

Our Faithful God
Lamentations 3:19-24
Rev. Brian Bill
July 21-22, 2018

I did something last Sunday afternoon that I have never done before. I attended the John Deere Classic. My brother-in-law gave me free tickets so I took my son-in-law Brad. I didn't really know what to expect because I am not a golfer. It was pretty incredible watching professional golfers hit that tiny white ball hundreds of yards and make twenty-yard putts with ease.

I peppered Brad with questions as we walked the beautiful course. I learned about birdies (those are good) and bogeys (those are bad) and bunkers (those are really bad), slices, hooks and fades and the importance of keeping quiet when golfers were preparing to hit a shot (which wasn't easy for me).

We spent time near the tees and by the greens. We even got caught up in the crowd that was following Michael Kim who won by a record eight strokes at 27-under par, which is the lowest ever in the John Deere Classic.

Brad and I left after a couple hours but when I got home I watched Michael Kim finish his last two rounds. As he came up to the final green to line up his shot, he spotted his parents on the large CBS feed. He quickly scanned the crowd and when he saw where they were he broke out into a huge smile. They, along with his brother, had taken a red-eye flight to be there for the celebration.

Just then Beth walked in the room and was surprised to see me watching golf, something I had never done before. In the past I had told her that watching golf was like watching paint dry but now I told her I was taking up golf...at least on TV!

When Michael Kim sank his final putt his parents and brother embraced him. It was pretty cool that they showed up but it got me thinking. I wonder if they would have taken a middle of the night flight from San Diego if he hadn't made the cut? Would they had been there if he had been in tenth place? Related to this, it struck me that these great golfers only received applause (the golf clap) when they hit an amazing shot. When it was just average or a bad shot, the crowd was quiet.

Some of us have hit bogey after bogey in life and it feels like we're struggling to get out of the sand trap. No one is clapping for us and we wonder if God is ever going to show up.

We're halfway through our summer series called, "Behold Your God!" Let me point out that we're called to "*behold God*," not behave *for* God. Once we behold, we *will* behave but if we only focus on moral behavior without beholding God, we'll neither please Him nor find personal satisfaction. As Paul Tripp says, "*We don't have a behavior problem, we have an awe problem.*"

We've looked at how God is knowable, holy and all-powerful. Next weekend we'll do some serious study about God's justice and in two weeks we'll celebrate His immutability (unchangeability). We'll land the series by learning about the love of God. Our topic today is the faithfulness of God.

As we consider God's faithfulness, it's difficult to find an English word that is an exact equivalent to the Hebrew, which is the word, "*Amen*." Here are a few words that help capture the richness of its meaning: "*Firmness, constancy, support, trustworthiness, loyalty and steadfastness.*" The opposite of faithfulness is "*ever-changing or wishy-washy.*" Someone who is faithful is steadfast in affection and allegiance.

Here's a simple definition: "*God's faithfulness means that everything He says and does is certain.*" He is 100% reliable, 100% of the time. He says what He means and means what He says – and therefore does everything He says He will do. God's faithfulness is not some minor or secondary part of His character. To say that God is faithful goes to the very core of who He really is.

A.W. Pink adds, "*This quality is essential to His being, without it He would not be God. For God to be unfaithful would be to act contrary to His nature, which [is] impossible...He never forgets, never fails, never falters, never forfeits His word.*"

Key Passages on God's Faithfulness

Here are some key passages on the faithfulness of God.

- Exodus 34:6: "***The LORD passed before him and proclaimed, 'The LORD, the LORD, a God merciful and gracious, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love and faithfulness, keeping steadfast love for thousands...'***"

- Deuteronomy 7:9: ***“Know therefore that the LORD your God is God, the faithful God who keeps covenant and steadfast love with those who love him and keep his commandments, to a thousand generations.”***
- Deuteronomy 32:4: ***“The Rock, his work is perfect, for all his ways are justice. A God of faithfulness and without iniquity, just and upright is he.”***
- Psalms 25:10: ***“All the paths of the LORD are steadfast love and faithfulness.”***
- 1 Corinthians 1:9: ***“God is faithful, by whom you were called into the fellowship of his Son, Jesus Christ our Lord.”***

No sermon on an attribute of God would be complete without an A.W. Tozer quote: *“Faithfulness is that in God which guarantees that He will never be or act inconsistent with Himself...All of God’s acts are consistent with all of His attributes. No attribute contradicts any other, but all harmonize and blend into each other in the infinite abyss of the Godhead...God, being who He is, cannot cease to be what He is...He is at once faithful and immutable, so all His words and acts must be and must remain faithful.”*

Paul drew on this truth when he wrote to the Thessalonians, ***“He who calls you is faithful; he will surely do it.”*** (1 Thessalonians 5:24) God’s faithfulness is at the core of His very nature. Chip Ingram writes, *“If we do not understand and trust God’s faithfulness, we will not trust the rest of His character either...He may not do what you want Him to do exactly when you want Him to or even how you want Him to. He may not orchestrate it in a way that you can understand it now, or perhaps ever. But He will never let you down.”*

A Song of Lament

Last week, as we focused on God’s power, we looked at the life of Jeremiah. You’ll recall that Jeremiah’s preaching was not very popular because he urged the people to surrender to the King of Babylon. Let’s turn now to the book of Lamentations, which is a collection of sad songs, or mournful laments that take place after Jerusalem has been destroyed. The human author is most likely Jeremiah. It’s been called a *“poem of pain, a symphony of sorrow.”*

The Book of Lamentations uses acrostics based on the Hebrew Alphabet. Chapter three is even more carefully composed with each paragraph beginning with the next letter in the alphabet while each sentence within that stanza also begins with that same letter. That means a lot of thought has gone into selecting the exact words that express these sad thoughts.

Lamentations is not the original title but was the name given to it by Greek translators after the exile. The actual title is taken from the first word in chapters 1, 2 and 4, “How,” as in, “*How in the world did all this happen?*” It could also be translated, “*alas!*” which was a characteristic cry of lament or exclamation of agony. Thousands have been killed, others have been deported and those who remained were reduced to cannibalism. Jeremiah’s greatest fears have been replaced with never-ending tears.

As we come to chapter 3 we see that Jeremiah bares his heart, not holding back the depths of his despair.

A List of Laments

In the first 20 verses, the weeping prophet uses language that is real and raw. Here are some highlights, or lowlights.

- **He is in the dark.** Instead of seeing things clearly, Jeremiah feels the loneliness of darkness: “*He has driven and brought me into darkness without any light...*” (3:2)
- **He feels like God is against Him.** Because of God’s judgment, Jeremiah writes “*surely against me He turns His hand again and again the whole day long.*” (3:3).
- **He is tormented mentally and physically.** Jeremiah’s pain is both acute and chronic. Look at verse 4: “*He has made my flesh and my skin waste away; He has broken my bones.*”
- **He can’t find release.** We see this in verse 5: “*He has besieged and enveloped me with bitterness and tribulation.*”
- **Feels like prayers are not heard.** Notice verse 8: “*Though I call and cry for help, He shuts out my prayer.*”

- **People make fun of him.** Notice verse 14: *“I have become the laughingstock of all peoples, the object of their taunts all day long.”*
- **His hope is gone.** He can’t forget his troubles because they ambush him at every turn. In verse 18, he says, *“My endurance has perished; so has my hope from the Lord.”*

While Jeremiah experienced a lot of pain and agony, my guess is that some of you have the lyrics to his lament memorized. Perhaps you are experiencing many of these same things and secretly wonder if God is really faithful.

In the midst of this dirge of despair, listen to what Jeremiah writes next in Lamentations 3:19-24: *“Remember my affliction and my wanderings, the wormwood and the gall! My soul continually remembers it and is bowed down within me. But this I call to mind, and therefore I have hope: The steadfast love of the LORD never ceases; his mercies never come to an end; they are new every morning; great is your faithfulness. ‘The LORD is my portion,’ says my soul, ‘therefore I will hope in him.’”*

Some of you are already humming, “Great is Thy Faithfulness” because it comes right from this passage. We’re going to sing this great hymn at the end of the service.

Here’s the main thing I want us to get today: *Focus on God’s faithfulness, not your frustrations.* This is easier said than done because it’s really a process. Let’s learn from the progression Jeremiah went through.

1. List your laments. While it doesn’t seem spiritual to list your laments, it’s actually an important first step. Are you aware that about 1/3 of the Psalms are songs of sadness? In fact, there are more psalms of lament than any other category.

Look at verse 19: *“Remember my affliction and my wanderings, the wormwood and the gall.”* Jeremiah is asking God to recall that his life is filled with frustrations. The word **“affliction”** means *“trouble or misery”* and **“wanderings”** refers to being *“restless or homeless.”* It was also used of *“straying.”* Wormwood is a harmful plant and symbolizes bitterness. Gall is a poison or life-threatening substance. It’s also used of the bitter secretion of the liver. I

experience gall when I eat Mexican or Thai food too late at night and my acid reflux acts up.

In a world of, “*Don’t worry, be happy,*” it’s more honest to admit that many times we’re stressed and sad. It’s good for us to lament before the Lord. My guess is that many of you are more sad than glad, maybe even mad. While many preachers hold out the promise of health and wealth and happiness, the real world is filled with sickness, scarcity and sadness.

Listing your laments is healthy but dwelling on them can lead to discouragement and despair. When Jeremiah replayed all his problems to God, it sent him to a really dark place. Listen to verse 20: “***My soul continually remembers it and is bowed down within me.***” The word “***continually***” means that Jeremiah is “*rehearsing his problems over and over.*” And when he does, his very soul sinks within him. Actually, in the Hebrew the word “***remember***” is used twice – “*I remember remember them.*” Some of us are so good at focusing on the negatives that we twice remember them. We could translate it like this: “*As often as my soul calls them to remembrance, it is bowed down in me.*”

It’s OK to be honest with God and express your real feelings, but it’s not OK to stay there. My guess is that some of you are stuck and all you can do is go over and over all your problems. Jeremiah had every reason to sing the blues and just pitch his faith, but he didn’t. He forced himself to think about God’s character – in particular he grabbed onto His faithfulness.

You may think that you can’t help what you’re feeling. I don’t mean for this to sound harsh but you don’t have to allow what you’ve gone through to keep you emotionally entangled and spiritually sidetracked forever. Let’s look now at what Jeremiah latched on to when his world was falling apart. We’ll see that he *focused on God’s faithfulness, not his frustrations.*

2. Consider God’s character. Verse 21 is really the “hinge” on which the book, and Jeremiah’s life turns: “***But this I call to mind, and therefore I have hope...***” The word “***but***” serves as a contrast to what Jeremiah had just been doing. The phrase, “***I call to mind***” has the idea of “*doing something again, of returning or bringing back.*” The Hebrew literally means, “*I make it to return to my heart.*” Jeremiah is being intentional, forcing himself to focus on what is true.

Notice that Jeremiah is not minimizing his troubles or denying his sufferings. But he is making a choice to not dwell on them by choosing to remember something else instead.

While his outward affliction and inward turmoil pushed him toward despair, Jeremiah forces himself to bring truth to the forefront of his mind. Like a computer that “defaults” to certain settings, each of us have a “despair default.” If we don’t reconfigure our minds, we will slide down the slippery slope of discouragement and despair.

In order to break out of this pattern and cycle of despair, Jeremiah needed to be vigilant about what he allowed himself to think about. He was aware of the attributes of the Almighty but they were in the back of his mind and so he brought them to the front of his mind.

Brothers and sisters, what Jeremiah did was something we need to do as well. We need to engage our will, and purposely and deliberately focus on God’s promises rather than our problems. Force yourself to remember truth. Recall a verse. Remember a time when God demonstrated his grace and mercy to you. Push God’s attributes to the front of your mind, even when you don’t feel like doing it. When you do, God will begin to restore hope to your life by crowding out the hopelessness that threatens to shipwreck you spiritually.

Focus on God’s faithfulness, not your frustrations.

What to Call to Mind

Now, what did Jeremiah call to mind? What did he hone in on while he was hurting?

Verses 22 and 23 contain great truths.

- **God’s love will never leave me.** We see this in verse 22: ***“The steadfast love of the Lord never ceases.”*** The Hebrew word for “love” is *hesed*, a word rich with meaning. It has within it the idea of “loyal love,” a love that will not let go because it does not depend on emotion but on an act of the will. This is also translated in the plural as *“lovingkindnesses.”* Ray Pritchard makes the following point: *“As bad as things are, if it weren’t for God, things would be much worse.”*

We need to be constantly reminded of God's steadfast love, don't we? Check out Psalm 89:33: ***"But I will not remove from him my steadfast love or be false to my faithfulness."*** We sang about God's overwhelming, never-ending love earlier in the service: *"O it chases me down; fights 'til I'm found; leaves the ninety-nine. I couldn't earn it; I don't deserve it; still You give Yourself away."*

Sometimes people tell me they struggle when certain phrases or choruses are repeated over and over in songs. I admit that there are certain songs that I don't care for because of all the repetition. But then I'm reminded that the chorus, ***"For His steadfast love endures forever"*** is repeated 26 times in Psalm 136! Let me read just the first three verses: ***"Give thanks to the LORD, for he is good, for his steadfast love endures forever. Give thanks to the God of gods, for his steadfast love endures forever. Give thanks to the Lord of lords, for his steadfast love endures forever."*** Instead of replaying our problems, let's repeat God's promises.

- **God's mercies will never run out.** This is what we see in the second half of verse 22: ***"His mercies never come to an end."*** The word *mercies* is plural because His mercy is intense and limitless. It comes in rolling waves from the very presence of God. The rivers of mercy flow fully and constantly, and never run dry.

The word ***"mercy"*** is also translated as *compassion* and comes from the Hebrew word *"womb"* which shows the gentle feeling of concern and care that God has for us. The word literally means, *"to be moved in the heart out of love for another."* God's compassion emanates from deep within Him and floods our lives. He is moved with mercy when He thinks about you.

- **God gives me what I need each day.** Look at the first part of verse 23: ***"They are new every morning."*** The word ***"new"*** can mean, *"fresh; never seen before."* God gives us exactly what we need each day. With every dawn comes a new wave of God's mercies. Which means we should look for new mercies every morning. One person put a plaque on their wall to help them remember: *"Every day may not be good, but there is something good in every day."* God sends His mercies to meet our immediate needs each day.

This ties into Jesus' words found in Matthew 6:34: ***"Therefore do not be anxious about tomorrow, for tomorrow will be anxious for itself."***

Sufficient for the day is its own trouble.” God gives us what we need today and when tomorrow comes we’ll have what we need for that day. Aren’t you glad that God gives a fresh supply of His loyal love and magnificent mercy every morning?

Let’s summarize what we’re learning from Jeremiah’s process as he *focused on God’s faithfulness, not his frustrations.*

First, list your laments. Second, consider God’s character.

3. Pray God’s attributes back to Him. Look at the last part of verse 23: ***“Great is your faithfulness.”*** Jeremiah starts out grumbling and then he focuses his thoughts on God’s character and now He prays a prayer based on one of God’s attributes. Notice that he is not talking *about* God, but is rather talking directly *to* Him. And He chooses to declare that God’s faithfulness is ***“great,”*** which means it is *“abundant, numerous, mighty and much.”* Observe also that you don’t have to feel like it before you can pray it.

Remember, he’s not saying that God is faithful (though He is), he’s praying it *to Him*. It becomes a lot more real when we talk to Him: *“Lord, I don’t understand. I don’t like it. But great is your faithfulness!”*

4. Say God’s truth to yourself. After Jeremiah prays, he now talks to himself: ***“‘The Lord is my portion,’ says my soul, ‘therefore I will hope in him.’”*** We could personalize it this way: *“I says to myself, ‘Self, the Lord is all you need so put your hope in him.’”* The idea is not to listen to your feelings but rather tell your feelings to listen to the facts. Many of us need to talk back to our feelings instead of letting them run our lives.

I’ve shared this before but it’s so helpful its worth repeating. Too many of us let our feelings drive the train, when the Bible calls us to let the facts of God’s Word be the engine of our faith [show image].

The idea of ***“portion”*** is very interesting. It refers to *“territory, treasure, possession or share”* and was used of the spoils of war. Jeremiah is saying something like this, *“In the battles I’m going through, God is my reward and treasure.”* He is the only one who can satisfy.

Portion also refers to an allotment of land that was very important to the Israelites. This makes me think of how Aaron was denied an inheritance of land in Numbers

18:20. Instead of land, he inherited the Lord: ***“You shall have no inheritance in their land, neither shall you have any portion among them. I am your portion and your inheritance among the people of Israel.”***

Can you say that God is all you need? If you can, then you will put all your hope in Him. C.S. Lewis said it like this: *“He who has God and everything else has no more than he who has God only.”*

Fleshing Out God’s Faithfulness

Here then are some ways we can experience God’s great faithfulness in our lives:

1. Put your faith in Christ for salvation. Romans 10:9 says, ***“If you confess with your mouth that Jesus is Lord and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved.”***

2. Step out in faith. God loves it when we demonstrate faith as found in Hebrews 11:6: ***“And without faith it is impossible to please him, for whoever would draw near to God must believe that he exists and that he rewards those who seek him.”*** As a practical assignment, read through the “Hall of Faith” in Hebrews 11 and pick a man or woman of faith to study and emulate. In what ways is God asking you to grow in faith? How about in the frequency of your gathering? In your growing? In your giving? In your going?

3. Be faithful to keep your marriage vows. Hebrews 13:4: ***“Let marriage be held in honor among all, and let the marriage bed be undefiled, for God will judge the sexually immoral and adulterous.”*** One of the strengths of Edgewood are all the couples who’ve been married for 50 years or longer. I just heard George and Carol Baxa will be joining the ranks on Friday.

4. Trust God’s faithfulness when you are tempted. Did you know that because God is faithful, He will provide a way out so you don’t have to give in to temptation? 1 Corinthians 10:13: ***“No temptation has overtaken you that is not common to man. God is faithful, and he will not let you be tempted beyond your ability, but with the temptation he will also provide the way of escape, that you may be able to endure it.”***

5. Trust God’s faithfulness to forgive you. 1 John 1:9 says that God’s faithfulness is tied to our forgiveness: ***“If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness.”***

6. Be faithful to the end. I find the question Jesus asked in Luke 18:8 often rolling around in my mind: *“Nevertheless, when the Son of Man comes, will He find faith on the earth?”*

I received a call from George King on Friday. George, along with his wife Ellen and daughter Ruth, have been missionaries in Japan for 58 years, being supported by Edgewood all those years! George has been back in the States for some surgeries on his eye, for the cancer on his back and for his broken arm. He has another surgery on September 9 and plans to be back in Japan on September 15. He has therapy three hours a day and told me that he’s been doing a lot of translation work while he’s recovering. He wanted to make sure I didn’t think he was being lazy!

And then he said something that I can’t stop thinking about: *“Pastor Brian, I’m 85 years old and hope to plant two more churches before I retire.”*

George reminds me of what Caleb said when he was 85 as recorded in Joshua 14:11-12: *“I am still as strong today as I was in the day that Moses sent me...So now give me this hill country of which the LORD spoke on that day, for you heard on that day how the Anakim were there, with great fortified cities. It may be that the LORD will be with me, and I shall drive them out just as the LORD said.”*

While golf is becoming fun for me; George is being faithful to preach the gospel. May we be found as faithful as he is. I close with a quote from him: *“When you surrender your life to God, He will do with it more than you could imagine!”*

Let’s focus on God’s faithfulness, not on our frustrations.

Closing Song: Great is Thy Faithfulness

Membership – Lauren Elgin (Saturday)

Pray for John Blackburn (10:45)

Pray for Puerto Rico team

Benediction

Receive this benediction based on Psalm 138.

*Go with confidence into the days ahead,
trusting in God's unfailing love and faithfulness.
God will not abandon you,
for you are the work of His hands—His own creation—
and His love endures forever.
So go in joy to love and serve the Lord!*