattern fails to preach the passage canonically. This does not mean forcing a heavy-handed allegory onto every verse — it means showing the congregation that the structure of faith-in-catastrophe that the *geber* enacts is the same structure that Christ supremely enacted, and that the *hesed* the man clings to is the same love that sent Christ into the ultimate pit on their behalf.
- **Moralizing the discipline of hope.** The pivot of verse 21 is not a technique for emotional resilience that any sufficiently disciplined person can employ. It is a theological act: a person in covenant relationship calling to mind the character of the covenant God. Stripped of its theological content — reduced to “choose to focus on the positive” or “practice gratitude” — it becomes therapeutic self-help dressed in biblical language. The *hesed* the man recalls is not generically “God is good.” It is specifically “the LORD, the God of Israel, the God of the Exodus, the God who swore *hesed* and *emet* in covenant — *this* God is still faithful.” The preacher must protect the specifically theological content of the pivot, or the application becomes a form of spiritual self-rescue rather than a turning to the God who has declared His own character.