

Memorial Service 18-02-24 – Devotional on Grief
(Held at Kingsbury Baptist Church)

Lam.3:1-23

I am the man who has seen affliction by the rod of the Lord's wrath.

² He has driven me away and made me walk in darkness rather than light;

³ indeed, he has turned his hand against me again and again, all day long.

⁴ He has made my skin and my flesh grow old and has broken my bones.

⁵ He has besieged me and surrounded me with bitterness and hardship.

⁶ He has made me dwell in darkness like those long dead.

⁷ He has walled me in so that I cannot escape; he has weighed me down with chains.

⁸ 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.

¹⁰ Like a bear lying in wait, like a lion in hiding, he dragged me from the path and mangled me and left me without help.

¹² He drew his bow and made me the target for his arrows.

¹³ He pierced my heart with arrows from his quiver.

¹⁴ I became the laughingstock of all my people; they mock me in song all day long.

¹⁵ He has filled me with bitter herbs and given me gall to drink.

¹⁶ He has broken my teeth with gravel; he has trampled me in the dust.

¹⁷ I have been deprived of peace; I have forgotten what prosperity is.

¹⁸ So I say, 'My splendour is gone and all that I had hoped from the Lord.'

¹⁹ I remember my affliction and my wandering, the bitterness and the gall.

²⁰ I well remember them, and my soul is downcast within me.

²¹ Yet this I call to mind and therefore I have hope:

²² Because of the Lord's great love we are not consumed, for his compassions never fail.

²³ They are new every morning; great is your faithfulness.

Introduction

The reading from Lamentations was an extract from Jeremiah's soul. He poured out his grief, like pouring water in a surprisingly honest and open way. He held nothing back.

It is in times of grief that we can, perhaps, be more honest with God:

- For some there remains a temptation not to dwell long in grief and revert to the phrase 'ah but God is good'.
- For others there is a temptation to remain in grief – experiencing long-term heaviness and loss without expecting, or perhaps, wanting, to experience hope.

There is no standard timeframe for experiencing grief – it varies from person to person and even in one person grief over one family member or friend may be longer or shorter than another, for it depends on our relationship with them, that other person's demeanour and it also depends on our own circumstances in life when grief strikes.

While there is no standard timeframe, there are recognised seasons within grief where different thoughts and emotions come. The number of stages does differ, but the core stages normally include:

Shock & denial > pain & guilt > anger & bargaining > depression > and then an upward turn toward reconstruction, acceptance and hope.

Despite the neat pictures of this being a grief cycle, in truth those thoughts and emotions don't always happen in a set order, and we can suddenly be transported back into one of those stages through something else happening or a memory rushing in unbidden.

This service is a time to gather some of those thoughts, to notice them and begin to process them with the help of Jeremiah.

What we hear from Jeremiah is an intentional time of grief, not rushing through but voicing the inner turmoil. And we did not join Jeremiah at the start of his lamentation but part way through.

We also joined him part way through that expression of turmoil so that we could experience his upturn of hope toward God ... though his circumstances have not changed.

Listen again,

Listen again to some of his lamentation....

I am the man who has seen affliction by the rod of the Lord's wrath.
He has driven me away and made me walk in darkness ...
he has turned his hand against me ...

He has made my skin and my flesh grow old ...

⁵ He has surrounded me with bitterness and hardship.

⁶ He has made me dwell in darkness like those long dead...

⁷ He has weighed me down with chains...

¹³ He pierced my heart with arrows from his quiver.

That first line is a self-description by Jeremiah, but the rest are all directed as distress caused by The Lord...

Reflect on this,

Does that shock you? Does it surprise you that Jeremiah appears to be blaming God.

Have you ever done that? Have you harboured a grudge against Father God for your loss?

Did you voice it or hold it in your heart, afraid to actually voice it because it seems to rail against God himself?

Did you know it is ok to do that, to let it out, to blame God?

To help manage your surprise / fear / curiosity / concern at what I'm sharing with you (apply 1 or more as fits) let me tell you a little more of the bigger picture for Jeremiah.

- The tribes of Judah had rebelled against the Lord and, despite receiving plentiful warnings, the people would not turn back to the Lord.
- When the result of their rebellion hit, Jeremiah knew the Lord had allowed it,
- More than that, Jeremiah knew the Lord's decision was justified but still Jeremiah threw complaint after complaint at the Lord... 'he has done this to me'...
- But, at the same time, Jeremiah also knew that the fault truly lay with his people; they were receiving a just sentence – they had rejected the Lord, he listened and stood back to leave them to the forces of the world and the devil.
- So, in blaming God, throwing complaint after complaint at God, Jeremiah was also proclaiming the Lord's sovereignty over all life.
- He pulled no punches; he allowed the inner turmoil of anger and depression to be given voice.
- This was healthy for his soul!
- And guess what, Father God is more than able to hear and receive the lamentations of a broken heart.

What do we learn from that? It is ok to rail against God as the giver of hardship and grief – not because he is hard-hearted and evil, but because he is sovereign over all.

The reason why we have death and hardship in this life is because all humanity rejected God. Like Jeremiah who was a voice for God and who never rejected God, Christians suffer alongside fellow humanity. Expressing the inner turmoil is to express our humanity.

Do not deny that suffering - for it would also deny God's sovereign rule. Let it out, let it run its season and when the soul becomes tired and emptied of expression, unable to voice that hurt and pain, allow the stillness to settle.

Listen Again,

In his Lamentation Jeremiah voices these words:

⁸ Even when I call out or cry for help, he shuts out my prayer.

It feels like that, like being shut out and prayers going answered as we experience grief.

Reflect on this,

However, it is not that the lamentations and railing against God are shut out as not heard by God, but that he absorbs the punches without taking them into his heart. He knows them as an expression of grief that must be let out and he does not that hold that against the one voicing their grief at God, but he absorbs the force and weight on our behalf.

It is not, as you might first suppose, an empty stillness but it is a stillness that anticipates the Lord's peace. It is a stillness like that experienced by Elijah, who after experiencing the storm waited quietly to hear the still, small voice of the Lord.

... pause ...

Listen,

Hear these words over us...

This is what the Lord says, "I remember the devotion of your youth,
how as a bride you loved me and followed me through the wilderness", (Jer.2:2b)

Those words were said to Jeremiah to proclaim over his people.

They can be re-applied to the followers of Jesus today.

Jesus did much of his ministry in the wilderness, the countryside outside of the towns. He experienced the wilderness of grief too – both in ministry and as he reached the climax of that ministry to all humanity on the cross.

Jesus, God's son knows and has experienced grief. Grief not only as experienced by Jesus - but as experienced in the very rejection of humanity against him.

And he says to the people: I remember you; you are my bride and I have led you through the wilderness.

We are not alone! And so, this bring us to the upward turn.

Listen again,

²¹ Yet this I call to mind and therefore I have hope:

²² Because of the Lord's great love we are not consumed, for his compassions never fail. ²³ They are new every morning; great is your faithfulness.

Reflect,

- Jesus' followers experience both the joys and suffering of what it means to be human.
- Unlike those who continue to reject Father God, we know he too experienced grief and suffering and that Jesus was raised to life,
- He is the symbol of hope and reminder that, while the physical body must die, the soul will live on and be given a new resurrected body.
- There is hope!
- He is with us in grief, and he is with us in joy – the ultimate joy being that experienced when the kingdom of heaven is fully renewed and restored.

Summary:

- Allow and voice grief, do not brush it to one side and do not rush through it.
- Letting it out, giving it to God, is also to be being released from the grief,
- When the cry is done, allow the stillness and invite the Lord's peace.
- Rest in the stillness and anticipate the Lord's voice.
- Rise from the rest and continue on in the hope of the Lord.
 - Do not hold onto grief as a comfort blanket, for that is to deny the Lord's hope.
 - When moments of grief come unbidden, pay attention once again, voice the inner turmoil, quieten for the Lord's peace... and go on again in hope.