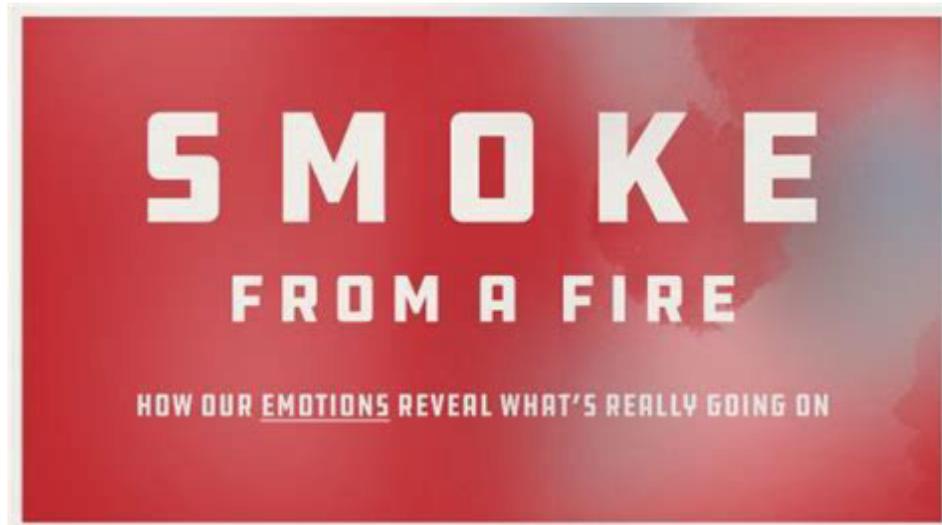


“Depression”
Lamentations 3:1-30

Smoke From A Fire #1
Weekend of July 6-7, 2019



This week we going to begin a month-long series called Smoke From A Fire: How Our Emotions Reveal What's Really Going On. The title comes from St. Augustine, a 5th century Christian theologian (perhaps the most important a theologian in the Christian church after Paul the Apostle). Augustine said that our emotions often function like smoke from a fire—they tell us what is really going on in your heart.

In our previous house the smoke alarm near the kitchen was crazy-sensitive and crazy loud. So, when you burned the bacon even a little bit, it sounded like air raid sirens going off. So, you'd rush over and open the door and take your towel and start waving it around the smoke detector—which made the alarm stop, but until you removed that pan and the burning grease, the problem would continue.

In the same way—emotions are not usually the problem. They are indicators of the problem. With that image in mind, we're going to take the next few weeks to look at 4 or 5 emotions that should function like smoke in your house. As with the smoke, the wise thing to do with these emotions is not to try and whiff them away, or suppress them, medicate them or even to manage them. The Bible would point us first to read them as indicators of what is going on down in there.

I think the next few weeks have the potential to impact your life. Your emotions determine how happy you feel about life, how much you enjoy life, how you see the world, and how you treat others! The first emotion we're going to look at is “depression.” Now, let me say right out of the gate—depression, like all of these emotions, is complex.

First, depression operates along a continuum. On one end of the continuum is discouragement, which we all feel from time to time, and on other end is depression. Between here and there a lot of different factors come together—spiritual factors, physical/ biological factors, psychological factors or even social factors.

In this sermon series, I'm going to focus primarily on the spiritual 'factors.' But that doesn't mean I think it's the only contributor, or even always the primary contributor in depression. God made us a "psychosomatic unity," which simply means it is impossible to separate, at least on earth, our souls and our bodies, and what happens in one inevitably affects the other.

Depression begins with discouragement. You get discouraged about something that really starts to change your outlook on life.

- Your marriage just is not getting better. You've had occasional glimmers of hope but now you've finally resigned yourself to the fact it may never be the family you've always wanted.
- Somebody broke up with you and their insults have really gotten into your head.
- A loved one passed away and you're lonely. And the pain of their loss doesn't seem to be going away.
- You're still single. Or single again.
- Maybe it's a chronic illness.
- Or maybe you've messed up again—you've blown another opportunity, destroyed another relationship, or lost another job. You are convinced you're never going to get victory over a particular structure.

Whatever it is, when you look into the future, all you feel is a suffocating darkness that keeps you from even wanting to get out of bed: things are bad now and you don't see how they will ever get better.

Which brings us to Lamentations 3. The book will surprise you when I tell you about it. It's a book of laments—poems about how bad everything is—5 of them of the prophet Jeremiah. Jeremiah lived during a time when Israel was being delivered over to exile for their sin. Israel had hardened their hearts to God so many times that God was finally exiling them from the land he had promised to them.

During his life, Jeremiah witnessed multiple, violent deportations of friends and family from his beloved Jerusalem to Babylon. He watched as Solomon's Temple, the symbol of Israel's faith and pinnacle of her cultural life, was torn down.

Jeremiah was one of the remaining survivors in Jerusalem, and everybody that was left kept telling themselves that the worst was over. But God told Jeremiah that the worst was yet to come, and Jeremiah was given the task of telling everyone the armies of Babylon would keep coming until nobody was left. (Imagine that being your job—to tell people around you that you love who have seen unspeakable tragedy that the worst was yet to come!)

To make matters worse, nobody believed Jeremiah; they called him a traitor and put him in a dungeon where Jeremiah 38:6 says he sunk up to his armpits in mud. It was from this hell-hole that Jeremiah composed these poems. Is it any wonder they are so dark? So, let's dive down into the middle of this mud pit with him.

I am the man who has seen affliction by the rod of His wrath. He has driven and brought me into darkness without any light. Surely against me has He turned His hand continually, the whole day long My flesh and my skin He has made waste away; He has broken my bones; He has besieged and enveloped me with gall and travail. He has set me in dark places, like the dead of long ago. He has hedged me in so that I cannot get out; He has made my chain heavy. Even when I cry for help, He shuts out my prayer.
Lamentations 3:1-8

Some of you have gone through dark chapters and thought these same things but you've suppressed those emotions telling yourself, "Real Christians don't ever feel like this." The prophet Jeremiah was a real man of faith and he felt that way.

Charles Spurgeon was a real Christian and he told his 15,000 member congregation: "I have spent more days shut up in depression than probably anybody else here." He was said by many to be the greatest preacher ever to live and he frequently considering quitting the ministry he was so depressed.

Martin Luther was a real Christian and he went through times so dark that his wife would remove all the knives from their home for fear he'd kill himself: "For more than a week I was close to the gates of death and hell," he wrote. "I trembled constantly. I could find no thoughts of Christ, only of desperation and blasphemy of God."

Can you see you are not alone in your thoughts? Look at how Jeremiah continues...

He has blocked my ways with hewn stone; He has made my paths crooked. He is to me a bear lying in wait, a lion in hiding. He has turned aside my ways and torn me in pieces; He has made me desolate. He has bent His bow and set me as a target for the arrow. He has caused the arrows of His quiver to pierce my inward parts. I have become the derision of all my people, their mocking song all the day. He has filled me with bitterness, He has sated me with wormwood. He has made my teeth grind on gravel, and covered me with ashes. My soul is bereft of peace; I have forgotten prosperity. So I say, "My strength and my hope from the Lord have perished." Jeremiah 3:9-18

This is Jeremiah, ladies and gentlemen, the prophet of God! Some of you, as we're reading this, may be tempted to pick up your Bible and be like—is this the Bible? Some of you, as we're reading this, may be tempted to pick up your Bible and be like—is this the Bible? So, let's talk about that for a minute. God chose to include this in the Bible.

But God put this book in there, even though it's depressing and most of you will never memorize it because he wants those of you who suffer to know that he knows how you feel. And it's ok for you to express these emotions to God.

This lament is honest even if it is not accurate. (It is an honest reflection of how Jeremiah feels even if it doesn't fully account for everything that God was doing.) And I point that out because I want you to see that it's ok to be honest, deeply honest with God.

The greatest Christians in history were not those that God delivered from all pain and misery but those he delivered through pain and misery. **Faith starts with honesty before God. But it doesn't stop there: Look at how Jeremiah continues...**

But this I call to mind, and therefore I have hope: It is of the Lord's mercies that we are not consumed; His compassions do not fail. They are new every morning; great is Your faithfulness. "The Lord is my portion," says my soul, "therefore I will hope in Him." The Lord is good to those who wait for Him, to the soul who seeks Him. It is good that a man should wait quietly for the salvation of the Lord. Look it how he continues... For the Lord will not cast off forever. But though He causes grief, yet He will have compassion according to the abundance of His mercies. For He does not afflict from His heart, nor grieve the sons of men. Lamentations 3:21-26, 31-33.

This is Jeremiah's answer to the spiritual dimensions of depression. He gives us four things we can remember to do the midst of despair. * Here's the first one...

He calls to mind the goodness of God: What does Jeremiah call to mind? That God's steadfast love never ceases. "Call to mind" means this thought is not naturally in there—we have to put it in there. It's what D. Martin Lloyd-Jones called preaching to yourselves. He said, "...there is a sense in which the primary task of the Scriptures is to teach us how to talk to ourselves."

A lot of Christians get that we walk by faith, not by sight, but they don't get that we walk by faith and not by feeling. For many Christians, what they feel is their most reliable indicator of what is true. I feel like God has forgotten me. I feel distant from him. Jeremiah says, "I feel all those things, but God's word tells me they not true" and I choose to believe him even though I can't feel it."

Luther used to call this drowning out the voices of despair with the louder word of the gospel. At times he would physically shout at the devil: "NO! I have not been abandoned. I have not been forsaken. God's word tells me, and Jesus's death proves it." Here's a second thing we can do in the midst of despair...

Learn any lessons God is trying to teach you. I want to be careful with this one because I don't want to imply that in whatever suffering you are going through God has you in it because he has some grand lesson for you to learn and he won't let you out of it before you learn it.

There are many times that is not true. There is nothing, in fact, that indicates that Jeremiah's suffering was any kind of response to what he'd done. Jeremiah had been a faithful prophet of God since he was a young man. So, what is God trying to do in our suffering?

Sometimes in our suffering God is trying to take out some idol from our lives. Sometimes God might be trying to humble you. Sometimes God uses times of waiting to prepare you for ministry. Sometimes through pain God is giving you the ability to relate to others in ways you couldn't without the pain!

Look at the words of **Charles Spurgeon** as he talked about his journey through depression... **"I would gladly go into the depths of depression a hundred times in order to learn how to cheer a downcast spirit, that I might better know how to speak a word in season to the weary."**

In the words of AW Tozer... **"For God to use you greatly he must first wound you deeply."** Here is a third lesson for those of us in despair...

Realize that God's plans are ultimately for good and for blessing: Notice what Jeremiah says... **"The Lord is my portion," says my soul, "therefore I will hope in him."** Portion is a word that the Jews used to refer to their allotment of land, the inheritance passed down in a family from generation to generation.

Jeremiah is saying, "I don't have any land left. The Babylonians stole it all. But God himself is my portion." He's my inheritance and he's better than land. Let's be clear: Jeremiah wanted deliverance from prison. He wanted vindication in the eyes of the people. He wanted reunion with his loved ones and restoration and salvation for the people. And he says, I'm convinced God will change things in the days to come.

Why does he think that? Because God is a good of goodness and blessing.

Don't get so spiritual that you overlook that God's intentions for the world are good. Don't just say, "Well, Jesus is enough." Yes, he is enough. But Jesus came to do something on earth, and I want to see his goodness and restoration at work in the world now! In my life. In my family. In our community. That leads to the last point...

Get up tomorrow and look for the goodness of God. But this I call to mind, and therefore I have hope: It is of the Lord's mercies that we are not consumed; His compassions do not fail. They are new every morning; great is Your faithfulness. Lamentations 3:21-23

Don't you love this image of the new morning? God's mercies and faithfulness are like the sun coming up new every morning, washing away the shadows and the darkness of the night! Today may feel like a terribly dark, never-ending night of mistakes and despair. But God's mercies rise new and fresh every morning.

For those whose depression has a primarily spiritual root cause, this is the hope that drives depression away. Your emotions may be telling you that there is nothing ahead but darkness and despair, but you must call to mind that Jesus got out of the grave which means he has good plans for you and your family, and ultimately your story will end in victory and not defeat. There are some things you need to call to mind...

Call to mind that it is by grace you have been saved through faith, it was the gift of God, and because of that we know God has preordained good works that you should go and walk with them. Call to mind that we were saved for a purpose—to bless us and make us a blessing.

You may feel, like Jeremiah, like you have been forsaken. But this you must call to mind: **"the steadfast love of the Lord never ceases; his mercies never come to an end. They are new every morning; great is your faithfulness, o God!"**

For many of you, this will be a watershed in your life. Don't let your emotions dictate reality to you. Your emotions don't have brains; they can't show faith. Let's God word dictate reality.

Which brings up one, final question: **How do you know God has steadfast love for you?**

Some of you may wonder. You have a life filled with mistakes, and you wonder whether God might be punishing you for some past sins.

Here's how you know: Re-read this chapter again through the lens of Jesus's life. Wasn't Jesus the one who experienced real exile? Wasn't he the one driven from Jerusalem with a whip, from God's people, and from the presence of the Father he loved as he carried the cross?

Wasn't the one whose body God tore, the one into whom God shot his arrows of wrath? Wasn't the one who literally drank wormwood? Matthew 27:34 says they gave him vinegar mixed with "gall." Gall is the Greek word for 'wormwood.' Jesus drank the full cup of God's wrath, so that all that is left for us is the overflowing cup of steadfast love.

Jesus lived in the darkness of Lamentations 3:1–20 so I could live in the beauty and light of vs. 21–33. Jesus went into depression, so I could get out of it. He went through the pain, so I could get the joy.

Now, **“When darkness seems to hide his face, I rest on his unchanging grace. In every high and stormy gale, my anchor holds within the veil.”** One last word from Charles Spurgeon...**“I find no better cure for my depression than to trust in the Lord with all my heart, and seek to realize afresh the power of the peace-speaking blood of Jesus, and his infinite love in dying upon the cross to put away all my transgressions.”**

This I call to mind—the steadfast love of the Lord never ceases; his mercies never come to an end. They are new every morning. Great is your faithfulness, O God!