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WATCH OUT FOR THAT BEAR LYING IN WAIT

Lamentations 3:19-26

The theme of this past most memorable year surely has to do with infection. Along those lines I admit to you that years ago Laurie and I were infected years ago with something that we have never gotten over. This is not an infection that is a threat to anyone’s health, but, as you will see, it is stubbornly persistent. We had a vague idea when we were engaged that we might go to Santa Barbara for our honeymoon. That wasn’t very dramatic, but it was the best we could do because we didn’t have much money. That changed when a friend told us that his family owned two condos in Hawaii and as a wedding present wanted us to use one of them for a week for our honeymoon, absolutely free. Our new honeymoon location would be the island of Kauai! We were totally blown away by Hawaii from the moment our flight was coming in to the airport there. Our one bedroom condo was right on a beach with a view of the ocean. We loved every minute of our honeymoon, except for that first marital spat. We were utterly enamored with the islands, and were infected with the Hawaii bug, a condition for which there has been no cure, at least for us. When we came home dreamed of going back some day for a vacation.

We dreamed for years, but we just didn’t have the money for that. Then, to our great surprise, a bunch of friends got together and gave us money for a trip to Hawaii on our 10th anniversary. We were going to get to do what we had dreamed of for 10 years! We could not contain our excitement. Some of our friends suggested we stay in the condo they owned on Maui, and it wouldn’t cost us very much. I envisioned something like the condo on the beach our other friends had given us for our honeymoon. So this was great! It wasn’t quite like our honeymoon because it wasn’t free, but it wouldn’t be expensive and that helped our budget for the trip. Unfortunately, we weren’t very smart. These were friends, and they said the condo was beautiful, so we didn’t ask them questions about it, like how big it was, what kind of view it had, how close was it to the beach, and so on. We just trusted them and agreed to pay to stay in their condo.

When we got to Maui on our long hoped for trip I was a bit surprised. The condo wasn’t a one bedroom, it was a studio. But that was all right, we didn’t need another room. However, it also didn’t have any view at all. It had almost no windows, just a sliding glass door, and it looked out on a sidewalk and a wall. And it was to a considerable walk to the the beach. But hey, we were in Hawaii, and the February day we landed on Maui the weather was spectacular, so we didn’t care. We just headed to the beach. The condo, frankly, was a disappointment, but we didn’t plan to spend a lot of time there, so we didn’t dwell on it. The next day started out with warm, magnificent sunshine like the day before. But in the middle of the day the wind started picking up. Soon it was howling. We couldn’t stay on the beach because we just got sand blasted. That night clouds rolled in and it began to rain. For much of our week there the weather was breezy, cloudy, cool and raining off and on. We spent a lot more time at our disappointing condo than we had planned because of the weather, and now we did dwell on how disappointing it was. We waited more than 10 years for that trip, and it proved to be a disappointment. A big disappointment. The fact that we have now been back to Hawaii many times is a bit of a surprise because our second time there was disappointing enough that we could easily have decided to never go back. Our persistence in returning after a big disappointment tells you how bad our infection with the Hawaii bug is.

I hate disappointment. We all do. This past year has been very disappointing, loaded with loss, and very few, if any have been happy with that. The example of our Second Hawaii trip was an insignificant case of disappointment, but there have been many others. Some have been devastating. Disappointment is one of the things we must learn to survive in this life. It is going to be a fact of life for all of us. Today we are going to get some wisdom about loss and disappointment from a man who knew it first hand. Let’s look at Lamentations 3:19-26.

DISAPPOINTMENT IS A PART OF LIFE

Just the name of Lamentations gives us an indication of its content. You don’t lament when life is going great. You write lamentations when your world is filled with grief and sadness. That was certainly the case with Jeremiah. God gave him the task of calling Israel back to their God, but also of telling them that because of their rebellion and rejection of their own God, judgment was coming. For many years Jeremiah hammered away, telling people that because they refused to change, the Babylonians were going to come and rain down terror and destruction on them. He warned them that following that disaster, for 70 years they would be oppressed and many of them would live in exile. He told them when that time came to not resist, but to accept God’s judgment.

As you can imagine, this did not make him MVP, Most Valuable Prophet, in the eyes of the people of Israel. He was not voted “Most Likely To Be Appreciated” in his class. In fact, most of Israel hated him. You can imagine why. What do you think will happen if you go around pointing out people’s flaws to them letting them know that because of those flaws they are going to be judged by God and suffer for years, if they even survive? You will not be considered the life of the party. You will be resented, avoided, ridiculed, opposed, shunned and despised. That was Jeremiah’s life. In Jeremiah 20:7 he said, “I am ridiculed all day long: everyone mocks me.”

Everything Jeremiah prophesied did occur. Just as he had said, the Babylonians came with a vengeance. They defeated Judah once, but the Jews continued to cause trouble. Finally, the Babylonians got fed up and said, “All right, we’ve had it.” They attacked again, and this time they roared through Judah like Sherman marching to the sea during the Civil War. It was a scorched earth campaign that was intended to solve a problem permanently. They wanted to make sure the Jews would never cause trouble again, so they went on a brutal, ferocious spree of death and destruction. When they were done, Jerusalem, the City of God, was nothing but a pile of rubble and decaying corpses.

Jeremiah had the opportunity for the ultimate “I told you so” to the survivors. But Jeremiah loved his people. Despite how they had treated him, he cared about them deeply. He loved the idea of them being God’s people and the dream of them being what they were supposed to be. Jeremiah was not gloating, he was devastated. Lamentations is a book of grief. It is filled with sadness because people Jeremiah loved had been killed and because the dream of the people of God was crushed.

In Lamentations 2:11-12 the prophet wrote, “My eyes fail from weeping, I am in torment within; my heart is poured out on the ground because my people are destroyed, because children and infants faint in the streets of the city. They say to their mothers, ‘Where is the bread and wine?’ as they faint like the wounded in the streets of the city, as their lives ebb away in their mothers’ arms.”

Yeah, that would be tough to see. Verse 15 in that chapter says, “All who pass your way clap their hands at you; they scoff and shake their heads at Daughter Jerusalem; ‘Is this the city that was called the perfection of beauty, the joy of the whole earth?’” Jerusalem was supposed to be the perfection of beauty and the joy of the whole earth. Now it was a pile of broken and burned material, ashes and bones. Verse 20 is even worse. “Should women eat their offspring, the children they have cared for?” That tells you what conditions were like in ruined Jerusalem in the aftermath of a lost war.

You see his sense of loss in the first two verses of this passage. In verses 19-20 he wrote, “I remember my affliction and my wandering, the bitterness and gall. I well remember them, and my soul is downcast within me.” His hurt was vivid, and it produced a deep sadness in his heart.

Jeremiah’s dream for his people was gone, and in the worst way one could imagine. He walked through the remains of that city weeping. This was the last thing in the world that he wanted. All too often, that is what life gives us. We don’t get what we’d dreamed. We get disappointment. Movie producer, director and actor, Woody Allen said, “In real life, people disappoint you. They are cruel, and life is cruel. I think there is no win in life. Reality is a very painful, tough thing that you have to learn to cope with in some way.”

That’s a pretty dim view of life, but it’s unfortunately all too true. Novelist John Cheever said, “The main emotion of the adult American who has had all the advantages of wealth, education and culture, is disappointment.” With all that we have, more than any other society before us, we end up with disappointment, and it is rampant.

Few of us would say that life has gone the way we dreamed and planned. For most of us there is some disappointment. We thought maybe our lives would be somehow bigger, more grand. I don’t need to tell you that life has disappointments. You already know it. Some of them are discouraging, some are hard, and some are soul crushing, like the one Jeremiah wrote about in Lamentations.

DISAPPOINTMENT CAN HARM US

You can see the effects of disappointment in this book. Here are some of the ways it affected Jeremiah, and likely will affect us.

***It can distort our perspective***

In Lamentations 1:12 Jeremiah wrote, “Is it nothing to you, all you who pass by? Look around and see. Is any suffering like my suffering that was inflicted on me?” Jeremiah felt like no one suffered the way he did. His was worse than anyone else’s. Don’t you get a whiff of the odor of self-pity in that statement? Is any suffering as bad as mine? No way. Life is tougher for me than anyone who has ever lived. Call the waaa-ambulance.

Laurie and I went through the horror of the death of our son, Joel, a fact we remembered yesterday, which was his birthday. Our tragedy felt to me like it was bigger than anything that had ever happened to anyone. Oh, intellectually I knew that wasn’t true, but it felt like it was. In the many years since, Laurie and I have sadly known and tried to minister to way too many people who have lost children. I know from those experiences that what happened to us was terrible and grievous, but sadly, not unique. But it felt that way, and in a sense it still does to this day.

Have you ever found yourself feeling, “Why do these things always happen to me?” Always? Really? Disappointment and loss skew our thinking so that we feel like we are sort of picked on. Stuff happens to us that doesn’t happen to other people. What does that self pity do to us? It makes us feel discouraged. It makes us feel hopeless. It saps our energy. It makes us hard to be around because of our negativity. In fact, it doesn’t take long for people to kind of get fed up with us. Disappointment can make us feel like giving up. After all, what’s the point of trying because something will always happen to mess up our efforts and land us right back in the pit.

***It causes us to feel alone***

In Lamentations 1:16 Jeremiah said, “This is why I weep and my eyes overflow with tears. No one is near to comfort me, no one to restore my spirit.” Woe is me. I’m all alone and no one cares. In Lamentations 1:21 he said, “People have heard my groaning, but there is no one to comfort me.”

Wow, he was in a bad place. That’s what big loss can do to us. No one understands. No one cares. That can make us a bit resentful of others because they don’t care about us at a level we think they should.

***It undermines our faith***

This is where it starts to get really serious. In 3:8 Jeremiah wrote, “Even when I call out or cry for help, he (God) shuts out my prayer.” He felt God did not listen to his prayers. In fact, he felt God was actually against him. In verses 10-11 he wrote, “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, not only does God not respond to his prayers, but God is like a bear or lion, hiding in the bushes. He pounces on poor Jeremiah and “mangles” him. God didn’t just turn a deaf ear to him, it felt to Jeremiah like God was actively trying to do him harm.

In his book, *Disappointment With God*, Philip Yancey wrote, “I have found that petty disappointments tend to accumulate over time, undermining my faith with a lava flow of doubt…I am tempted to pray less often, having concluded in advance that it won’t matter.” In his book *Wild At Heart*, John Eldredge said that the wounds we take throughout life can cause us to lose heart. We are going to take wounds, we will get disappointed and that can cause us to quit. It can easily cause us to feel like God has mangled us just like Jeremiah. I’ve known people who once believed in Jesus, but who have given up primarily because of disappointment, because God hasn’t come through for them.

***It leads to bitterness***

When we are feeling sorry for ourselves, when we feel alone, and especially when we feel like God has not come through for us, the outcome is pretty predictable. God is supposed to come through for us. If we think he hasn’t, then we will become bitter.

In Lamentations 3:15 the prophet wrote, “He (God) has filled me with bitter herbs and given me gall to drink.” In verse 19 he said, “I remember my affliction and my wandering, the bitterness and the gall.” Like Jeremiah we get focused on our own affliction, or our disappointments, and bitterness is the result. When bitterness takes root in our lives it fouls everything and turns it all dark.

DISAPPOINTMENT CAN BE REMEDIED

Well fine. We know disappointment happens and it has many negative effects. That’s all bad news, but there is good news. There are some things Jeremiah did that we can do and they make an enormous difference.

***Remember the Lord’s great love***

After more than 2 chapters of lamenting, the prophet finally hit the brakes in verse 21. Up to this point the book has pretty much been a litany of “woe is me,” but in that verse he made a decision. He chose to call something to mind. In other words, he reminded himself of something. He remembered the Lord’s “great love.” The Hebrew word for love employed here is a beautiful one that has no exact translation in English. It involves the ideas of love, loyalty, persistence and faithfulness. It is sometimes translated “unfailing love” or “loyal love.”

One way I like to think of this love is “determined love.” It is determined to love, regardless of what the object of its love does. It just keeps loving no matter what may happen. Watch a parent with a young child who has a penchant for nuclear tantrums. The parent may be frustrated even irritated by the behavior, but they patiently deal with the child, loving them regardless of their behavior. This is the love that God has for us. It is determined, it is loyal, it is unconditional.

Jeremiah realized he was in the throes of a galactic tantrum, and the first step in remedying that was remembering the Lord’s great love. The prophet made a deliberate choice of his will to see and count on God’s love. He said, “This I call to mind.” To call something to mind is to invite into your mind a thing that is not already there. He’s been focused on how he felt God has abandoned him, on all of his pain and sadness. But here he makes an important choice. He’s choosing to think about the fact that God loved him. That is what we must do when dealing with our losses and disappointments. We have to choose to remember the Lord’s love. We may not feel that love, we may not be happy with what is happening in our lives. But we can remember that though we don’t see it in circumstances, God does love us and wants our best.

Verses 22-23 say God has compassion for us, and it never fails. It may feel like it does on some days, but his compassion for us is new every day. *There is never a day when all we have is the memory of how God once loved us and had compassion for us*. Even when we can’t see it in our circumstances, God is loving us as much this difficult day as on the best day of our lives.

Do you know what the word “compassion” means? The passion part is rooted in the idea of suffering. The “com” at the beginning of the word means “with.” So this word means God suffers with us. In other words, his love is not some cold, aloof thing where he loves us but mostly tolerates us and our childish, selfish antics. He feels for us. He hurts with us when we hurt. Poor little one year old Wesley, our grandson, went through a few days recently where his digestive system was not working properly. It caused his little rear end to be red and raw, and it was painful for him to eliminate waste. While we were there helping with him one evening he squatted down and clearly was trying to get the deed done. He was trying, but it was painful. I could see the pain on his face. He put his head down and covered his eyes with his hands in a very adult gesture of distress. It killed me. I wanted badly to do something to help him, to alleviate his pain and obvious distress. I had compassion for my precious little grandson. And that’s how God feels about us. He loves us intensely.

It is easier for us to believe that God loves us and has compassion for us than it was for Jeremiah because of what God has done in the centuries after Jeremiah. God has demonstrated that fact in the most powerful, the most graphic way in history. He has shown us how much he loves us by the death of Jesus Christ on our behalf. Whatever we may think about what is happening in our situation today, the cross of Christ overshadows it all and shouts loudly to us that God loves us to a depth and degree that we will never fully comprehend.

***Make the Lord your share***

In verse 24 Jeremiah said, “I say to myself, ‘The Lord is my portion, therefore I will wait for him.’” Notice again this is not a feeling, but a deliberate choice. He says, “I say to myself.” The prophet had a talk with himself. In a situation where there was every temptation to be devastated by what had happened and to doubt God’s goodness, the prophet said, “Here’s what I choose to tell myself.”

He told himself the Lord was his portion. The word “portion” often meant “tract of land” and was commonly used to refer to an inheritance. In Jeremiah’s culture wealth was based in land. When the head of a family died his will would leave a “portion” to each of his heirs. This was their share of the estate. Jeremiah used that imagery here saying that he reminded himself that the Lord was his share.

What Jeremiah was saying was that while he was broken hearted over what had happened, he reminded himself that the Lord was his share of the riches. He had the Lord, and that would be even better than having Judah be able to avoid the horror of what had just happened. He reminded himself that though he was grieved, rightfully so, he had the Lord, and in the end that was more important.

Often on Sundays we have brunch with my brother and mom after our live stream. We usually get some doughnuts from our favorite local doughnut shop. I love doughnuts. They have some really good ones. I love a custard filled one in particular. We might have a box full of doughnuts. Jerry likes this huge cinnamon roll that’s almost the size of a plate, and it is very good. My mother likes a glazed old fashioned doughnut, and it is delicious. Laurie likes all of them, but especially a cinnamon covered one. I like all of them, but I choose the custard doughnut as my portion. I am happy if I get it. I like to eat the other ones, but as long as I get my portion I rate the brunch a success. I’m happy with what I have. To choose the Lord as our portion means we are happy with what we have when we have him. There are other things, but they are not the key. Having our portion is what matters, and our portion is the Lord.

If life had gone exactly the way we had hoped, but we didn’t have the Lord, would we be happy? No, we wouldn’t. We would be distinctly unhappy. Does having the Lord as our share make any difference? Yes, it makes all the difference in the world. It means I have him in my life, it means I’m at peace with him, it means I have hope in every situation, I have the hope of eternal life, I am forgiven, I am loved, and my life is filled with meaning and purpose. All these things are still true even if my circumstances are deeply disappointing. So in those disappointing times it is crucial that we have that conversation with ourselves. We need to say to ourselves, “The Lord is my share, and that is far better than the things I wish I had. In fact, it is enough.”

***Wait for the Lord***

Jeremiah tells us in verse 26 that it is good to wait for the Lord. In fact, he says we should not just wait for the Lord, but we should wait quietly. We should not be pacing around the room like a caged tiger, or sitting there with our leg vibrating up and down, clearly just about out of patience. He tells us to actually sit still, be calm and wait.

A favorite verse of many believers in Jesus is Jeremiah 29:11, which says, “I know the plans I have for you, declares the Lord, plans to prosper you and not to harm you, plans to give you hope and a future.” Yes, God has plans to make us prosperous and give us a future. This is great. He really does want us to be prosperous and healthy, right? We forget that verse had a context. Verse 10 changes how we see it a little bit. “This is what the Lord says, ‘When 70 years are completed for Babylon, I will come to you and fulfill my good promise to bring you back to this place.’” Those are the good plans the Lord had for his people.

There was bad news and good news for God’s people. The bad news was they were going to be judged because of their rebellion against God, and it was going to be a severe judgment. As part of it many of them would live in exile in Babylon. But there was good news too. The good news was God was not done with his people. He said Babylon wasn’t forever. In chapter 25 he made it clear Babylon was going to get its just desserts, and their dominance over the people of Judah would end. That would happen in 70 years, as we see in verse 10, and the Jews would be able to return to their homeland. Those are the plans God had for Israel, plans to prosper them. In the meantime, what the people needed to do was wait for God’s plan to come to fruition.

In Lamentations 3:26 Jeremiah said it was good to wait for the Lord and his plan to prosper them. It was going to take 70 years, so they needed to settle down and be patient. He would give them freedom and some measure of prosperity, but it was going to take a lifetime. It was going to happen. Unfortunately anyone in their 20’s or older were not going to see it. They were going to live the rest of their lives under Babylon’s rule, and many would live in Babylon itself. But Jeremiah said they needed to accept God’s timetable. They couldn’t rush it. They just needed to wait for it.

Do you like waiting? I don’t. Ladies and gentlemen, due to a small technical problem with the aircraft, your flight will be delayed while the mechanics work to resolve the issue. Oh, great. Flying is no fun to begin with, now we get to sit here in the airport for who knows how long and wait. Michael told me that on a recent flight out of Salt Lake City as his plane was pushed back from the gate and was ready to taxi, another pilot made a mistake that resulted in his plane being hit by a big jet blast. It caused their rudder to malfunction. They sat there on the tarmac for 25 minutes while he and his fellow pilot communicated with the maintenance people, trying to fix the problem, to no avail. They had to go back to the gate where a maintenance guy came out to work on the plane. Meanwhile, the passengers sat in the aircraft, waiting. That’s no one’s idea of a good time. They finally gave one last try by essentially rebooting the system. That did work. But lots of unhappy passengers got to have the “fun” of waiting.

My question is, why is it good to wait for the Lord? Why does God want us to wait? He’s all powerful, so he can act any time he wants to. Why does he make us wait? Again, any time you start a question, “Why does God” we don’t really know the answer. God does what he knows is best, and we don’t always know what that is. But there are some things even we can see about waiting. One is that God makes us wait because he wants us to learn to be patient. This matters because our impatience actually is just selfishness.

Not long ago our granddaughters were at our house. Laurie was preparing dinner. She was chopping up some strawberries, I believe. Cara, the 3 year old, decided that she wanted Nana to pick her up and hold her. So she went to Nana and requested that service. Laurie said, “I will, Cara, but you’re going to have to wait because I’m getting dinner ready.” She had a knife in her hand and obviously couldn’t pick up Cara just that instant. Waiting was not acceptable for Cara. She began melting down, pushing Laurie to try to get her away from the counter so she could pick her up. She didn’t want to wait, she wanted what she wanted, and she wanted it *right now!* It was just selfishness. She needs to learn to wait, and curb her selfishness. All kids have to learn that. Sadly, so do most of us adults.

When we are impatient, when we hate waiting, it is for the same issue Cara had. We want what we want and we want it *right now!* It’s actually not very attractive, and it is definitely unhealthy. So God wants us to wait because we need to learn to not be selfish.

Another reason why God wants us to wait is that it both strengthens us and honors God. When we have to wait for God to act, we must live by faith. We exercise trust in his goodness, love and wisdom. When we exhibit that kind of faith in him it brings him glory. It actually is a victory in the spiritual war that is continually going on. But using faith that way also strengthens it. Faith is like a muscle. The only way you can make it stronger is by exercising it. There are no spiritual steroids that will bulk up your faith. When you go through a time of waiting and you trust, then you see God work, it is powerful and it confirms and strengthens your faith. You see that God really is good and wise, and that he can be trusted.

For a number of years beginning around the time our daughter, Carissa graduated from college, one of Laurie’s and my most fervent prayers was that God would bring a wonderful man along to be her husband. We had been praying that since she was a little girl. But that became increasingly urgent in her early 20’s. We knew that she longed to have a husband to share life with. And we knew that is God’s design for humans, going all the way back to Genesis 2. But one year passed, then two, then three, then four. A few guys passed through her life, but no one that was obviously an answer to our prayer. For her dad, it began to get agonizing. Many of her friends were getting married, and that made her loneliness even worse. But all we could do was wait and pray. Yet another year passed, and still another, and honestly I began to despair. I poured out my heart to God. Why wouldn’t he give her something that was clearly a good thing, according to him? The waiting was so hard, because you start to think it’s never going to happen, and maybe God isn’t being kind to your beautiful daughter. And then this young Marine fighter pilot came along. There was hope! Things looked promising, but we still had to wait. Then there came an evening at the beginning of 2013 we were going to take Carissa and Michael out to dinner. They were in the back seat of our car and they informed us that they had gotten engaged the night before. Laurie almost broke the seats in our car trying to jump into the back to hug them both. What joy! And what a confirmation that God really is good, that we can wait and trust him. Often since then I have remembered that it is worth it to wait on the Lord. Waiting built my faith so it is easier to trust him now than it was before.

In Psalm 27 David reflected on times when according to verse 2 the wicked advanced against him to devour him, and according to verse 3 when an army besieged him. We need to always remember his conclusion in verses 13-14. “I remain confident of this: I will see the goodness of the Lord in the land of the living. Wait for the Lord; be strong and take heart and wait for the Lord.”

CONCLUSION

When we face disappointment or loss there are 3 simple things to do. They are not always easy, but they are simple.

First, tell yourself that God loves you. Have that conversation with yourself and remember this critical truth. Second, remind yourself that the Lord is your share. You have full life because of him and not anything else. Finally, wait for the Lord, because he is good and he is worth waiting for.