

“God – The Faithful One”

Lamentations 3:1-25

Dr. Jerry Nelson

(the main parts of this were preached in 1999 at SGC)

Richard Strauss tells the story of a successful salesman he knew named Don, who at 44 was struck totally blind.

His job, his hobbies, and his appreciation of the “great outdoors” were brought to a halt.

Don was so angry that he begged God to take his life and threatened suicide.

But God seemed to assure him that God had a plan for his life.

A short time later Don insisted on taking a walk even though no one was available to help him.

Angrily he took his cane, stumbled down the steps of his home and started across the road in front of his house.

He became disoriented and tripped into a small creek.

As he sat waist deep in water he thought he could almost hear God say to him, “Don, have you cooled down enough now to hear and trust me. I have a plan for your life.”

That was the moment that Don gave away his anger and chose to trust in the faithfulness of God.

A few years later Don was serving the Lord as a representative of a Christian mission to the blind and finding more joy and satisfaction in life than he had ever known before. God was faithful. (Strauss in *The Joy of Knowing God* 275)

Such stories both encourage me and infuriate me.

They encourage me because I cannot refute their truth – Time and time again God has taken the worst and turned it for good – God is faithful.

But they infuriate me because they would seem to indicate that such happy endings are always the outcome of terrible circumstances – and everyday I see evidence that that is not true.

I've seen marriage ripped apart; children separated from a parent, Christians dying in miserable pain, and more.

In those times is God still faithful?

Do I really believe God is always faithful?

C.S. Lewis wrote, "You never know how much you really believe anything until its truth or falsehood becomes a matter of life and death to you. It is easy to say you believe a rope (is) strong... as long as you are merely using it to (wrap) a box. But suppose you had to hang by that rope over a (cliff). Wouldn't you then... discover how much you really trusted it?" ([A Grief Observed](#) 25)

I may be wrong in this, but I sense that the concept of God's faithfulness is something of an abstraction until it intersects our lives.

Like Lewis' rope, saying I believe in the faithfulness of God is much easier than confidently trusting in his faithfulness.

Therefore I will, today, speak of both God's faithfulness and our faith in his faithfulness.

It is when our faith meets his faithfulness that we experience what God desires for us – the full knowledge of his love.

Little did I realize, a few years ago, how I would struggle with faith in the faithfulness of God.

On February 8, 1998 a one-day-old boy, named Paris, came into our lives – his mother gave birth to him in prison.

A prison chaplain called us one day earlier asking if we knew anyone who would care for the child until the mother was released from jail.

Over the next few weeks as our attachment to Paris grew our fear for him also grew.

As we visited the mother in prison and learned more of her situation and the life from which she had come (prostitution, drugs, HIV positive, etc) and that would inevitably be Paris' if he lived with her the greater our concern became.

For 17 months we lived from month to month, anticipating the mother's release, not knowing if he would be with us any longer and safe.

For 17 months our love grew deeper and deeper.

Then in the year 2000, we decided to take a risk.

With his mother's mandatory release from prison imminent, we thought Paris would best be protected by appealing to the court for permanent custody until such time as his mother could prove herself fit to care for him.

But by taking the matter to court we knew we risked everything.

We had no legal standing in our relationship with the baby.

We were not parents, grandparents, or even foster parents.

We had no more legal standing than a babysitter.

By forcing the matter before the court we knew that two other options presented themselves to the court – Paris could be instantly be awarded to his mother who was then out of prison, or to Social Services to be placed in foster care.

Our love for Paris was so strong, and our fear for his physical or emotional safety in the other options before the court, made it feel like we were risking everything.

Again I quote from Lewis, "Only a real risk tests the reality of a belief."

(A Grief Observed p25)

On a Wednesday afternoon we stood in courtroom 5b of the Jefferson County District Court, made our case, sat down and waited.

As I sat there I realized anew that I wasn't certain what I believed about the faithfulness of God.

To be more precise – it was not whether I believed God could and would do what he said he would do but whether he would do what I considered to be "good" in this situation.

And I realized I was questioning the "goodness" of God.

The subject of God's faithfulness forces the subject of his goodness.

To have an all-powerful God who is not good would be to have a malevolent God.

To have a good God who is not all-powerful would be to have a well-meaning but impotent God.

Implicit in the faithfulness of God are his attributes of power and goodness.

And I realized I was wrestling with whether I believed God would exercise his power to do what was good for Paris.

What if this very human judge, maybe overworked, maybe easily indifferent, maybe a “rehabilitationist”, ruled that Paris should immediately be given to his mother or placed in the protective care of the social services’ foster care program?

Would I still be able to speak of the faithfulness of God?

The prophet Jeremiah was put to the test.

Look with me please at the book of Lamentations

If you have watched and read the international news over the past several years then you know something of the conditions under which Jeremiah lived.

You have seen pictures of the atrocities of war waged on the Kurds in northern Iraq, the Albanians in Kosovo, earlier the Hutus and Tutsis of Rwanda in Africa, and earlier still the Cambodians under Pol Pot.

If you let the pictures touch you at all, you realize how unbearable it would be to experience such things.

You too must wonder if you would be like Elie Wiesel, the WWII concentration camp victim, who survived but only with the conviction that there cannot be a God.

Maybe you have read of the torture and death of so many Christians in Sudan and Columbia (CT Oct 4, 1999 p23)

Maybe your own childhood or more recent circumstances.

So at the least your belief in the faithfulness of God is threatened.

In chapter 1, Jeremiah describes the results of the invasion of Jerusalem by the Babylonian army.

Like the pictures we have seen of thousands fleeing their homes in modern wars – so the residents of Jerusalem were either running or being led away in chains by the thousands.

Jeremiah had seen the starvation that preceded the final assault.

He described the children and infants fainting without food and dying in their mothers' arms.

Jeremiah was shaken to the core.

In chapter 3 he describes it all in very personal terms – for he was personally a victim of the horror he described.

And he described it the context of his relationship with God:

STAND please!

Lamentations 3:1-20

I am the man who has seen affliction by the rod of his 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 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. ⁹ 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, ¹¹ 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 sated me with gall. 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 splendor 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." (REMAIN STANDING)

I don't know if you can feel the anguish of his soul.

But maybe you too have wondered about the goodness, the faithfulness of God.

Maybe you too, like Jeremiah, have been put to the test.

It is Jeremiah's anguish that makes his next words so powerful.

It is knowing, that he knows, what it means to be sick with fear, to question the goodness of God, to wonder if there is any hope, that makes his affirmation so attractive.

Hear his words, the Word of God, in Lamentations 3:21-25.

"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. ²⁴ I say to myself, "The LORD is my portion; therefore I will wait for him." ²⁵ The LORD is good to those whose hope is in him, to the one who seeks him..." (BE SEATED)

Walt Kaiser said that given the terrible circumstances at the time, Jeremiah's resounding affirmation of the faithfulness of God is like someone standing in the concentration camp called Auschwitz in 1943 (before the war ended) and singing the beloved song, "Great Is Thy Faithfulness". (Kaiser in A Biblical Approach to Personal Suffering p80)

How incongruous it must have seemed! How could he do it?

What caused him to make such a declaration when the circumstances were so dark?

He tells us.

He said, "Yet this I call to mind and therefore I have hope:"

What does he call to mind, what does he remember?

The first is in verse 22.

"Because of the Lord's great love, we are not consumed..."

The old King James translation said it this way, "It is (because) of the Lord's mercies that we are not consumed..."

It seems the **first thing** Jeremiah remembers is that unless God had intervened in mercy, Jeremiah would have already experienced the consuming judgment of God – Jeremiah wouldn't even exist.

He was a man who remembered that he deserved nothing from God except judgment.

He remembered he had no right to claim God's goodness. His own sinfulness deserved any misery inflicted on him.

It was only God's mercy, great love, and loyal love, covenant-keeping love that kept Jeremiah from being wiped off the face of the earth and eternally separated from God.

John Calvin said it this way, "Were God to take away the promise (of his mercy), all the miserable would inevitably perish; for they can never lay hold on his mercy except through his word. This, then is the reason why Scripture so often connects these two things together, even God's mercy and his faithfulness in fulfilling his promises." (Kaiser 87)

We have heard advertising slogans such as: "Have it your way", "You deserve a break...",

Or we've heard of our "inalienable rights", children's rights, women's rights, workers rights, patient's rights, "entitlements".

Every day we hear how we **deserve** good.

But the Bible unequivocally declares that not one of us deserves anything but the judgment of God.

That casts a very different light on life.

Hard as it is to accept, **if I never knew any mercy from God, I would be getting exactly what I deserve.**

Such humility takes the wind out of our sails of anger toward God for what comes our way.

Were it not for God's mercy, his great love, we would know **only** judgment.

Victor Hugo (author of Les Miserables) said, "The supreme happiness of life is the conviction of being loved for oneself or more correctly (much more correctly) in spite of oneself."

Jeremiah is reminded that God loves him in spite of Jeremiah's unworthiness.

That's the first reason why Jeremiah has hope.

The second thing Jeremiah notes is that in addition to mercy (God not giving us what we do deserve) – God does give us what we don't deserve.

3:22b "...for his compassions never fail, they are new every morning..."

If mercy is "not getting what we do deserve" then his compassions are grace - "getting what we don't deserve".

I don't think you will find the plural word "compassions" in your dictionary.

The English translators are attempting to describe a Hebrew word that is related to the word "womb" – noting the various ways a mother tenderly cares for her child.

Though Jeremiah doesn't enumerate them here, his mind apparently wandered down memory lane noting the ways God has demonstrated and still demonstrates his grace each day.

I think the hymn-writer captured something of this when he wrote,
 "Summer and winter, and springtime and harvest,
 Sun, moon and stars in their courses above
 Join with all nature in manifold witness
 To thy great faithfulness, mercy and love.

Every season, every new day, every colorful fall mountainside, every enjoyment of life, even life itself is a gift from God – and it witnesses to his grace, his tender "mother-care" of every one of us.

Jeremiah knew it would be a great blasphemy to characterize God based only on the discomforts, difficulties and even tragedies that come into our lives.

It was his responsibility and privilege to characterize God based also on the compassions he showers us with each day.

Tennyson wrote somewhat cynically:

"For nothing worthy proving can be proven
 Nor disproven: wherefore thou be wise,
 Cleave ever to the sunnier side of doubt." (The Ancient Sage 1.66)

This is unfounded optimism which I suppose is better than pessimism.

But Tennyson did not have nearly the insight of Jeremiah for Jeremiah concludes, "Great is your faithfulness!"

With Jeremiah it is not the "sunnier side of doubt" but the full light of belief in the faithfulness of God.

Jeremiah had not only seen God's faithfulness declared new every morning but he had heard God himself say:

Jeremiah 32:40-41

"I will make an everlasting covenant with them: I will never stop doing good to them... I will rejoice in doing them good and will assuredly plant them in this land with all my heart and soul."

God's declaration is that he is always doing good for his own.

He doesn't do good sometimes and bad other times.

Romans 8:28

"He works all things together for good to them that love him..."

Psalm 84:11 "No good thing does he withhold from those who walk uprightly."

Even when things are going badly, it means he is changing things to be able to do more good.

Isaiah 38:17 "Lo, it was for my welfare that I had great bitterness."

Psalm 119:71 "It was good for me that I was afflicted, that I might learn your statutes."

In fact, God said in Jeremiah 32 that he "**rejoices**" in doing good for us.

The Scripture depicts God as taking great pleasure in accomplishing our good – so much pleasure does he take in it that he will go to any length to accomplish it, including the sacrifice of his own Son.

In fact, God said in Jeremiah 32 that he rejoices in doing good for us **with all his heart and soul.**

God is **not** passionless, emotionally unmoved, uncaring.

He pictures himself as involved at the very core of his being – caring more for us than WE could ever care for ourselves.

In Luke 15 Jesus tells the story we know as the prodigal son.
In the story the father is clearly a representation of God.

John Piper commenting on this story said “Well-to-do, dignified, aristocratic, aging men don’t run.”

He said they would probably stand and wait or possibly they would walk to meet their returning son but they wouldn’t run.

But God wants us to know that his love for us is so great that he can’t contain himself – he runs.

I am that son and I see the Father running toward me – he is glad with all his heart and soul that I am in his family and he delights in doing good for me.

(from Piper The Pleasures of God p196)

Jeremiah suggests yet a third reason why he can trust in the faithfulness of God.

While God’s compassions are new every day, they are also as old as human history.

God has a history of faithfulness!

Jeremiah didn’t have half the history we have to see the love of God unfolding and **yet he believed** in the faithfulness of God.

He knew of God’s promise to Abraham 1400 years earlier, he knew of the miraculous birth of Isaac.

Even before Isaac was born, God had told Abraham:

Genesis 15:13-16 Then the LORD said to him, "Know for certain that your descendants will be strangers in a country not their own, and they will be enslaved and mistreated **four hundred years**. But I will punish the nation they serve as slaves, and afterward they will come out with great possessions... In the fourth generation your descendants will come back here..."

In the days of Abraham's grandson Jacob, and his sons, these people moved to Egypt and there they were enslaved just as predicted by God.

Abraham's descendants groaned under the burden of Egyptian slavery. Had God forgotten his promise?

No. Jeremiah remembered the faithfulness of God in raising up Moses who led the people out of slavery at exactly the time God said it would happen.

Exodus 12:41 "At the end of the 430 years, to the very day, all the LORD's divisions left Egypt.

Jeremiah knew of the 1200 years of God's faithfulness and he believed God had not changed.

We have a longer history with God.

Through Isaiah the prophet God declared "Behold a virgin shall conceive and bear a son, and you shall call his name Immanuel."

800 years later the Virgin Mary conceived and Paul said to the Galatians, "When the time had fully come, God sent forth his son born of a woman."

We have also heard the witness of the disciples and the witness of men and women for the past 2000 years since Jesus was here.

As children of God, all of this is our family history as well!

And we have known personally the forgiveness of sin and a new relationship with God.

Sociologists like longitudinal studies – how about a 4000 year study – **God never failing to do exactly what he had promised.**

What does Jeremiah remember in the middle of his miserable circumstances?

- Jeremiah remembers that God is merciful not judging Jeremiah as he deserves.
- Jeremiah remembers that God is gracious giving him gifts every new day.
- And Jeremiah remembers that God has a history of faithfulness.

But he also remembers that God himself is the goal of Jeremiah's life.

Lamentations 3:24

"I say to myself, 'The Lord is my portion; therefore I will wait for him.'"

This reflects a refocusing of perspective that I don't pretend to fully understand.

I think the Psalmist was expressing the same perspective when he wrote,

Psalm 73:25-26

"Whom have I in heaven but you? And earth has nothing I desire besides you. My flesh and my heart may fail, but God is the strength of my heart and my portion forever."

Jesus himself repeatedly spoke of our need to change our perspective.

The "good life" is not made up of things or even trouble-free lives.

John 17:3 "Now this is eternal life: that they may know you, the only true God, and Jesus Christ, whom you have sent."

In summary, when Jeremiah finds himself thoroughly depressed by the circumstances of life, he calls to mind the mercy, grace, history and centrality of God himself.

And in the midst of his "Auschwitz" he proclaims with conviction: "Great is your faithfulness!!"

We waited that Wednesday in Jefferson County Court.

We had stated our case for keeping Paris in our care.

We sat and waited for a very human judge to determine the fate of a little boy that we couldn't love more deeply than we did.

I wondered then as I had all that week,

"On what do I base my belief in the faithfulness of God?"

"Can I say with Job, 'Though he slay me, yet will I trust him'?"

“Will I say with the Psalmist, ‘Will not the judge of all the earth do right?’”

If this District judge says Paris will now live with strangers or worse will I be able to say, “Great is thy faithfulness?”

George Mueller is famous in church history as the Englishman who started orphanages and sustained them by prayer alone.

In July 1853 Lydia Mueller the only child of George Mueller became deathly sick with typhoid fever. She went to the brink of death.

Here is Mueller’s description of this time of trial:

“While I was in this great affliction, (I was also) at peace, so far as the Lord’s (plan) was concerned... Parents know what an only child, a beloved child is... Well, the Father in heaven said, as it were, by this (sickness of my daughter), ‘Are you willing to give up this child to me? My heart responded, ‘As it seems good to you, my heavenly Father. Your will be done...’ Of all the trials of faith that as yet I have had to pass through, this was the greatest; and by God’s abundant mercy, I owe it to His praise, I was enabled to delight myself in the will of God, for I felt perfectly sure, that, if the Lord took this beloved daughter, it would be best for her parents, best for her and more for the glory of God than if she lived...”

In God’s providence the child lived.

Seventeen years later, the outcome in other circumstances was not so good.

On February 6, 1870 George Mueller’s wife, Mary, died of rheumatic fever.

They had been married 39 years.

George was 64 years old.

Shortly after her death he preached a sermon from Psalm 119:64 entitled “You are good (God) and (you) do good”.

His points for the sermon were:

The Lord was good and did good in giving my wife to me.

The Lord was good and did good in so long leaving her with me.

The Lord was good and did good in taking her from me.

During her illness he had prayed:

“Yes, my Father, the times of my darling wife are in your hands. You will do the very best thing for her and for me, whether life or death. If it may be, raise up yet again my precious wife – You art able to do it, though she is so ill; but however you deal with me, only help me to continue to be perfectly satisfied with your holy will.

After her death he prayed this:

“Everyday I see more and more how great is her loss... Yet without an effort, my inmost soul habitually (rejoices) in the joy of that loved departed one. Her happiness gives joy to me. My dear daughter and I would not have her back, were it possible to produce it by the turn of the hand. God himself has done it; we are satisfied with him.”

(Autobiography of George Mueller 424-440 in Piper The Pleasures of God 190-191)

No matter what the circumstance, Mueller had matured to be able to say, “Great is thy faithfulness.”

What about me? Could I say it and mean it?

On that Wednesday the Court declared we were granted full parental responsibility for Paris.

He was not yet available for adoption but he was protected by the court for the foreseeable future.

As the judge ever so slowly revealed his judgment, it became increasingly apparent that Paris was safe.

We couldn't contain our emotions.

And though our thanks went to the judge, our praise went to God!

But I was still troubled, what if the decision had been otherwise?

Like Mueller could I say, “Great is Thy faithfulness?”

Later I realized that what God had done was given us one more reason to trust his faithfulness.

In his grace he was building our confidence in him.

It was about a year later that “parental responsibility” became legal adoption – Paris Michael Nelson

A confidence in the faithfulness of God doesn't come in a flash of inspiration, but like a long rain – it soaks in, almost imperceptibly over time.

C.S. Lewis said it is “Like the warming of a room or the coming of daylight, when you first notice them, they have been going on for some time.” (A Grief Observed p71)

In every experience of life God is working his grace in us to believe him, that with his whole heart and soul he rejoices in doing us good – the kind of “good” that comes from his perfect wisdom and perfect love.

Though sometimes not seen or felt in the present, we know our God - one day we will see it for the “good” these circumstances are.

Jeremiah said, “I remember my affliction...and my soul is downcast within me. 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.** I say to myself, ‘The Lord is my portion; therefore I will wait for him.’”