



Our story today makes a stop in Lamentations. It's not a popular stop. Do you know what "lament" means? It means to feel and express sorrow or regret or pain, to mourn deeply. It's the other side of the "eat, drink, and be merry" coin. Maybe we have never connected our experiences to the word lament, but I trust that most of us here have had a season of lament. Some of us are lamenting right now. May God help those of us here who are suffering and in pain this morning.

I want to tell you a story. It's a true story and it is personal. I am changing the names and a few details to preserve privacy. We have some friends and I will call them Blake and Jill. Blake and Jill were happily married for 20+ years. They have two grown children who are out of the house. Blake has a brother named Tom. Blake and Tom loved each other as brothers. One night Blake and Jill went to Tom's house to celebrate Tom's birthday. Tom never married and had lived by himself in his house for many years. That night the three of them went out to celebrate. They came back to Tom's house late and decided after a lot of birthday partying it was best to not drive home. So Blake and Jill bedded down at his brother's house.

In the middle of the night Jill got up to use the bathroom and Tom heard the noise and forever whatever reason, didn't connect that his sister-in-law was in the bathroom and thought she was an intruder. In a stupor he reached for his handgun and went to investigate. As Blake tells later, he heard his wife holler out, "Tom, Tom it's me Jill, don't shoot." And then he heard the gunshot. The bullet clipped her spine and she went down. She survived being shot, but this beautiful, athletic love of Blake's life became a paraplegic. Through four years of medical care, special therapies, hopes repeatedly shattered, what was left was a shattered family, two brothers that hadn't spoken for four years. From a medical perspective there was no good news. From a family perspective there was little good news. A family was shattered. It is the epitome of a lament.

One year ago after repeated complications, Jill's life on earth ended. Jesus took her home. What possible meaning could come from this? How could God ever use any of this for good? To put it in our Story language, What could we possibly learn in the lower story? And God, how would you ever use this in your upper story for your glory? To us it was an unexplainable tragedy that led to sorrow... period. There was no meaning we could see. Anyone who tried to explain it only sounded like simpletons who never experienced tragedy. Sunday School answers didn't work. Romans 8:28 rang hollow to us. All anyone could do was express sorrow, mourn deeply, and grieve. The only beautiful thing was Blake's loyal love and care of his beautiful wife, and Jill's hopeful

optimism. I want to leave Blake, Jill and Tom's story for now, and turn to The Story.

We've met some amazing people along the way who trusted God and played a special role in God's Story: Abraham, Sarah, Joseph, Moses, Ruth, David. We have been introduced to some real villains too: Pharaoh and Jezebel. We saw prophets of God come and go warning God's people. And then there are those kings of Israel. We can count on one hand the good kings. Those bad kings? I can't count them using all my fingers and my toes. In this prior chapter we were introduced to King Manasseh of Judah, who was the Dr. Evil of the Old Testament. We read about the Babylonians laying siege against the city of Jerusalem.

We saw God offer up prophet after prophet telling the people, "Thus says the Lord your God, 'I love you and my heart breaks over your sin. Come back to me. If only you would listen to me, you would thrive.'" Instead they double down on their rebellion and they suffered for it.

We read of the prophet Ezekiel issuing his final warning as he is captured and deported off to Babylon. Yet God's people ignored him and this beautiful city of Jerusalem—the city of David, the temple Solomon built, the city on a hill, the place where God's people would come to meet their God in worship—endured a 20 year siege by the Babylonians.

We read about the reluctant and weeping prophet Jeremiah who stayed in Jerusalem and observed the destruction, the starvation, the absolute suffering of a people who had turned their back on God. The reason for Lamentations can be summed up well in 2 Chronicles 26:15-16. ***"The LORD, the God of their ancestors, sent word to them through his messengers again and again, because he had pity on his people and on his dwelling place. But they mocked God's messengers, despised his words and scoffed at his prophets until the wrath of the LORD was aroused against his people and there was no remedy."***

When you get to a point when the God of the universe says "no remedy," you know it's over. Nebuchadnezzar, the king of Babylon, began his final assault on Jerusalem. Judah's final king Zedekiah offers one more plea to Jeremiah for God to do one more miracle to bail out his nation. And Jeremiah's message back from God is, "It's too late. He will now show his justice and wrath, no longer his mercy, protection and favor."

The last we hear of this final king, Zedekiah of Judah, was that he was captured by the Babylonians and his sons were brought before him and he watched each of them be executed. Then to make that the last thing Zedekiah saw on earth, the Babylonians plucked out his eyes and deported him to Babylon to die in captivity.

"I am a man who has seen affliction by the rod of the LORD's wrath" (3:1).

That rod that was supposed to comfort the sheep is doing just the opposite. It's beating your people. It's the Lord's wrath poured out on sin and rebellion. For Jeremiah you wonder if this man believes Psalm 23? Did our friend Blake? That rod? It's not guiding me, it's beating me. You're supposed to be the good shepherd. Why, God, am I and those I love suffering?

...Indeed he has turned his hand against me (v. 3).

That hand of favor, that hand of blessing now became a closed fist of adversity.

...He has besieged me and surrounded me with bitterness and hardship. He has made me dwell in darkness like those long dead (verses 5-6).

He compared his life to someone who was long dead and buried in the grave and then even worse in the grip of hell. I'm walled in. I can't escape.

...When I call out or cry for help, he shuts out my prayer (v. 8).

When I cry out, it hits a wall. I wail before you, but my prayer is shut out.

.... Like a bear or a lion lying in wait he mangled me (verses 10-11).

Forget the Babylonians. You, God, are like a bear, or a lion hiding, waiting and attacking and mauling me.

... He made me a target for his arrows (v. 12).

Ever feel like you are being used for target practice?

... I became the laughingstock of all my people; they mock me in song (v. 14).

They mocked me, they lampoon me, it goes on to say, "I am bitter."

... So I say, "My splendor is gone and all that I hoped from the LORD (v. 18).

Bottom line: I have no joy, only sadness. I am discouraged, weary, broken, dejected. Only darkness. Only depression. I don't know how some of you may take this as you read it. Maybe you are sitting there thinking, "Wow. What a whiner. Snap out of it." Or maybe you are here thinking, "This guy Jeremiah is describing the water I am drowning in. Stop describing it and throw me a life preserver!"

Jeremiah is asking all of us the same question that Blake asked, "Where is God when I am struggling? Where is God when the people I love are struggling? When will he return and restore? When will he make things right?" What does he do? In verse 19, in the darkness, in humility, in total dependence on God, he says, "I remember" and in verse 20 "I remember well."

"Yet this I call to mind and therefore I have hope: 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" (verses 21-23).

There are two great words for love in these verses. **Great Love.** It's the Hebrew word for *hesed*, and a term we have referred to from back in Ruth and Naomi and Boaz as loyal love. It's God making a promise, making a commitment, and then saying he's going to be loyal to that promise.

Compassions. The word expresses the emotional side of love. The original meaning is the love a mother has for her unborn child still in her womb. It's God's emotion, his feelings and his affections for us. I love that we get both words in verse 22. Commitment regardless of how we feels he remains true to his commitment to us. But he feels. He has compassion for us.

Remember the hymn, *Great is Thy Faithfulness*? What's that line? "Morning by morning new mercies I see." I don't know about you, but there are some mornings I don't see God's mercies. But do you know what? They are still there. I trust Jeremiah. I trust God even though I can't see them there, even though Blake's family is shattered, the mercies are still there.

Great is your faithfulness. For when the night is lonely and bleak, the dawn of a new day is a reminder that God is still preserving and caring for his people. Even more, when my faith waivers, when I doubt, when I am not trusting him, when I am disobedient, the Lord remains faithful. He cannot be otherwise. That is who he is.

A few years ago I had the opportunity to go to Israel. I spent several days in the old city of Jerusalem. One of the sites I visited was the Wailing Wall. After going through a battery of security guys and metal detectors I was able to go to the wall and pray. The wall symbolizes something we have all felt. God, I can't get into your presence. I am being blocked. I can't get to your holy place. You are not hearing my prayers. There is a wall there. Every month thousands of pilgrims, Christians and Jews alike go to this wall and pray. And they write down their requests, their dreams, their passions, their sorrows, their sins, their fears, and they stick them in cracks in the wall, as if through a crack their prayer might find its way to God. And they wait...

I think what Jeremiah learned and what we can learn as well to experience light and hope in the darkest days, we must first be certain of God's love. I big lesson for me in Blake and Jill's and Tom's lower story is that I cannot judge God's love by his actions, or for some of us we cannot judge God's love by his inactions. We can't ask, "God, if you were really loving, you could have prevented that gun from being fired." We can't go there.

Doing that only leads to despair when actions don't make any sense to me. In the middle of this there is only one irrefutable, undeniable piece of evidence of God's love. It's the cross of Jesus Christ. In the darkest days when you call out to him and he doesn't respond, you beg him for an answer that doesn't come, it's the cross that proves you can know God's love in spite of what you are feeling at the moment. To trust God's actions you first have to be certain of his love.

And Jeremiah had a glimmer of a future Messiah. He didn't have what we have today. He didn't have the beautiful New Testament and Jesus, God in the flesh, but he was certain of God's love so deep down he was able to trust God's actions for the future.

"I say to myself, 'The LORD is my portion; therefore I will wait for him. The LORD is good to the one who's hope is in him, to the one who seeks him; it is good to wait quietly for the salvation of the LORD'" (verses 24-26).

Endure

The word for wait here is the same as the Hebrew word for hope. Hope implies a confident expectation. To paraphrase: God, I am so certain of your love I will trust your actions and endure so I will wait for you in my suffering. I will wait patiently. Not passively wait. But the kind of waiting that involves seeking out God in prayer. Jeremiah says, "The Lord is good to the one who seeks him." And this will lead to salvation/deliverance.

But Jeremiah doesn't stop there. He now gives us a crack in the wall, an insight into God's purpose. This loving God tells us this:

"It is good for a man to bear the yoke while he is young. Let him sit alone in silence, for the LORD has laid it on him. Let him bury his face in the dust – there may yet be hope" (verses 28-29).

Persevere

He calls Blake, and the rest of us, to endure through a painful experience to learn whatever God wishes us to learn through the trial. The idea is submit. Submit to a loving God. Submit to his path. When I see this not only do I see Jeremiah enduring something difficult a loving God allows, I also see in his waiting God's call for us to persevere.

I was teaching on this idea of perseverance back in the day out of James. James talked about tests or trials we face. Here is what James said: **"...because you know that the testing of your faith produces perseverance. Let perseverance finish its work so that you may be mature and complete, not lacking anything"** (James 1:4).

The greek word for perseverance is *hupomone* – *hupo* (under) and *mone* (remain or abide). So perseverance means to remain under. Testing produces the Godly quality of remaining under for the purpose of becoming mature and complete.

I played a lot of basketball in high school. I have really weak ankles. I remember whenever I had an ankle tweak, our trainer had a way of dealing with it. He used torture. He would fill a big bucket with ice and water and he would put my foot in it. He said hold it there for 3 minutes. It hurt after 7 seconds. After a minute I wanted a bullet to bite down on. But after 3 minutes he would look at my blue foot and say, "You will play tomorrow." The blood flow had stopped. There was no swelling. The point was that remaining in the place of pain for the appropriate length of time produces the result, and if we try to run from our loving God we won't be complete and mature.

When some of Blake's friends said to him, "I don't see why you stay with Jill? Put her in a facility and get on with your life." Looking back I am certain that Blake sees that keeping his foot

in the ice bucket (*hupomone*) for the duration of Jill's life was the right thing. And Blake sleeps well tonight because he persevered and possesses a beautiful maturity and completeness that only comes from God.

I want to bring this together by having us process through three questions that every seeking person asks, maybe not out loud, but they do ask. These are questions that Jeremiah answers for himself and for us in the last half of this chapter. These are the kinds of questions we write down on scraps of paper and would stuff into a crack in the wailing wall as we cry out to God in tough times.

Is God Really Good?

Another way to ask this is: How could a good God allow so much evil, pain and suffering? It's a Why question every suffering person asks when we hurt. We ask it almost on reflex. I don't think we even expect a logical answer or would hear one when we are engulfed in pain. When we are asking this question, we are wanting assurance that we are not alone, We are asking for God to show us tangible reminders of love to soothe the pain. Don't you care God? Show me you care.

For Jeremiah, for Blake, for us, when the darkest is our only companion, it's recalling God's unfailing love that gets us through. That gives us the hope and help we need to just make it through another day. But Dan, you don't know the kind of suffering I am enduring. God seems indifferent to it. I do not know the suffering you are enduring, but my Lord does and he is not indifferent.

Any suffering we endure comes from consequences of either our own sin or the consequences of others who sin against us. Also, taking an even broader look. Suffering comes because creation has fallen and this fallen creation is full of fallen people living in a fallen and cursed world. A reason there is pain is so that Christ can feel pain. A reason there is suffering is so Christ can feel our suffering as our Savior. This is the world God prepared for the suffering and death of his son. This is the world where God displays his greatest example of his love: He gave up his Son out of love. Romans 5:8 says, **"God shows his love for us in that while we were still sinners Christ died for us."** All his suffering was to eventually save us from suffering.

So is God really good? Jeremiah makes sure we understand he is!

"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" (verses 31-33).

Is God Really in Charge?

At the wall I can concede that you are loving, but are you impotent, up there in the high places just wringing your hands? Do something God. If you are loving and in charge why won't you do something? These are questions theologians have been asking for centuries. If God is loving, he must not be in complete control or he would have stopped the bullet or at least moved it a centimeter to the right and Jill would likely be alive today. Or

if God is in complete control and either directed or allowed that bullet to nick Jill's spinal cord then he must not be loving.

With all the evil in the world, how can God be both 100% good and 100% in charge? What I have learned in my years as a Christian is that this conundrum does not mean there is a problem with God. The problem is with me. I can't understand it because I am finite and he is infinite and I'm sinful and he is infallible. How can I understand fully the infinite, the perfect God of the Bible?

The more I know God the more I realize there is so much I **don't** know. I have come to realize that there are mysteries that I will never know this side of heaven. This should lead me to worship. As Job said in his suffering. As Blake said at the memorial service for Jill. The Lord has given, the Lord has taken away. Blessed be the name of the Lord. It's all about faith at the wall and the ice bucket.

"Who can speak and have it happen if the LORD has not decreed it? Is it not from the mouth of the Most High that both calamities and good things come? Why should the living complain when punished for their sins?" (verses 37-39).

I remember an author who wrote of something called the dark side of grace. While Blake has his foot in the ice bucket he learned that a loving God is in control. He is sovereign. There are times he uses things he directs specifically. But there are also times he uses things he steps back and allows. Blessed be the name of the Lord.

Is God Really Personally Involved in My Circumstances?

At the wall we concede God is good. At the wall we concede that God is in charge. But God, do you care about me? Do you really care about my personal circumstances? Am I worth it to you? Do you care about my employment, my marriage, my rebellious teen, my loneliness, my schooling, my fears, doubts, my depression, my anxieties, my desires, my dreams?

"I called on your name, LORD, from the depths of the pit. You heard my plea: 'Do not close your ears to my cry for relief.' You came near when I called you, and you said, 'Do not fear.' You, Lord took up my case; you redeemed my life. LORD, you have seen the wrong done to me. Uphold my cause!" (verses 55-59).

If God didn't care about us personally, why does he hear Jeremiah? Why does he tell Jeremiah not to fear? And eventually he upholds Jeremiah's cause. God's perfect timing, 47 years later in 539 BC the Babylonians were overthrown in Jerusalem by Cyrus the Persian.

At the wall there were many of us offering prayers for Blake, Jill and Tom. Can you imagine the guilt, the shame, the sorrow that

Tom felt? As I said at the beginning of this message Tom and Blake hadn't spoken in four years. But in God's perfect timing this past Christmas we were sitting in a living room with Tom. We had finished dinner, and Blake's daughter pulled me aside and said, "my dad is coming here in about 20 minutes. He said it's time for me to make baby steps to reconnect with my brother." We didn't know what to expect, all we knew was this was a moment that so many had prayed for.

Twenty minutes later Blake walks through the door. He is a big guy and he greeted us with a big Merry Christmas. He immediately walked over to his brother Tom and hugged him and wished him a Merry Christmas. We all stood around with dropped jaws and not a dry eye in the room. It was our Christmas miracle. Our friends were being reconciled. After the wall... after the ice bucket... after Christ the ultimate sufferer paving the way, brothers are being reconciled. And Lord, you are being glorified today.

Your life and my life is in the hand of God. The hand that holds our lives is the hand that holds the world. I want to conclude by sharing with you the lyrics from a famous old hymn. It's called, *His Eye is On the Sparrow*.

Why should I feel discouraged? Why should the shadows come?

Why should my heart feel lonely and long for heaven and home?

If Jesus is my portion, my constant friend is he.

And if his eye is on the sparrow, I know he watches me.

Said the sparrow to the robin, "I should really like to know, why these anxious human beings rush around and worry so?"

Said the robin to the sparrow, "I think it must be, that they have no heavenly father, who cares for you and me."

We have a heavenly Father, and our lives are not a random sequence of chance events. He's working in it for good. And so we go out into another week. Who knows what it holds?

I do not know what lies ahead, the way I cannot see.

But One stands near to be my guide. He'll show the way to me.

I know who holds the future and he'll guide me with his hand.

With God things don't just happen. Everything by him is planned.

So as I face tomorrow, with its problems large and small,

I'll trust the God of miracles and give to him my all.

This manuscript represents the bulk of what was preached at CPC. For further detail, please refer to the audio recording of this sermon.

© 2015 Central Peninsula Church, Foster City, CA
Catalog No. 1404-17FC

This message from Scripture was preached on Sunday, January 18, 2015 at Central Peninsula Church
1005 Shell Boulevard | Foster City CA 94404 | 650 349.1132 | www.cpcweb.org. Additional copies available on request.