

Hope Against Hope

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- [0 : 01] We praise you again, Father, for your word, your word that corrects us, that rebukes us, that also encourages us and trains us in righteousness.
- So, Father, we pray that your word indeed will be a sword that will be living and active today, that will be piercing our hearts, but that will also be healing them and bringing them to see again the Lord Jesus Christ.
- All this we pray in his name and for his name's sake. Amen. Hold fast to dreams, for if dreams die, life is a broken-winged bird that cannot fly.
- Hold fast to dreams, for when dreams go, life is a barren field, frozen with snow. Those are the words of the poet Langston Hughes, and I think he's onto something, isn't he?
- Especially if he permits me just for today to substitute the word hope for the word dreams. Hold fast to hope, for if hope dies, life is a broken-winged bird that cannot fly.
- [1 : 13] You see, hope is essential to life, isn't it? When we hope, we are imagining a better future. When we hope, we are expressing that this is not the end of the story. But we are only in the middle, and that the story will end happily.
- When we hope, we are assuming that there is a deeper meaning, a bigger purpose, a larger narrative to our lives. One which we can discover and participate in.
- When we hope, we believe that life is worth living. And so that means if we begin to lose hope, we will begin to believe that life is not worth living.
- Just think of suicide notes. Here's how one note would sit. Medication. Therapy. Counseling. Alcohol.
- I've tried everything. And I can't seem to figure out a way out of this. I can't crack the code. I can't crack the code. And notice how this person feels.
- [2 : 17] Exhausted. Helpless. And hopeless. He couldn't figure a way out. He couldn't crack the code. And so he felt he only had one option. To end his life.
- You see, hope is essential to life. But how can we hope when it seems like there is no hope? It's a question we all have to deal with, especially when we face suffering, sorrow, grief, loss, and anguish.
- It's a question that we all have to deal with this year as the pandemic rages on without any end in sight. It's a question that stays on our minds when we see an increase in racism, tribalism, misinformation, and intolerance in our world.
- And even when our gaze shifts from looking at the world to looking at ourselves, it's a question that doesn't go away. Martin Luther is one of the most famous Christians in history.
- As a very serious-minded and studious monk, he took his religion very seriously. And he found himself constantly asking, are my prayers sincere enough for God?
- [3 : 24] When I sin, are the feelings of remorse in my heart pure enough? But all that did was to make his conscience more and more terrified. Because he saw little hope in himself that he could change for the better.

That he could become somehow more sincere or more pure. Now, does that sound familiar? Is that your experience of the Christian life? And in fact, Luther saw so little hope that he began to hate God for being so severe in his mind.

And so whether we're looking at the world or ourselves, we find that the question remains, how can we hope when it seems like there is no hope? Well, that's what Lamentations 3 is all about.

The poet is going to show how against all hope there is hope. For 66 verses, he will take us on a journey. It's a journey that will initially take us through the darkness of hopelessness.

But thankfully, it doesn't end there. For he's going to keep moving until we break through to the light of hope. And then he's going to let that light of hope illuminate us for the rest of the journey.

[4 : 35] When we look at the beginning and the end of this chapter in verses 1 and verse 66, we find reference to the wrath of God. But at the centre of this chapter, indeed at the heart of this book, we find these words in verses 32 and 33.

Though he brings grief, he will show compassion. So great is his unfailing love, for he does not willingly bring affliction or grief to anyone.

If Lamentations 3 was a sandwich, then the outer layers look like they are made of harshness. But bite into it, and we discover that love and compassion are wrapped up within.

They are the feelings of hope. And so let's begin our journey. We're going to make four stops on this journey, and we'll mainly linger on the first two stops.

And our first stop takes us from verses 1 to 18, and I'm calling it the eclipse of hope. The eclipse of hope. For where is the hope in these opening verses?

[5 : 41] You'll be hard-pressed to find any. All you'll find is affliction. That's a word that was repeatedly used of Jerusalem in chapter 1 last week. And that's how the poet begins.

In other words, the poet is saying, I'm not the CEO in my office. I'm the engineer on site.

I'm not the coach on the sidelines. I'm the player on the field. You see, last week, when the poet spoke, he spoke as an onlooker. He speaks as one on the sidelines.

But today when he speaks, he speaks as a fellow sufferer. He speaks as one who was actually there. And if the poet is Jeremiah himself, as is likely, then he actually speaks as one of the faithful.

And yet that does not spare him from suffering. As God poured out his wrath on the city, he was right there with the rest of the inhabitants. He felt the effects.

[6 : 44] And so the poet speaks both in his personal capacity and as a representative, representing and summarizing all his nation's sorrows.

He's speaking as one of them. He's speaking from the inside. And the poet begins with a shocking image. My affliction comes by the rod of the Lord's wrath.

God is the shepherd. That's an image that they and we are familiar with. You know, God's the shepherd who leads us beside quiet waters and refreshes our soul.

God is the shepherd, whose rod, Psalm 23 verse 4 tells us, comforts me. But the rod of comfort has now been transformed into a rod of terror.

What was used to protect the sheep is now used to strike his very own flock. In the Old Testament, the rod is sometimes described as an instrument of discipline.

[7 : 48] It's what a parent might use to straighten out his child, as in Proverbs 22 verse 15. And it's what God himself will use to discipline his chosen kings, as in 2 Samuel 7 verse 14.

And this is exactly how the rod is now being used. Earlier in Israel's history, the nation of Assyria was described as the rod of God's wrath in Isaiah 10 verse 5.

And now it is Babylon's turn to be God's rod. And what a terrifying rod it is. In verse 4, instead of binding up the brokenhearted, God breaks the bones of his sheep.

Instead of being their fortress, in verse 5, he besieges them. Instead of being their sun and their shield, verse 6, he makes them dwell in darkness, almost like in a kind of hell.

The shepherd treats his sheep as if they deserve death. He places them in a kind of graveyard where he looks to have forsaken them. And he cannot be accessed.

[8 : 57] Verses 7 to 9 pictures this hopeless situation in another way. He has warred me in, so I cannot escape. He has weighed me down with chains.

Even when I call out or cry for help, he shuts out my prayer. He has barred my way with blocks of stone. He has made my paths. Crooked.

Imagine being completely shut in a solitary space. Or in a confined space, you know, like a solitary cell in prison. The walls are so thick that no one can hear your pleas for help.

And the end of verse 9 is especially ominous. For in the Old Testament, straight paths lead to life, but crooked paths lead only to death.

But that is the path that the poet is on. There is no escape. Do you sense the hopelessness? For how can there be hope when the shepherd himself has gone rogue?

[10 : 01] In Psalm 23, the shepherd leads the psalmist through the deepest valley, the darkest valley, the valley of the shadow of death. But here in verse 2, the shepherd now drives the poet away and makes him walk in darkness rather than light.

In verse 3, he has turned his hand against me again and again all day long. You see, this is not a one-off, but wave after wave of adversity as God keeps coming again and again like a battering ram.

There is no rest. There is no respite. And instead, verse 10, God is like a bear lying in wait, like a lion in hiding, dragging me from the path and mangling me, leaving me without help.

And that's why verse 12, he drew his bow and made me the target of his arrows. You see, how can that be? Well, remember last week, God is like an enemy.

And so the shepherd is simply behaving as he would towards his enemies. Except, that's us. It just gets worse.

[11 : 18] In verse 14, the poet says, he has become the lovingstock of all my people. They mock me in song all day long. Did you notice that it's not the Babylonians or other nations that mock him, but his own people?

Even when coming under judgment, his own people are still taunting him about his suffering. Indeed, he says it's like eating the bitterest of herbs, verse 15, or drinking gall, which is also a bitter-tasting shrub.

And then in verse 16, we have this picture of God standing on the poet like a victor over a prisoner of war. See, this entire bitter experience can be summed up in verse 18.

My splendor is gone and all that I had hope from the Lord. I have no hope. Verse 17 tells us what that feels like.

All sense of well-being is gone. There is no peace, no shalom. All memories and anticipations of happiness is gone.

[12 : 28] I have forgotten what prosperity is. I don't know any longer what it's like to feel joy. There is no splendor. One commentator suggests that the Hebrew word is better translated as everlastingness.

And if so, there is no everlastingness. And this indicates that Jerusalem has forfeited the long-lasting affection that God has shown his people.

There is an eclipse of hope. So is there anything at all in our first stop on this journey for us to learn? Is there anything instructive here for us?

Yes, I think there is. And I think the lesson of this section has to do with facing up honestly to our condition. Remember who the poet is speaking as?

He is speaking as someone who identifies with Jerusalem. And he is honest about Jerusalem's condition. Look carefully and you will notice that the poet isn't presenting these things as evidence that God is guilty of wrongdoing.

[13 : 40] Rather, he simply speaks in a matter-of-fact way. Yes, he has been treated as an enemy. Yes, he has been treated as a prisoner of war.

Yes, he has been consigned to the darkness. He is honest about all that. But not once does he speak as if all this is undeserved.

God has done all this, he says, but it is exactly what God ought to do. God has driven me away. He's turned his hand against me.

He's pierced my heart. He's deprived me of peace. And that is exactly right. The poet is incredibly honest. He names God's actions not to lodge a grievance or to make an appeal, but to bear witness and to testify to the rightness of what God is doing.

That's what lies behind the question of verse 39. Why should the living complain when punished for their sins?

[14 : 50] The implied answer is they shouldn't. As verse 38 puts it, if the living accept good things even when they're undeserved, why shouldn't they accept calamities when they're deserved?

I wonder how many of us can speak as honestly as this? How many of us can accept God's verdict on us as honestly as this?

You see, many of us, myself included, don't always see sin as something so serious that it requires nothing less than the divine shepherd's rod of wrath.

We don't see sin as something that we must passionately, fervently, completely, wholeheartedly oppose with our entire being.

It's a bit like how some of us might see lizards in our house. You know, we're not so particular about eradicating them. We just want to make sure that they don't appear at inconvenient times, like at dinner or something.

[16 : 00] And so rather than killing sin, we often have a more modest goal. We simply seek to keep sin under control. We simply seek to manage them. You know, it's like managing your fouling system.

As long as you make sure that your files are all kind of hidden away in the right drawers and they're not all over your place in the office for everyone to see, you're fine.

And so we see sin as nothing more than a failure than to manage our external behaviour. And if that's how we see sin, then similarly, we'll see living for God as just simply reduced to successfully managing our external behaviour.

And so we end up with a very low view of sin and how serious it is. And therefore, we'll also end up with a very low view of how serious we should take living for God.

But God isn't about sin management. He's about killing sin. That's how serious he is. How do we know this? Just by reading this section of Lamentations 3.

[17 : 13] It's clear how much God hates the sin, isn't it? But the problem is we can't easily separate sin from the sinner. One popular Christian cliché is to hate the sin but love the sinner.

And you're kind of understanding what that saying is trying to get at. But that isn't the language of the Bible. Certainly, in this passage, for God to hate the sin is for God to hate the sinner.

the wrath of God doesn't fall on some abstract concept of sin. It is sinners, not just sin, who face nothing less than the wrath of God.

Ephesians 2, verse 3 says that by nature we were objects or children of wrath. And so we must be honest about that. That's what Lamentations 3 demands of us.

And certainly, that's what the cross itself demands of us. For you see, the cross is not just a display of God's love. It is a display of his wrath.

[18 : 21] Sin is so serious that God's own beloved son could not pay with anything less than his own life.

And so if last week we asked, do you realize how destructive sin is? Well, this week we asked a different, if related, question. Do you realize how serious sin is?

Lamentations tells us that it is deadly serious. The gravity of the offense cannot be overstated. God hates sin.

And verses 1 to 18 tells us what happens when we don't deal with it. our dwelling is in darkness. Our ways are blocked. Our paths are crooked. Our cries are shut out. But verses 1 to 18 also tells us that we can't deal with it.

There's a sense of helplessness that surrounds the poet. And that helplessness leads to a sense of hopelessness. But the journey has not ended.

[19 : 32] For we now move on to the second stop of our journey, the rebirth. of hope. The rebirth of hope. Remember our question. How can we hope when it seems like there is no hope?

And that's where the poet is at by the time we get to verse 18. That's where his mind is at. In verse 19, he recalls all the bitter things that he has tasted.

Now I think we all know how easy it is to recall the hurts that we've experienced in the past. Those memories take no effort to call to mind. And it's not hard for the poet either.

And those memories of the recent past bring a fresh wave of present pain. As verse 20, his soul is downcast within him.

But in verse 21, we find a turning point. he calls to mind another memory. This, as the commentator Chris Wright puts it, is not the reaction of the emotions, but an action of the will.

[20 : 42] It is a deliberate remembering. Now, this isn't the poet just trying to engage in the pop psychology of positive thinking. You know, he's just not trying to call to mind and he's trying to conjure up something out of tin air.

For you see, what does he remember? What does he call to mind? The answer? Scripture. You see, he isn't seeking some new and extra revelation of God.

He has already hidden God's word in his heart. And that's what he now turns to. He turns to Exodus 34, verses 6 to 7.

He turns to the words of introduction that God has provided of himself on the screen. You see, it is Exodus 34 that underlies his statements in verses 22 and 23, and later on in verse 32.

he comes back to Exodus 34 where, on the one hand, God clearly shows that he is a God of justice. He doesn't leave the guilty unpunished.

[22 : 08] And at that moment, that's all too clear to the poet. But he now also recalls as well that God says he is the compassionate and gracious God.

And looking around him, that probably isn't obvious to the poet. But this is what he calls to mind. You see, what happens when life becomes dark and painful as it does for the poet here?

We have a couple of choices. We can simply let the memories of the past shape us. The poet can choose to let himself be defined by verse 19.

He can choose to define himself simply as a person who has tasted bitterness. And so he can choose to let that bitterness seep into his heart and cause him to be bitter towards God and towards others.

Or he could choose to recognize that while we are shaped by our memories, we are also more than just our past experiences. And we have the choice instead to turn our face upwards to God.

[23 : 23] More specifically, the choice that lies before us is the choice whether or not to believe that God is good. The Christian psychologist Michael Mangus writes this, it takes little faith to believe in God's existence.

One can even obey God without much faith in the way a slave or a pet obeys his master. But faith enters in at the powerful moments in our lives when we must decide whether or not we believe God is good.

And so how does a poet exercise faith? What gives him hope against hope? Well, let's look again at verses 22 and 23. Because of the Lord's great love, we are not consumed, for his compassions never fail.

They are new every morning. Great is your faithfulness. These are the best known words of the book of Lamentations. Perhaps these are the only words of Lamentations you knew prior to last week.

But I hope you begin to see now that in the context of the whole book, that this is no sentimental cliché printed on fridge magnets or coffee cups.

[24 : 50] Instead, these are powerful words drawn from the mouth of God himself through the testimony of scripture, which, in a situation of hopelessness, present hope from the outside and powerfully shape our entire outlook.

And let me just home in on one phrase in particular in that verse to show how the poet's hope is shaped. And it is that phrase, the Lord's great love.

Now, that's almost too weak a translation. The Hebrew word for great love is *hesed*, and it's translated in different ways. But perhaps the Jesus Storybook Bible, which, by the way, is a great children's Bible, might be the best at getting across the meaning.

The Jesus Storybook Bible calls God's *hesed* as God's never stopping, never giving up, unbreakable, always and forever love.

That's *hesed*. That is what great love means here. Think of the original context of Exodus 34 to get what that really means.

[26 : 04] The people have been rescued from terrible slavery in Egypt. They are now at Mount Sinai receiving the law. In Exodus 24 to 31, they have a ceremony marking the forming of a covenant between them and God.

And they also get the blueprint for the tabernacle where God has said that he will come and dwell with them. But while Moses is receiving the law at the top of the mountain, the people at the bottom become impatient and they decide to build a golden calf and worship it instead.

they are breaking the first two commandments even as it is being given. It's equivalent to a bride deciding halfway through her wedding ceremony to head to the hotel next door and jump in bed with a stranger instead.

That's how bad it is. And so the Lord judges. But here's the key thing. That is not the end of the story.

the people don't honour their vows. They deserve to be judged. But God still honours his vows. He doesn't just judge.

[27 : 17] He has mercy because he has chesed. You see, he's already promised to crush the serpent. He's already promised to bless the world through the children of Abraham.

He's already promised to be their God. His love is a never stopping, never giving up, unbreakable, and always and forever love.

And that is the consistent pattern of the Old Testament. Think of Noah being preserved even as the entire world turns wicked. Think of the next generation of Israel being preserved in the wilderness even as the previous generation grumbled and was wicked.

Because of the Lord's great love, we are not consumed. And that is what the poet is hanging on to. God's chesed, God's compassions, God's mercies, none of these ever come to an end.

They arrive brand new every morning. And that means that when there seems to be no hope, we can hang on to hope.

[28 : 25] Now, we all have an idea of God. God. Hopefully, our idea of God is biblically faithful and theologically sound. And so, if someone asks us what our idea of God is, we'll say he's good, he's loving, he's powerful.

But we all don't just have an idea of God. We all also have a lived experience of God. And sometimes our experience of God doesn't match our idea of God.

we don't feel his love. We feel he's quite weak sometimes. These are thoughts that we don't share with the pastor, but they are there.

And when we are facing adversity, when we're feeling the pain, well, those are the times when it's tempting simply to let our current experience of God become our guiding light.

We become like the poet in verse 19, remembering our affliction, remembering our bitterness, and so feeling downcast. But the poet shows us the better way.

[29 : 34] He asks us to call to mind God's chesed. And for us that means calling to mind the cross. You see, like the poet, Jesus identifies with his people.

He was the son of David who experienced the wrath of God's wrath. He watched as his father turned his face away and his prayers became cries of forsakenness.

He was given bitter gall to drink and became the laughingstock of his own people, the Jews. His bones were broken. He was filled with disgrace.

He dwelt with the dead. And so he truly is a great high priest who is able to sympathize with our every weakness, every affliction that you've gone through.

He knows it. the cross guarantees that God is truly merciful, truly faithful, truly filled with love. It presents us with hope, hope for transformation, hope for change, hope that sin will not always have the upper hand.

[30 : 42] And of course it's not just the cross where we see God's hesed, we see God's hesed even in Jesus' ministry, the way he treated Zacchaeus, the tax collector, the hated enemy of many, the way he had compassion on the Samaritan women, a sinner isolated by her community.

And we can look for God's hesed even in the little moments in our lives. Perhaps it was in a timely conversation that a Christian friend had with you at your lowest point.

Perhaps it was in a close call when God protected you from falling into harm or into sin. And that's what we need to keep calling to mind.

See, like the poet, it's so easy to look around and to see God as one with his arms crossed and his face tense as he disciplines. After all, that is his lived experience as we just saw in verses 1 to 18.

But in verses 21 to 23, he chooses instead to see God with open arms, who is willing to save, who is ready to embrace.

[31 : 53] And so can we? Why? Well, just jump ahead with me to verses 31 to 33 and look at what it tells us about God.

For no one is cast off by the Lord forever. Though he brings grief, he will show compassion, so great is his unfailing love, for he does not willingly bring affliction or grief to anyone.

You see, God gets no pleasure from inflicting grief on people. That's not how he wants to relate to us. He does so only because that is his just response to sin.

But his heart is really one of compassion and mercy. His heart is really a heart that wants us to get to know him. And that's what Martin Luther discovered.

As he studied the book of Romans, he began to realize that the righteousness of God was first of all a gift of God before it was a demand from God.

[32 : 55] He called it the sweetest words that he had ever heard because he saw the very heart of God in the person of Jesus Christ. And that's why we can say in verse 24, the Lord is my portion.

There I will wait for him. You see, what we believe about God and his character determines our hope. What we believe about God and his character determines our endurance.

But the good news is, the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus is what determines what we believe about God and his character.

The writer Mavaddon tells the story of an American man who visited a village in Africa. He followed the village pastor around until finally, when overcome by curiosity, he asked, pastor, where is your hope?

After all, he saw no tools with which this pastor could work, no materials with which this pastor could build, no food with which this pastor could pass on, all essential in this poor village.

[34 : 19] And the pastor just smiled at him and said, my hope is Jesus Christ. You see, it was hard for the American to figure out what hope there was in the pastor's situation.

The village was basically a dump, where it was easy to catch disease. But the pastor could. Not because he found hope in that situation, that's not what he said.

Rather, he could live joyfully because his hope was Jesus Christ. And if our hope is indeed Jesus, we can wait.

We hate to wait. After all, waiting means struggling. Waiting means having to struggle with our own fears that God will disappoint. Waiting means fearing that our hope will be in vain.

But God works according to his own timetable. And he would rather that we wait, if that's what it takes for us to know him, because that's always been his ultimate purpose.

[35 : 26] And that's why we hear these words in verse 25. The Lord is good to those whose hope is in him. And then notice the next line, to the one who seeks him.

And so when we're convinced that God is good, always and forever we can wait. We can hope. We can say, verse 26, it is good to wait quietly for the salvation of the Lord.

Notice that these amazing statements about God's character that we've been looking at come in the middle of the poem, not the end. They are not there to magically resolve everything right now but to help us to wait.

They are there to help us to grow in our trust of God. You see, that's the impulse of hope. That's our third stop on this journey, the impulse of hope.

See, hope drives us to keep trusting that God can and will be faithful to his promises, that salvation will come, that grief is not forever. And not just because God is a good God, but because God is sovereign.

[36 : 33] And that's the gist of verses 37 to 39. But if that's true, that our hope indeed is in a good and sovereign God, then that will necessarily push us in one direction.

It will push us in the direction of repentance. And that's verses 40 to 51. At this point, the poet doesn't just speak for Jerusalem.

He also now speaks to them. He speaks to them as prophet and pastor. And he leads them in a prayer of confession and corporate repentance. You see, notice again how direct and blunt the language is.

Verse 42, we have sinned and rebelled. Verse 43 to 46, notice how honest he is with God. He tells God, you know, you have made yourself absent and you have turned us over to our enemies.

And then he will cry before God in verses 49 to 51. You see, these are not just the mumbles of a little kid saying, sorry dad, and then quickly running off.

[37 : 35] This is proper, reflective repentance. And that makes sense, doesn't it? Think about what we've been saying so far. We've been saying that to find hope in the midst of hopelessness, we can only locate it in one place, in the gracious and compassionate God himself.

And so that means hope is found when we turn to him. But, turning to God means turning away from sin.

That's the definition of repentance. And repentance is more than just saying sorry quickly and then running away. Repentance is confession without minimization.

repentance accepts consequences and never takes forgiveness lightly. Repentance leads to humility and meekness. And we find all those elements in verses 40 to 51.

The impulse of hope pushes us to repentance. And repentance pushes us back in the direction of hope. Think of Psalm 30 verses 4 to 5.

[38 : 46] For his anger lasts only for a moment. But his favor lasts a lifetime. Weeping may stay for the night, but rejoicing comes in the morning.

And that leads us to our fourth and final stop this morning, the confidence of hope. The confidence of hope. There's a certain change in tone and content from verses 52 onwards that we might find a bit disorientating.

But perhaps a good way in is to recognize that in verses 52 to 58, the poet is no longer speaking as a representative of Jerusalem, but speaking as a prophet to Jerusalem.

And he is basically sharing his personal story. If the poet is indeed Jeremiah, this fits with what happened to him. In Jeremiah 38, the prophet himself was thrown into a well and left to die by government officials who hated his message and he had to be rescued by a foreigner.

And now the poet gives us a first-person perspective of his experience. My enemies hunted me, he says in verse 52. They tried to end my life in verse 53.

[40 : 02] I thought I was going to die, verse 54. But here is the confidence he can have, verse 55. And so this is the hope you can have, the poet now says to Jerusalem.

You can trust that God himself will take up your course and hear your plea. And that is the same confidence we can have because Jesus himself, the son of God, took up our course and became our advocate.

And then from verse 59 onwards it appears that the poet is now speaking once again as Jerusalem. He gives voice to their cries. Please God, he cries, you've redeemed my life.

And so now vindicate me against those who seek to do harm to God's people, who seek to frustrate God's plans. This is not so much a request for revenge as a request for justice.

Remember, the gracious and compassionate God does not leave the guilty unpunished. And it's similar in kind to what Paul says about Alexander at the end of his life in 2 Timothy 4 verse 14.

[41 : 24] This is what Paul says, Alexander the metal worker did me a great deal of harm. The Lord will repay him for what he has done.

Christian hope, you see, is a confident hope. It's a hope that wrongs will be made right, that the unrighteous will be unpunished, and that the righteous in Christ will be vindicated.

But that's in the future. In the meantime, we wait. And so as we end, let's zoom out to the bigger picture.

As we look at 2020, I think it's reasonable to say that God is shaking our world right now. I think it's reasonable to say that God wants to wake us up to help us to see the folly of human self-sufficiency.

I think it's even reasonable to say that God wants us to be honest about the spiritual condition of our churches. And that's why he has chosen to deprive us, in a sense, of the many things that we have taken for granted, to force us to ask if we are truly seeking God for who he is, or if we are really just lukewarm social groupings masquerading as a church.

[42 : 47] And I fear that if we still do not heed God's wake-up call, then he might increase the volume and plunge us even further into an even bleaker situation.

But I trust that amongst us there are those of us who strive to be faithful, just like the poet himself. 2020 has tested us like no other event in recent memory.

So how can we hope when there seems to be no hope? The answer is we can hope because we know who God is, the gracious and compassionate God.

And he has not left us in the dark. He has told us the story of this world and he has told us how the story will end. And it is a story where the climax is that of Jesus Christ entering the world and dying and rising again as the ultimate revelation of his headset.

And that is the story we participate in. We need to remember COVID-19 is not the main character or event in God's story, much as the fall of Jerusalem is not the main story, the main event in the story of the Bible.

[44 : 07] A hundred years from now, people will forget about it, much like many of us have forgotten about the 1918 flu pandemic. But God himself will not be forgotten.

So let us call to mind God himself. Let us say along with the poet, the Lord is my portion, therefore I will wait for him.

Great is thy faithfulness. Let's pray. Heavenly Father, we come before you.

And as we look around us, we recognize that we are currently experiencing a situation where often you look absent, you don't look like you're here, you don't look like your purposes are being carried out.

And yet, Father, we know that you remain present in every situation. And Father, we pray that in this time, in this year, that we will take the opportunity not to drown ourselves in all kinds of distractions, but help us to be reflective.

[45 : 30] Help us to turn to you and turn away from sin, to acknowledge where we have gone off the beaten paths, where we have gone on the crooked paths.

But will you take us off those crooked paths and put us back on the straight path, the straight path that leads to life, the straight path that leads to Jesus. And so help us to see the Lord Jesus again, see how gracious and compassionate he is.

help us to keep calling to mind who you are, what you have done, and help us to keep seeking you in all things.

All this we pray in the name of Jesus Christ. Amen.