

Northwest Community Evangelical Free Church

(November 27, 2011)

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Sermon manuscript

Thanksgiving

Lessons from a Lament

(Lamentations 3)

Introduction: Post-Thanksgiving Day reflections...

And so, with the much-vaunted 3rd annual Turkey Bowl aches and pains fading, Thursday's fine feast a distant memory, and Black Thursday's and Friday's sales soon to be replaced by even better pre-Christmas sales, we're zeroing in on thankfulness today.

Where to go in the Bible to turn our hearts to gratitude...? I thought about that a lot this week.

Surely Psalms would be a great place to turn. Over the years lots of my Thanksgiving messages have been drawn from the psalms. But not this year.

For that matter any of Paul's New Testament letters would provide plenty of fodder for gratitude. Again, not today.

And there are dozens of stories scattered throughout the Bible that show us God's people praising Him, thanking Him, and worshiping Him for all that He has done and for who He is. We could look at one or more of those stories to good effect. Not this morning.

This morning, I've chosen a few choice verses from a book that rarely gets opened around Thanksgiving: the book of Lamentations. With a name like "Lamentations" it's not surprising that the book gets placed on the back burner at this time of year.

But over the next few minutes I want to show you the terribly tough setting in which Lamentations was written. And seeing that, we're going to listen as Jeremiah directs us to a complaint-free life and to grateful hearts.

Jeremiah wrote this book while he was sitting among the ruins of a destroyed Jerusalem. How did things get that way?

It's a long and tragic story, but I'll try to tell it this morning, if only briefly.

The Setting of Lamentations (Jeremiah 52; 2 Kings 24:18--25:30)

The Old Testament: The Story of God's People

Abraham and his family

From one standpoint, the story of the Old Testament is the story of God's work in the life of one man (Abraham) and his family. In fact, Abraham and his descendants - Isaac and Jacob and Joseph - dominate the first book of the Bible, Genesis.

The nation of Israel

By the time we get to the second book, Exodus, the family has grown into the nation of Israel.

In Exodus we trace the story of Moses and follow him and the Israelites on their journey out of Egyptian slavery, through the midst of the Red Sea and out into the wilderness.

Joshua took them across the Jordan River and into the Promised Land. He led them in conquest over the Canaanites. Following Joshua, the judges ruled the land for a few generations and they were replaced by kings who reigned over Israel, as it became an up-and-coming world power.

Kings like David and Solomon put Israel on the map in the 9th and 8th century BC. The kingdom expanded, became wealthy, powerful, and influential throughout the Middle East.

And then, just as the kingdom of Israel seemed to be entering a golden age of prosperity, maturity, and God-honoring obedience, the kings (led by Solomon!) began to lead the people astray.

The downward spiral of Abraham's seed

Wise King Solomon abandoned wisdom and actually worshiped other gods. And because of his sin, God judged. He saw to it that the kingdom was divided, north and south, so that Solomon's son, Rehoboam, only got to preside over half of the people of God.

You might have thought that having been disciplined by God, the Jews would have repented. Not hardly. Rather than repent of their evil, they continued on a downward spiral, committing greater and greater sin. Both the northern (Israel) and southern (Judea) tribes alike rebelled against God.

The sins of the north were more flagrant than those of the south, so God saw to it that they were destroyed first.

Following a couple of centuries of unrelenting wickedness, violence, and injustice, God loosed the fierce Assyrian army against the north. In 722 BC, the northern kingdom was ruined, never to rise again.

By the time we come to the days of the prophet Jeremiah, the southern kingdom (Judah) was behaving as badly as the north ever had.

Jeremiah came on to the scene late in Judah's story. The die was already cast. God's discipline was assured if the people didn't repent. And Jeremiah's role as prophet was, more than anything else, one of warning. *"Guys, if God did away with the Northern Kingdom He can and will certainly do away with us, too!"*

The Book of Jeremiah: The Story of the Final Decline of God's People

The theme of Jeremiah: Warning of judgment!

The message of impending judgment permeates most every section of this fifty-two chapter book.

Over and over again, the prophet warned the Jews to turn from their idolatry, their immorality, their sin - or face God's judgment. He even told them the form that the destruction would take - destruction of Jerusalem and Babylonian exile.¹

The people persistently ignored his warnings

Of course Jeremiah wasn't the first to bring this message to the Jews. Many prophets preceded him with exactly the same message.

But for the most part, the people's response to those prophets was identical to the response they gave Jeremiah. They refused to listen. Here is the way Jeremiah put it:

[25:3] From the thirteenth year of Josiah the son of Amon, king of Judah, even to this day, these twenty-three years the word of the Lord has come to me, and I have spoken to you again and again, BUT YOU HAVE NOT LISTENED.

The Jews thought that they had immunity from God's discipline because they were His people.

They honestly believed that they could behave however they wished - and that He would never punish them. *"God will never remove us from the Promised Land. After all, He promised it to us!"*

However, they would soon come to see that God would indeed judge them, and that precisely because He did love them!

The last chapter of the book of Jeremiah, chapter 52, brings us to the end of the story of Judah, the end of life for the Jews in the Promised Land, and the end of Jerusalem.²

¹ These warnings are scattered throughout the book. You will find them in chapters 1, 2, 4, 5, 6, 7, 8, 9, 10, 11, 12, 13, 14, 15, 16, 17, 19, 21, 22, 23, 24, 25, 26, 27, 28, 34, 35, 36, and 37.

² Jeremiah 52 is based on 2 Kings 24:18--25:30 and is written mostly in the very words of the 2 Kings passage. It is also similar to 2 Chronicles 36:11-21. The last words of Jeremiah 51 suggest chapter 52 is an editor's epilogue to the book.

And Jeremiah got what he would have never asked for - a front row seat to view the destruction of his people.

The Story of Jeremiah 52: The Fall of God's People

The fate of Zedekiah, the puppet-king

Zedekiah rebelled (against Babylon, against God)

In those days, the Babylonian king, Nebuchadnezzar, was the world's most powerful ruler. He did whatever he wanted to do. Among the things he did was replace the rightful king of the Jews, Jehoiachin, with his own puppet-king, Zedekiah.

In every way, Zedekiah turned out to be a rebel.

Tragically, he rebelled against God. Zedekiah's life is summarized as are the lives of so many of the kings: **[2 Kings 24:19] He did evil in the sight of the Lord.**

But he also rebelled against Nebuchadnezzar, King of Babylon. That rebellion was the straw that broke the camel's back and spelled the end of the Jewish state.³

What is often missed is that Zedekiah's rebellion against the king of Babylon was actually a rebellion against God's discipline.

He should have submitted, but he didn't and when he didn't submit to Babylon, he guaranteed Judah's destruction and his own downfall.

Zedekiah is punished

In response to Zedekiah's rebellion, the Babylonian army surrounded Jerusalem. But at some point during the siege, King Zedekiah and some of the leading military and governmental officials escaped the city under cover of night, with an armed escort, hoping to flee to safety.

³ He also proved faithless in dealing with a group of his slaves. He had granted them their freedom, and then broke faith with them by heartlessly re-enslaving them! (Jeremiah 34:8, 16, 21).

They actually made it a few miles out of town before they were missed, searched for, captured, and then taken to stand before Nebuchadnezzar - who was in a really bad mood.

He had stationed himself at a place called Riblah, an ancient Syrian town on the Orontes River, north of Palestine. And those with Zedekiah were shown no mercy. They were summarily killed.

And then Zedekiah, the king who rebelled against the King who had put him on the throne, was brought before Nebuchadnezzar. The treatment he received reminds us that some punishments are worse than death.

Zedekiah was forced to watch the executions of the leaders of his regime.

Then, his sons were marched in front of him. He watched as they were killed. The Babylonians then immediately blinded him, ensuring that the last thing he ever saw was the assassination of his sons and the death of any hope that his kingly line would survive.

The Bible tells us that he was bound with bronze chains, marched to Babylon and placed in prison where he remained until he died.

The siege that Zedekiah had temporarily escaped continued after his capture.

The sack of Jerusalem

A loooooong siege

[4] Now it came about in the ninth year of his reign, on the tenth day of the tenth month, that Nebuchadnezzar king of Babylon came, he and all his army, against Jerusalem, camped against it and built a siege wall all around it.

During the siege against Jerusalem, Nebuchadnezzar would have used all of the technology of war available to him.

If you are a Lord of the Rings fan, think about the siege of Gondor or the assault on Helm's Deep.

There would have been siege mounds and barricades and massive battering rams pounding the city's walls and towers from which missiles or burning tar would have been hurled.

The siege lasted eighteen long months.⁴ During that time, no one entered or left the city. There was no re-supply and the people inside the city were near starvation.

At about the eighteen month point the Babylonians breached the walls and the invading army swept in.

An overwhelming attack

We can only imagine the scene. All of the slaughter and atrocities of war were unleashed on the city of God and the people of God.

The last chapter of Jeremiah reveals not only the punishment of the rebels, but the details of the sacking of Jerusalem.

First, Nebuchadnezzar put it to the torch. All of the important buildings were set on fire. The Temple, the king's palace, and other government buildings. From these structures the flames spread and consumed the entire city.

The walls surrounding the city were "pulled down."⁵ But we are to understand that it's not just Nebuchadnezzar and the Babylonians who were destroying Jerusalem. No, God was in it. The Babylonians were God's tools to discipline His wayward people.

So, Jerusalem was destroyed, the walls were torn down, and the Temple of Solomon was razed.

With the walls breached and the demolition of the whole city, the Bible tells us of the methodical plunder of everything of value.⁶

Looting, pillaging, plundering

Babylon had already taken all the gold from the temple, ten years earlier, as tribute. Now they took the bronze, which was there in enormous quantities. Jeremiah 52 lists all of the bronze that was taken.⁷ And why list it?

Well, bronze was used in all kinds of military applications. The looting of Jerusalem was equipping Babylon to become an even more powerful, more lethal, more effective war machine than ever. What a tragic irony.

But bronze wasn't the only treasure accompanying the Babylonians on their journey home. They were taking human plunder as well.

Deportation

They took thousands of Jews back to Babylon with them. The Jews they took were the wealthiest and most influential people. The cream of the crop. The movers and shakers.

Those who were taken away were tied together and herded all the way from Jerusalem to Babylon in a "trail of tears."

And some were not taken. Some were left behind. The Babylonians intentionally left behind the weakest members of society, people who would not be tempted to re-build anything or to rebel against Babylon.

They were left behind to work fields and vineyards for the benefit of the Babylonians. So, while the city was not completely depopulated, the people left were completely demoralized.

⁶ This earlier plundering (605 BC) was also by Nebuchadnezzar and the Babylonians.

⁷ The two gigantic pillars on the outside of the temple building were broken in pieces, as was the ten thousand gallon capacity "bronze sea" used for ceremonial cleansing. They took all of the bronze utensils used in the temple for worshipping God - bowls, firepans, basins, pots, lampstands, and pans.

⁴ Siege against Jerusalem began near the beginning of January 15th, 588 BC and lasted for about eighteen months (the walls of Jerusalem were breached July 18th, 587 BC.)

⁵ In chapter one, Jeremiah was commissioned to "*pull down*" kingdoms.

Now the Babylonians had graciously offered to allow Jeremiah to travel to their capitol and to leave the wasteland that was Jerusalem. If he went to Babylon he would be treated with honor for the rest of his life and would be able to live out his remaining years in comfort and peace in the palace.

Jeremiah declined. He decided to stay behind in Jerusalem with the refugees who had been left behind.

While there with them, in the last years of his life, he wrote the book we call "Lamentations." And in Lamentations 3 we find these words, especially fit for three days after Thanksgiving, 2011.

A Word About Complaining...

[3:39] Why should any living man or any mortal offer complaint in view of his sin?

...in Jeremiah's Day - complaining in light of our sin

That's a mouthful. And in light of all we've seen, it was quite a comment for Jeremiah to have made.

The destruction of the city took place in 586 BC. So, imagine yourself sitting in Jerusalem with friends a couple of years later, say, about 584 BC.

You are all looking at the devastation, glancing over to where the temple used to stand, gazing at the broken down walls that used to guard the city.

Life is miserable, hard, and dangerous. There are no leaders, except the Babylonian masters. Work is scarce and taxes are high.

And you are forbidden to complain.

God's Word to you is, *"Don't even let Me hear you talk about how hard life is."* and *"Don't gripe about what a mess things are in."* and *"Don't whine about how ugly the city is now."*

Zero complaining allowed. And the rationale for making Jerusalem a "no-complain zone" is that the Jews were suffering as they were because of God's discipline in their lives due to their sin.

Had they not sinned so grievously over so many centuries, they wouldn't be in the mess they were in. God says, *"Don't complain. You did it to yourselves."*

There have been certainly times in my own life - and maybe in yours, too - when I can look at a situation and honestly say, *"You know, if I hadn't done 'X' I wouldn't be in such a mess. This is my fault."*

In such a case, complaining is wholly inappropriate. The best course is to accept the suffering as the discipline of God, endure it, learn from it, submit to it.

It might be a prison sentence or time-out from your parents at home. It might be a failed financial transaction due to a lack of diligence or a lack of preparedness for a sports event. It might be a fractured relationship due to your unfaithfulness.

Own up to your failure, turn to God, and don't complain.

Of course, not all suffering is due to the discipline of God in our lives for misbehavior. I would never want to say that. Lots of people suffer innocently and have done nothing to bring their suffering on themselves.

Even then, complaining is inappropriate. Jeremiah lets us know that God takes no pleasure in complaining when we're the ones who have done it to ourselves.

Centuries earlier, during the time that Moses was leading the people of God through the wilderness, God had made it clear that His people were not to be complainers even when they weren't directly responsible for their suffering.

In the days of Moses... - complaining in light of God's work in our lives

Early in their time in the wilderness something went wrong. We don't know what it was, so it could have been most anything.

Food shortage. Water shortage. Too hot. Too cold. Kids are sick. Wheels falling off chariots. Whatever.

Some adversity struck the crowd of Jews as they were on their march through the desert and they complained. Listen to what Scripture says about their complaining ways.

[Numbers 11:1] Now the people became like those who complain of adversity in the hearing of the LORD

Woah! Can you imagine that? Somebody complaining when they are in the midst of adversity.

Seems reasonable to me... (After all, when else would you complain?)

But God wasn't pleased with their complaining. God reckoned His people guilty of sin for complaining of adversity. He considered that they were wrong to complain of adversity.

Regardless of the variety of adversity they faced, they should not have complained. According to God, no adversity is sufficient to justify complaining.⁸

[Numbers 11:1] Now the people became like those who complain of adversity in the hearing of the LORD; and when the LORD heard it, His anger was kindled, and the fire of the LORD burned among them and consumed some of the outskirts of the camp.

⁸ Aside from Lamentations 3:39 (“*Why should any living man, or any mortal, offer complaint, in view of his sin?*”), this is the only time this particular word for “complaint” occurs in the Hebrew Old Testament.

If it seems to you like an over-reaction from God to send fire from heaven for having complained, we simply don't understand complaining from God's point of view.

God takes responsibility for His people's welfare. So, when His people complain of their situation, they are casting aspersions on His goodness.

It is as if they are saying that they are not pleased with the way He is treating them. It is to say that God isn't a good provider.

Our complaints/grumbles are not just gripes about our circumstances. To God, they sound like snide remarks, like, “*It sure would be nice if God would pay attention to our needs and take care of us every once in a while.*”

So, to give evidence of our faith in the goodness of God, the ancient Israelites were to not complain, despite adversity.

And the same holds true for you and me, today. We are to refrain from complaining. Not only when we are directly responsible for the adversity we are suffering, but even when we are not. To not complain is to say, “*God knows what He is doing in my life. He is good and I will trust Him.*”

So, God put up a sign in the days of Moses and Jeremiah, “*No complaining allowed*”. The sign is still up.

...today - complaining and SHINING for Jesus

When the Apostle Paul wrote to the church in the city of Philippi he included the following.

[Philippians 2:14] Do all things without grumbling or disputing (= complaining!); [15] so that you will prove yourselves to be blameless and innocent, children of God above reproach in the midst of a crooked and perverse generation, among whom you appear as lights in the world...

Paul says that adopting a no-complaint policy today will set us apart from the rank and file. We will shine like lights in a dark world if we do nothing more than agree to not complain.

Imagine the impact it would make if you were known as the one person in your workplace who never complained, never had a gripe, never grumbled.

I'm not saying that you don't address wrongs and I'm not saying that you don't look to improve less than ideal circumstances. It's just that due to your trust that God knows what He is doing and He loves you like crazy, you don't gripe.

According to the Bible, simply choosing to not complain opens doors for us to shine for Jesus that would be shut to us if we were known as grumblers.

Now, I know that I've drifted away from Lamentations 3 in developing a theology of complaint. It's just that I've wanted us all to see that throughout history God has been clear: Complaining is to play no part in the lives of His children.

To not complain opens doors to talk about Jesus. It shows our trust in God. And it reflects submission to His discipline.

And rather than complain, we are to engage in the anti-complaint. We are to give thanks. Jeremiah provides all the fodder we need today prompt us to thanksgiving.

DON'T complain. DO open your eyes to the wonder of God's grace and faithfulness and love.

God's Way with Us - a Cause for Thanksgiving

[22] The LORD'S lovingkindnesses indeed never cease, For His compassions never fail. [23] They are new every morning; Great is Your faithfulness.

While sitting among the ash heaps of Jerusalem, Jeremiah looked for and saw evidence of God's faithfulness. I'm convinced that this was more than simple "put on a happy face, be positive" nonsense.

Over a long life, the prophet had nurtured the learned capacity to look for and find the goodness of God, despite whatever was going on.

He saw that he was not destroyed. He saw that Jerusalem still existed. He saw that thousands of Jews were still alive, even if they were living in captivity.

He saw all of that as evidence of God's love, compassion, and faithfulness. And he calls us, on this Sunday after Thanksgiving, to join him in looking for evidence of the same today.

He would tell us that if we look for it we will find it in abundance. Are you looking for evidence of God's lovingkindness?

Thank God for His lovingkindness

Look to the cross of Christ. On the cross God's love was poured out for you. God loved you so much that He sent His only begotten Son so that if you simply believed in Him, you would have eternal life.

He didn't have to send Jesus. Nobody was twisting His arm. He did it because of His great love for you.

On the worst day you can imagine, on the day of your greatest calamity, look to the cross and remember that there is a God in Heaven who loves you with an unfailing love.

Looking for evidence of God's compassion?

Thank God for His compassion

Look at the Person of Jesus. We learn about Him as we read Matthew, Mark, Luke and John. And we see compassion ooze from His every pore as He interacted with the people of His day.

How many times do we read that it was Jesus' compassion that prompted Him to heal, to cast out demons, to raise the dead, to multiply fish and loaves?

It is His compassion for you and for me, too, today, that moves Him to be every bit as actively involved in our lives as He was then.

He has given us His Spirit. He welcomes us to pray and worship. He answers our prayers. He changes our lives. He touches bodies, souls, and spirits. He brings families back together. He breaks the power of sin.

Why? Because of His great compassion. His heart breaks when He sees the calamities of our lives. And He is moved by that compassion to act.

And our God is faithful.

Thank God for His faithfulness

Look at the God who is revealed in the Bible, beginning to end, and you will see His unfailing faithfulness. He always keeps His promises.

What He says He will do, He will do. Friends may fail you. Your closest friends may let you down. God will not fail to keep every promise He has ever made to you.

Here's one to reflect on this morning. He said that the one who believes in Jesus is saved. She has eternal life. He can never be lost.

If you have placed your faith in Jesus, you can rejoice that you are safe forevermore.

Nothing and no one can pluck you out of God's strong grip. Not Satan. Not sickness. Not your own rebellion, failure or sin. Not suffering. Not death. Nothing.

He promised. He's faithful. You're safe and secure in Jesus.

Happy Thanksgiving, indeed!