

## BETTER THAN THAT GEYSER

8<sup>th</sup> in a Series on the Character of God Called, “Indescribable”- Topic: God’s Faithfulness  
Lamentations 3:21-24

Life is really about making decisions, isn’t it? All day, every day, we must make decisions. The course of our lives is largely a result of the decisions we make. Even during the lockdown when our options have been limited, we still have had to make many decisions each day. Shall I actually put on clothes or just wear my pajamas or my sweats all day? ...Again ? What am I going to watch on television? Of course, that decision making process will continue for the rest of our lives. Every time we make decisions, there are variables, which is what makes the decision process difficult. Often a key step in making decisions is figuring out what the most important variable is, or in other words, what is the most important question I need to answer in making this decision?

Recently Laurie and I were in a guitar store and she asked me if I were to get a new guitar, which one would I like to get? The store has a huge variety of guitars in a wide range of prices, styles and capabilities. The one I’d *like* to get is horribly expensive, so much so that it would be both financially unwise for me to buy it and ludicrous because I am not, and never will be, a good enough musician to justify even owning such a fine instrument. So I thought about a much more reasonable price range. Even within that range there was a bewildering array of choices. How could I ever decide if I were ever to choose to buy a guitar? The way to arrive at some sense of what to choose was to figure out what was most important to me. I decided that the top factor for me would be how well the instrument played. I have had a guitar that was not an especially good one, and I found it difficult, even painful, to play. It would be nice to have one with good sound, but if it wasn’t easy to play, I wouldn’t play it much and the sound wouldn’t matter. Once I decided that was the key factor, it helped me identify a likely candidate in the price range. I didn’t buy the guitar because I wasn’t ready to make that commitment to playing it. (But Laurie, my sly wife, gave it to me as a gift for my birthday!)

Think about how a woman decides to marry a man. She has to go through that determination of what is most important to her. If she’s smart she will sift through the variables of how charming he is, how good looking he is, how witty he is, how intelligent he is, how successful she thinks he will be, and hopefully she will get down to what I think is likely the most important question: Can I trust this man?

There is a decision process that we all go through in determining how we are going to live, and the number of variables in making our choices is huge. But down at the bottom of all of them is one key question. It is the most fundamental question we will ever face, and it is involved in everything we are and do. I will identify that question toward the end

of this talk, but I will tell you right now that the characteristic of God that we will be considering today is absolutely essential to answering that question. Let's look at Lamentations 3:21-24.

## EXPOSITION

### PREMISE: GOD IS FAITHFUL

Jeremiah wrote Lamentations. He had spent years telling Israel that because of their rebellion against God, judgment was coming. It was coming in the form of the Babylonians conquering them. His message was that it was going to happen and that they needed to accept their fate and submit to God's discipline of them. He wrote Lamentations after the judgment had finally come. Unfortunately, the ancient Jews refused to accept his message. They fought against God's judgment and it made things far worse. It resulted in massive devastation and death. Jeremiah was lamenting what had happened to the people of God. The destruction of their land was complete. Death was everywhere, and their nation no longer existed as an independent political entity. Jeremiah wasn't gloating, saying, "I told you so." He was heartbroken. What had happened to his people, people he loved, was devastating and tragic.

As he was grieving, lamenting the horror that had befallen his people, he wrote these words. The key words in these verses are startling, not at all what we would expect him to say. They are in verses 22-23. "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." Jeremiah's summation as he looked upon the holy city of Jerusalem now reduced to a jumble of rubble with not a building left standing, on the dead bodies strewn everywhere, on the few survivors looking haggard, weak and defeated; was to say to God, "great is your faithfulness." Remarkable. The message that God is faithful is pronounced and consistent throughout the Bible.

Psalm 33:4 says, "The word of the Lord is right and true; he is faithful in all he does." Psalm 36:5 says, "Your love, Lord, reaches to the heavens, your faithfulness to the skies." That is a way of saying there is no end of God's faithfulness. At the end of all things we see what John saw in Revelation 19:11. "I saw heaven opened and there before me was a white horse, whose rider is called Faithful and True." The Lord is called Faithful, because that is so characteristic of him. It is always true of him.

But what is faithfulness? How do we define it? The dictionary says, "True to one's word, promises, vows; steady in allegiance, affection, loyal; reliable, trusted." Let's consider some of those traits. It says one who is faithful is steady. God is the epitome of steadiness, because he does not change. In Malachi 3:6 the prophet quotes God saying, "I,

the Lord, do not change.” In Psalm 102 the Psalmist said in verse 25 that God created the earth and the heavens then said in verses 26-27, “They will perish, but you remain; they will all wear out like a garment. Like clothing you will change them and they will be discarded. But you remain the same and your years will never end.” Hebrews 13:8 says, “Jesus Christ is the same yesterday, today and forever.” He has never changed and he never will. That means his character, the essence of who he is, doesn’t change.

This is hard for us to comprehend because the only constant in our lives and our world is change. We change, a lot. Just look at wedding pictures from 30 or 40 years ago and you will see change that in some cases is so dramatic you can hardly recognize the individuals in the pictures. We change in our character and personality as well. Years ago while preaching a sermon I cited in an illustration a story about the boldness of a guy who was a well-known pastor of a huge church at the time. He was meeting with some other pastors in a restaurant. It was a bit noisy, so he stood up, and in his booming voice, said, “Could I have your attention please?” Everyone in the restaurant got quiet. He explained his group would like to give thanks and requested everyone stay silent so he could do that for just a moment. Then he led the entire restaurant in prayer. I said in my sermon that I could never imagine being that bold and doing such a thing. My brother happened to be there that day, and later he said to me, “Do you remember the time we were with a group of friends at the Casita Maria restaurant? You stood up and did exactly what that guy did.” When he said it, suddenly the memory of that forgotten incident he was referring to popped into my head. I had done that! I did it because back when I was 21 years old I was kind of brash. That guy is gone. I have seriously changed. That is the nature of human beings. But the nature of God is that his character never varies for a moment. James said with him there is no shifting shadow. That is why we know he is faithful, because he is always the same in his character.

The dictionary says a faithful person always keeps his promises. Numbers 23:19 says, “God is not human, that he should lie, not a human being, that he should change his mind. Does he speak and then not act? Does he promise and not fulfill?” That verse says there are a couple of things that are typical of humans. They lie, and they change their minds. *But God does not.* It asks, “does he promise and not fulfill?” The implied answer is no. He always does what he promises he will do. In Matthew 24:35 Jesus said, “Heaven and earth will pass away, but my words will never pass away.” Isaiah 40:8 says, “The grass withers and the flowers fall, but the word of our God endures forever.” He does what he says... always.

This is key to faithfulness. Every time we tell someone we will do something and then we do what we said, we are building trust, showing them we are faithful. If we ever fail to do what we say, don’t do what we promised, then we are not faithful, and thus not to be

trusted. I once backed myself into a corner by making a promise. Our kids had decided they wanted a dog and they pestered us to get one. Toby was relentless. He had decided he wanted an American eskimo dog. He cut out ads for them from the newspaper. He even called the people who were selling the dogs. The problem was, Laurie and I didn't really want to get a dog, and I especially did not want to have to pay for one. But Toby just kept at it. He would call a breeder, then say to me, "Hey, Dad, can we buy this one? It's only \$300." I'd say, "Never going to happen." But he wouldn't give up." He kept trying. One day he said he had found one for \$200. I said, "The answer is still no." He asked, "How about if I can get the seller to agree to \$100...?" I knew that Frosty the Snowman would have a better chance of surviving in Death Valley in July than Toby would of getting that woman to sell him the dog at that price. So I said, "Sure, if you can get her to agree to that we'll buy the dog." I was not even slightly worried that it would happen. I agreed just to get him to leave me alone. He called the woman and told her we could buy the dog for \$100. She said she would think about it and he should call her back in a couple of days. He was excited, but I knew she was just being nice, and the real answer was no. She was hoping he would just forget about it. He didn't forget. He called her back in a few days. I couldn't believe what happened. She said, "I can see you really want this dog. I want him to go to a family that will love him, so I'll sell him to you for your price." I was shocked. I was also stuck. I had made a promise. Would I be faithful, and keep my word to my son, or would I back out because I didn't really mean it? I bit the bullet and we bought the dog. I backed myself into a corner that had consequences for the next 16 years. God is faithful because he always, without a single failure or exception, keeps every promise he makes.

A faithful person is loyal, and that is definitely true of God. Hebrews 13:5 quotes him saying to us, "Never will I leave you; never will I forsake you." Jesus said, "I am with you always, to the very end of the age." Romans 3:3-4 says, "What if some were unfaithful? Will their unfaithfulness nullify God's faithfulness? Not at all! Let God be true and every human being a liar." That is huge, because despite all my weakness and unfaithfulness, he doesn't give up on me. He stays loyal to me. He says nothing can separate me from his love that is in Christ Jesus.

### HOW CAN WE BELIEVE GOD REALLY IS FAITHFUL?

The problem is that sometimes it doesn't feel like God is faithful. We should look at the context of these verses we are thinking about today. Look at how this chapter begins. Jeremiah wrote in verse 1, "I am the man who has seen affliction by the rod of the Lord's wrath." Well that doesn't sound like faithfulness. In verses 10-11 he said, "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." Yikes. God mangled him like a lion and left him there to suffer. That is hardly a description of God being faithful. In verse 17 he said, "I have been deprived of

peace. I have forgotten what prosperity is.” Uh, all of you who believe and preach the health and wealth gospel, how do you think it would have sounded to Jeremiah? This does not sound like the run up to “great is your faithfulness.”

That should serve as a loud and clear warning to us that God’s faithfulness does not mean that life is going to be all roses and unicorns. It is the rare follower of Christ who has not been through seasons where they question the faithfulness of God, because it doesn’t feel like he is keeping his promises and it doesn’t feel like he is being loyal to us and unchanging. It feels like he has either abandoned us or worse – turned against us. Life takes terrible turns that feel like unmitigated disasters. In his book, *Gleanings In The Godhead*, Arthur Pink wrote, “Our faith is sorely tried, our eyes dimmed with tears, and we can no longer trace the outworking of his love...We are staggered...a dark cloud hides (God) from us.” So what can help us believe this when we are in those times?

### **See the evidence around you**

Writer Philip Yancey wrote about his first visit to Yellowstone Park to see Old Faithful, the famous geyser. He and his wife were in the dining room of the Old Faithful Inn. There was a clock counting down the time until the next eruption of the geyser. When the clock reach one minute, they, along with every other diner in the room, left their table and went to the huge picture windows to see the event. Right on time the geyser erupted, and all the diners oohed and aahed. But Yancey noticed that the waiters and busboys busily went about their business without even one of them so much as glancing in the direction of the geyser. He wrote, “Old Faithful, grown entirely too familiar, had lost its power to impress them.”

Our problem is that we experience God’s faithfulness every day of our lives and become so used to it and our nature is to take it for granted. We don’t even notice it. The earth is ever-spinning at 1000 miles per hour. Every day it is hurtling around the sun at 67,108 miles per hour. Each day we travel 1.6 million miles through space. And as this is going on, our planet is right where it needs to be. *This system is kept in place by God.* Colossians 1:17 says he holds the whole thing together. Day after day we breathe in and breathe out, our hearts continue to pump blood through our system, and all of it is evidence of the faithfulness of God. We are surrounded by astounding miracles of life day after day and we take them for granted. They are spectacular, but we pay no attention, and we fail to see God’s faithfulness. Mark Buchanan wrote in his book, *The Holy Wild*, “We live amidst surpassing wonders, but most of it has become run of the mill...Faithfulness bores us.” In his book, *The Grave Robber*, Mark Batterson wrote, “We already believe God for the big miracles like they’re no big deal. The trick is trusting him for the little ones.”

But what about natural disasters like earthquakes? Where is God's faithfulness then? A few years back Peter Ward, a geologist and evolutionary biologist, and David Brownlee, an astrobiologist, both from the University of Washington, wrote a book called *Rare Earth*. In it they addressed the issue of why things like earthquakes and tsunamis happen. They said that the universe is fundamentally hostile to complex life. Complex, intelligent life requires a profoundly unlikely set of circumstances. One of those unique circumstances is plate tectonics. As you know, deep down in the earth there are tectonic plates, and these bang into each other and result in earthquakes. But it turns out that plate tectonics are crucial to the biodiversity on earth and they help regulate the planet's climate. They said that plate tectonics are a central requirement for life as we know it. So even some of the natural disasters we see are actually a manifestation of God's wisdom, goodness and his faithfulness.

### **Be clear about what God promises**

One of our biggest problems with believing in God's faithfulness is that we get confused about what he promises us. My kids can't accuse me of not keeping my promises because I didn't buy them a house when they got married. That's because I never promised them I would. We mostly think that God promises that he will give us a blessed life of security and abundance and success. After all, there are a number of Old Testament verses that seem to indicate exactly that. When we don't experience security or success or abundance it feels to us like God has not kept his promise, thus he is not faithful.

But God has not, in fact, promised us those things in this life. In John 16:33 Jesus said, "In this world you will have trouble." *That* is a promise. In Acts 14:22 Paul and Barnabus said, "We must go through many hardships to enter the kingdom of God." In Matthew 5:11 Jesus said, "Blessed are you when people insult you," (for they will,) "persecute you and falsely say all kinds of evil against you because of me." In 1 Peter 2:20-21 the apostle wrote, "If you suffer for doing good and you endure it, this is commendable before God. To this you were called, because Christ suffered for you, leaving you an example that you should follow in his steps."

What has God promised us that we can count on, that we can know he will fulfill? He has promised to love us unconditionally. He has promised to forgive us. He has promised that he will be with us and will guide us. He has promised to bring good out of everything that happens to us. He has promised to give us eternal life. *These* are things we can count on. He will be faithful.

God has promised he will be with us and will lead us through life, and he keeps that promise. In his novel, *Jayber Crow*, writer Wendell Berry has the central character say, "Often I have not known where I was going until I was already there. I have had my

share of desires and goals, but my life has come to me or I have gone to it mainly by way of mistakes and surprises. Often I have received better than I deserved. Often my faintest hopes have rested on bad mistakes. I am an ignorant pilgrim, crossing a dark valley. And yet for a long time, looking back, I have been unable to shake off the feeling that I have been led – make of that what you will.” These are the promises to which we can count on God to be faithful.

## APPLICATION

When I started this talk I said there is one question that is fundamental to life. Here is that question: ***can I trust God?*** That question comes up every single day. It impacts every decision we make, every word we say and our every action. If God is faithful, I can trust him absolutely. If I don’t think he is faithful, then I won’t trust him, and I will rely on my own devices.

Satan has an answer for that question. It is a resounding NO. He claims you can’t trust God. He is claiming that every moment of your life. His very first appearance in the Bible he was singing that chorus. He told Eve she could not trust God, so she’d better take care of herself. He will always find some reason for not trusting God. It will be as plausible as it sounded to her. And when we swallow his line we will make choices like she did, ones that always end in disaster. So what can we do to trust God when we are in that dark hole where it is hard to see his faithfulness?

## REMEMBER PAST FAITHFULNESS

We have very short memories. We tend to operate on a “What have you done for me lately?” basis. “Fine, maybe God did some cool things, years ago, but where is he right now?” That’s very human. Do you remember the ancient people of Israel? Remember all the miracles God did to force Pharaoh to let them go. Then remember what happened when they found themselves trapped on the banks of the Red Sea with the Egyptian army in hot pursuit. One of the monumental events of all time occurred as God cleared a path for them right through the sea. Do you recall what happened when not very long after that spectacular miracle, water ran short in the Sinai desert? They whined that Moses had led them out there to die. “What have you done for me lately?”

That’s how we usually operate. It’s surprising how short our memories can be sometimes. In our passage in verse 21, after Jeremiah talked about how he remembered the affliction and how downcast his soul was, he said, “Yet this I call to mind.” He *chose* to call to mind, to remember, the Lord’s compassions and his faithfulness. *It is crucial that we*

*remember the times when God has come through for us.* Psalm 105:5 tells us to “remember the wonders he has done.”

Recently Toby and Anna went through a stressful time when they needed to sell their house. Because of the pandemic, Anna’s job was in serious jeopardy, and without her income, they could not afford the mortgage on the house. They put their house on the market, but the lockdown pretty much froze activity in the market. Their price started dropping. They were frustrated by the fact that had they been able to get the house on the market two weeks earlier, it would have sold in the blink of an eye for a great price. They began to feel the stress. The possibility of a financial disaster lurked out there. Laurie and I felt some of the stress with them, but we have now lots of memories of God’s faithfulness. We remembered how in the early years of ministry we didn’t think we’d be able to survive here financially long term. But year after year God provided, and we’ve been here 41 years. We remembered how we didn’t have a clue how we would ever get our kids through college. But God provided in unexpected, surprising ways. So many times in our lives God has been faithful to us that it makes it easier to count on his faithfulness now. All we need to do is remember his past faithfulness.

God has been faithful. All of us have evidence of his faithfulness in our lives. We need to remember. Occasionally we sing the hymn *Come Thou Fount of Every Blessing*. The third verse begins with the words, “Here I raise my Ebenezer.” Um, Ebenezer? This is about Ebenezer Scrooge? No. Well what’s an Ebenezer? I’m pretty sure that unless this is an obscure Hebrew term for some body part or something, I don’t have an Ebenezer. I can’t raise my Ebenezer because I think I have arthritis in it. In 1 Samuel 7 after Israel had finally turned to God and trusted him through the leadership of the prophet Samuel, when they were afraid they were about to be destroyed by the Philistines, God miraculously defeated them. Afterward Samuel set up a stone there, a monument, and called it “Ebenezer,” which was Hebrew for “stone of help.” He wanted the people always to remember what God had done for them, and that monument was to remind them for years, for generations. ...Right next to our front door there is a little garden area, and in it are a bunch of stones. Each one of those stones represents a major event, an answer to prayer in Laurie’s and my life. They help us remember. We all need to remember God’s faithfulness.

## RECOGNIZE THAT FAITH AND WAITING ARE REQUIRED

Notice that when Jeremiah wrote these soaring words of hope, nothing had changed! There was no evidence of the Lord’s faithfulness. All he saw was death, destruction and defeat. *When he said, “Great is your faithfulness” it was a statement of pure faith.* That reminds us that there will be times when we won’t see God’s compassion and faithfulness in our present circumstances. That’s when we need to remember, and then believe that



God has not changed. As he has always been faithful in the past, so he will continue to be. In verses 31-33 Jeremiah wrote, “No one is cast off by the Lord forever. Though he brings grief, he will show compassion, so great is his unfailing love. He does not willingly bring affliction or grief to anyone.”

We must do exactly what Jeremiah said he would do in verse 24. “I say to myself, ‘The Lord is my portion; therefore I will wait for him.’” We must *choose* to wait for the Lord and believe that we will see his faithfulness in our lives. We must tell ourselves to wait for the Lord. Waiting is not anyone’s favorite thing to do. Few of us would say patience is our strength. Here’s a test to measure your patience. After the traffic light turns green how many seconds go by before you honk your horn at the nimrod in front of you who is apparently waiting for a different shade of green light before they decide to proceed? Two, three? I’m guessing it’s less than 10. We hate things that try our patience.

We say, “The Lord is my portion, therefore I will wait for him...as long as it doesn’t take him more than 10 seconds. If it takes any longer than that I will honk my horn at him, or maybe just drive around him.” Few of us would say our favorite verse is Psalm 27:14, “Wait for the Lord; be strong and take heart and wait for the Lord.” But that is exactly what we need to do.

Do you know what will help us wait? Laurie and I were recently discussing the possibility of having a vacation this year. Getting away is a huge deal for us every year. But our corona virus friend has made that a very iffy, maybe unlikely possibility this year. Right now we don’t have that to look forward to. I realized that every year we’ve been able to take a vacation we have to plan for it months ahead of time. Then we have to wait for it. We are always anxious for it to come, but the waiting isn’t hard. In fact, part of the fun is looking forward to it. What makes it easy to wait is knowing it is sure to happen. When I am confident it is going to happen then waiting is easy. Anticipating it actually gives strength in the meantime. When we are certain we will see the faithfulness of God, waiting can be kind of fun as we anticipate seeing the surprising ways God will show himself faithful.

Hershel York is a pastor and seminary professor in Kentucky. He tells of a time when he learned about God’s faithfulness as a young man. He was 15 years old. His parents informed him that they were going to move from their home in rural Kentucky to Detroit. He had lived a carefree life of a young man who loved hunting and fishing, and now he was being taken by his parents to Detroit, where the only things hunted were people. He didn’t want to leave his lifelong friends, and he didn’t want to go to a big city, especially one like Detroit. He was angry. As you can imagine when he started school he was the odd man out. People made fun of his accent and asked him if he wore shoes when he

went to school in Kentucky. He was lonely and isolated. He made it through his first morning, but then came lunch. Where do you sit in the cafeteria? He didn't know where the off limits tables were, which ones were territory where he wouldn't be welcome. He noticed a couple of open tables in the back, so he went there and sat down. No sooner had a sat down that a group of kids walked in and went directly to that table. One of them said, "Hey, you're at our table." He said, "Look, I'm brand new. This is my first day. If you would be so kind as to let me sit here today, I won't bother you tomorrow." One said, "Hey, you're from the south." Hershel admitted as much, then the kid said, "Where in the south are you from?" Hershel said, "Kentucky." The kid said, "Really, what part of Kentucky?" "Western Kentucky." The kid pressed him, "Well, where in western Kentucky?" Hershel said, "I'm from Christian County." The kid said, "Christian County, near Hop Town?" Hershel knew only people from Hopkinsville called it Hop Town, so he thought this curious. He said, "Yeah, that is the county seat. I lived out in the country." Then the other guy said, "You live anywhere near a place called Newstead?" "Yeah, I lived 3 miles up the road from Newstead in a place called Julian." The kid said, "Yeah, I know that place. Would you happen to know a guy in Newstead named Wink Roberts?" Hershel said, "I sure would. He was a deacon in my dad's church." The kid said, "He's my uncle." Then he introduced himself as Rick Roberts. And with that Hershel was in. It turned out this was a group of musicians, some of the most popular in the school. They took him into their group, opened doors for him and became lifelong friends. He said that day it was like God was saying to him, "Wherever you go, I go before you. I will be there."

Wherever we go in life, God goes before us. He will be faithful to what he has promised us. You can trust him, because he is utterly trustworthy. You will see his faithfulness in your life as you trust him.