

Title: Fighting for faith
Text: Lamentations 3
Theme: Fighting for faith in the storm
Series: Lamentations #4
Prop Stmtnt: Fighting for faith in the storm has to start before the storm.

You've been married for 15 years and have 3 children when your husband announces that he is leaving, although he tries to reassure you that this is not your fault, it's all him. But, when you have to move because you can't afford the house payment and have to find sitters and drivers because you have to work all the time, the fact that it is not your fault is not all that comforting. You may not be at fault, but that doesn't mean that you don't incur collateral damage.

Lamentations is a collection of poems of lament. The poet is grieving over the loss of his people, his city and his nation. His anguish is personal, certainly, but also theological. He does not question whether or not there is a God. He knows that what has happened to Jerusalem at the hand of the Babylonians is from God because God repeatedly said through his prophets that this was going to happen. But, one of his questions is, why does he have to pay? Why is he caught up in this? He didn't rebel against God and yet he is suffering the collateral damage as if he did.

Read Text: 3.19-33

The poet of Lamentations 3 questions his beliefs. He does not hide his struggle. In the midst of his struggle, he makes a powerful claim. In the midst of the storm, he plants a flag, declares his faith, and stakes his claim. Lamentations 3 has some of the most treasured words in the Bible. But, then the poet, it seems, goes back and pulls up the flag and we are left wondering whether or not he really meant what he said. I want him to mean it. But, then he seems to put the flag back in the ground again. Lamentations 3 (and the book for that matter) does not end with a neat and tidy bow. Outlining the flow of this poem was a challenge because the points are inconsistent. What I came up with is this:

- 1) God must hate me (1-21).
- 2) I will trust God anyway (20-39).
- 3) God, it still feels like you hate me (40-54).
- 4) I still believe that God will rescue me (55-66).

I think that most of us view suffering as "summer school." I didn't pass the test the first time, so now I have to go to summer school. But, once I learn my lesson, then the suffering will be over and I can go on with my life. So, we enter into a season of suffering and we think, ok, I need to hurry up and learn my lesson so that I can get through this season. But, what happens, if you learn your lesson, or you do not lose faith and in the midst of your suffering, you boldly declare your trust in God and the suffering does not end? Now what? Now is when you find out what you really believe. I have to learn to trust God when my circumstances are bad. I have to learn to trust God when my circumstances are bad and they do not change. I have to learn to trust God when my emotions do not change.

Beloved, this chapter is an honest-to-God view of what our experience as believers can look and feel like. Not everyone may go through something like this, but many of you do. And I desperately want you to know that just because your faith gets rocked from time to time, or there is a level of inconsistency in your beliefs from time to time does not mean that there is something fatally wrong with you. God put this poem in his Word so that you could find a language that expresses your experience when what you experience is erratic.

The detailed writing style tells us that these poems are carefully written, and it probably took a long time to consider every word and how to best express everything. This is not a shoot from the hip, heat-seeking, emotional knee-jerk verbal missile. This is a well-thought, organized, painstakingly written expression of what the poet was thinking. And at the end of the chapter, everything is not ok. Everything is not neat and tidy, with all of the crumbs of the crisis swept up and the mess of the catastrophe mopped up and wrung out in the drain leaving the room all clean again. The situation is not resolved at the end of the chapter. Happy times are not here again. The poet is not tapping his foot and pumping his fist to Elton John singing, I'm still standing on the oldies station. The problem is not gone, the questions and the conflict remain.

1. **God must hate me.** (3.1-21)

This “honest-to-God” admission about life touches about every nerve ending. Verses 1-3 are like the general description. God is against me. I live as the recipient of his rod of wrath and I am not sure how much more of this I can handle. My life is dark. There is no light at the end of the tunnel. He goes on to describe things he is experiencing physically and emotionally (4-6). My flesh and skin are wasting away, my bones are broken (4). I am totally surrounded with bitterness and tribulation. I feel more dead than alive and he's just getting started. These are the things that he is saying that God has done to him. He sounds clinically depressed, schizophrenic, claustrophobic and paranoid. He is trapped without any means of escape. He imagines bears waiting to eat him, arrows being shot at him and hitting him and being laughed at by about anyone who sees him. His teeth grind on gravel, he cowers in ashes and he has no remembrance of ever being happy. He is in despair. By v.18 he says that he is at the end of his rope and that he all hope in God is gone. He really sounds suicidal. Why would God put this in the Bible?

Many people prefer a religion where you can pray away danger, believe away problems, declare the darkness gone and praise away pain. Jesus is essentially a pill in a bottle to dull the pain and mask the issues so I can survive. I can see why you want that. I can see why that is attractive. The pains in our lives are real and the sorrows we experience run deep. The things that suffering seems to say about us are frightening and I can certainly understand why you want to avoid that. But true religion is not living untouched by sorrow. Authentic Christianity is raw because it is real. It does not minimize our pain, ignore the reality of our grief, question the legitimacy of our doubts or call us to live in a land of make-believe. Lamentations 3 is a report from the battle field and it includes a tally of casualties. All is not well, even if we want it to be. It does not describe the entire war, but it does describe a day. And this day is not particularly a great day. If that has ever described you, or that describes you right now, take heart. You do not have to pretend that every day with Jesus is sweeter than the day before. In fact, this text is saying that every day with Jesus is NOT sweeter than the day before. That song, while well meaning, is not helpful. Learn songs that you can sing at night.

Look at v.19. In v.19, the poet actually prays. Up until this point he has been talking about God, but now he actually talks to God and what he says to God is more like a complaint. Remember my affliction and my wanderings, the wormwood and the gall! (meaning soul-rotting, stomach-turning bitterness) In fact when I remember it my soul is crushed, it seems again. But, something happens when he prays. As he complains to God, he remembers something else. He considers some things about God that he has forgotten and now he calls them to mind. And in this moment when he begins to preach to himself instead of listening to himself, he begins to turn a corner.

2. **I will trust God anyway.** (22-39)

These verses are strong affirmations about the character and purposes of God. These are the things that he remembers about God and therefore preaches to his own soul. Obviously, the poet is not denying reality or glossing over the destruction around him. In fact, there does not seem to be anything circumstantially that he can point to in the moment that would give him reason to say these things. This guy's life is being crushed. What is spilling out of him is anguish, fear, anger and deep grief. But that's not all. There is something else that is coming out as the sponge of his life is being wrung. He realizes that he believes God. It's there. In spite of everything that has happened, he believes God. He not only affirms that, but there are passages of Scripture that spill out of his broken heart.

This sounds like Job who says, "*even though you slay me, I will still trust you.*" All of these things the poet says are good and true and he says them as if he is trying to both defend God to others and preach to himself. And we all need to preach to ourselves because when listen to ourselves we tend to hear: My suffering means that God is against me. My suffering must mean that I am not a Christian. My suffering must mean that God's promises do not work for me. My suffering must mean that I don't fit in. My suffering must mean that I am cursed, non-elect. Instead of listening to ourselves, we need to preach to ourselves which is what the poet is doing.

He recalls things that are true and then he says, here is what I will do. For example, the steadfast love of the LORD never ceases; (that's true) his mercies never come to an end, (that's true) they are new every morning, your faithfulness is great and the LORD is my portion. All of that is true. Therefore, I WILL hope in him. He is explaining to himself and anyone else who will listen that since the love of the LORD and his mercies do not stop that it is actually not foolish to hope in God because the love and mercy of God will outlast whatever calamity he is experiencing. God's judgment is huge, but God's love and mercy are bigger still. The judgment of God is real, but it does not cancel out the mercy of God. Wow! This resonates with us, doesn't it? In the midst of his pain he plants a flag of faith and takes the high ground. There's more. Look at v.25.

What does it mean to wait for God? Waiting for God is not like the parent sitting in the school parking lot waiting for her daughter to be done with play practice or marching band rehearsal. That waiting is marking time. Compare that kind of waiting to waiting for your family to come over for Thanksgiving. Now your waiting is active preparation based on your confident expectation of their arrival. The poet is saying that the LORD is good to those who actively prepare for him to show up, knowing that he will. You may not feel like shouting. In fact, if your heart is breaking, if you are carrying a private pain, it is still good that you actively prepare

(wait) for God to show up even if you do it quietly (26). Why is it good? It is good because God will show up. College students. On Sunday nights, you are doing a study on spiritual disciplines. These habits of reading your Bible, praying, worshiping weekly, discipling one another are designed by God to help you grow and to persevere in the long nights of the soul. Those who trust in him will not be disappointed in the end. In fact, notice v.27. It is good to learn this when you are young. It is good learn this when you are young, because they will carry you well through adversity. We live in a sin-cursed world. Things are not as they should be or will be. We also live with our adversary the devil roaming about looking to devour any he can. We also live within a worldview that is hostile to the gospel. Much of our lives are spent actively waiting in anticipation of God showing up.

Parents, your job is not to shield your children from adversity, but to teach them how to endure through it. The poet is saying that this is what God does for us. But, look at verse 28. Here is what we are to do when the yoke of adversity is placed on us. Sit alone in silence. Accept the weight. Think carefully and deeply about it. Mourn your losses. Grieve your pain. Do not go on and pretend as if nothing has happened. While you do not desire pain and adversity, when it comes, you do not have rage against it, but (v.30) let it have its way. Let adversity and even insult do a good work in you. Adversity reveals your weaknesses and unbelief. Adversity humbles you and makes you aware of how close to the edge you are.

Then we come to midpoint of the chapter and the midpoint of the book. This is the very heart of Lamentations. This is what everything before is pointing to and what everything to come looks back on. (read 31-33) The poet goes on for the next few verses and he is actually defending God. And yet, just when we think that we can take him off of suicide watch, or say that he has worked through his grief, we come to the next section and we wonder if we are listening to the same guy. The poet goes from seeing God's hand as being good to seeing God's hand as being heavy.

3. **God, it still feels like you hate me.** (40-54)

In verses 40-41 he is calling upon his people to confess their sins and repent. But then he says (42) "*and you have not forgiven.*" In fact, you won't even listen to our prayers. You have made us scum and garbage among the peoples. What happened to his confidence in God? What happened to his resolve to trust God, no matter what? The confidence of the previous section is bold and encouraging, but it does not change the circumstances. His enemies are still his enemies (46). They are still there. He still hears their taunts and feels their hatred. Panic and pitfall overwhelm him. He is gripped again with fear. The flag of faith that he planted is blown down by the relentless wind of suffering.

What do you do? What do you turn to? What do you think when your unresolved issues do not get resolved? What do you do when you begin to realize that you will always walk with a limp? You love God, but your anxiety is not gone. Your same sex attraction did not disappear. Your desire for porn, cocaine, Vicodin, or alcohol is a constant battle. You're still prone to depression. You still feel pain over the guilt of an abortion 10, 20, even 30 years ago. You still go home to a lonely house and climb into an empty bed and in the morning, you make coffee only for yourself.

If you are in high school, you often find your head spinning and your emotions swimming. You are coming into your own and it is hard to realize that your parents are not perfect and that your life is not going to be perfect either. What do you do with that? The stories that you learned as a child about Daniel not getting eaten in the Lions den, and David killing Goliath are true, but now you are learning that so are the ones in Hebrews 11 about believers being starved to death or sawn in two. Life is not always one success after another. If you are retired, the dream life is really not that dreamy. Is this my life?

The poet writes as if God hates him. Then he declares a stubborn hope, but when his circumstances do not change he says that it feels like God still hates him. Now what? The poem ends with another affirmation. It doesn't sound as bold and confident. The flag of faith isn't planted as much as it is pulled up. He looks again at his life and realizes that he has nowhere else to turn.

David Foster Wallace wrote: *“In the day-to-day trenches of adult life, there is actually no such thing as atheism. There is no such thing as not worshipping. Everybody worships. The only choice we get is what to worship. And the compelling reason for maybe choosing some sort of God or spiritual type thing to worship . . . is that pretty much anything else you worship will eat you alive. If you worship money and things, if they are where you tap real meaning in life, then you will never feel you have enough. Worship your body and beauty and sexual allure and you will always feel ugly, and when time and age start showing, you will die a million deaths before they finally grieve you. Worship power, and you will end up feeling weak and afraid, and you will need ever more power over others to numb you to your own fear. Worship your own intellect, and you will end up feeling like a fraud, always on the verge of being found out. But the insidious thing about these forms of worship is . . . they're unconscious. They are default settings.”*

What do you turn to when all of your options are gone? The poet (Jeremiah?), realizes that he has nowhere else to turn but to God. And he concludes this poem with this affirmation.

4. **I still believe that God will rescue me.** (55-66)

This final section is helpful because of the verb tenses. Notice how beginning in v.55 he speaks in the past tense. “I called, you heard, you came, you have, you have, you have, you have.” Then, v.64, “you will, you will and you will.” This final affirmation is, I think even more convictional because he says it in spite of nothing circumstantially changing and no evidence that it will anytime soon. Even so, he knows that this is not the end of the story.

If you are not a follower of Christ, I wonder what your response is to this sermon. I want you to know that if you come to faith in Christ, that you should not expect that everything in your life will now be fixed over night. Do not follow Christ in order to get things now because that is not following Christ. Follow Christ because no one else can forgive your sin and take your punishment and provide you with eternal life. No one else is worth your trust.

If you are a follower of Christ, it is worth asking, how deep is my faith? What can I do now to fill my heart with truths that will carry me in the night? Suffering is part of our story. There is no way to avoid it. But, it does not have the final word. By God's grace you can believe that.