

+ Lamentations 3:22-33 + When Things Can't Get Any Worse... +
+ 6th Sunday after Pentecost + 8 July 2012 +

Think back to a time in your life when it seemed like everything was going wrong, when everything was going from bad to worse. One thing piled on top of another, and when you thought you had dealt with what was going wrong, something else popped up. A large unexpected bill showed up in the mail. Then something broke in your car or in your home and a major repair was needed. Then the kids came down with the flu and you had an argument with your spouse. Talk of job cuts at work popped up again, and then you got a phone call that a dear loved one has passed away. We've all had times like that.

...But we also know it can get even worse. The Old Testament prophet Jeremiah knew what that was like. It seemed like whenever things seemed really bad in his life, they got worse. His people rejected the true God and God's Word proclaimed by his prophets. So it was Jeremiah's responsibility to proclaim God's coming judgment on those people, judgment that was coming very soon. Of course, no one wanted to listen to Jeremiah, so they verbally attacked him. They physically attacked him. Even the authorities tried to silence him. The king of Judah took a scroll of his writings, sliced it up, and threw it in a fire. He was jailed in a dry cistern for execution that never came. When the Lord had him urge the people to give up when the Babylonians attacked, that message put his life in danger. He witnessed the destruction of his homeland, the city of Jerusalem, and the Lord's temple. Even after all that, no one listened to him and they later took his life. So it's no surprise that he complained or "lamented" so much!

When it seems like everything is going from bad to worse, what's your natural instinct? "I'll just pick myself up again, brush myself off, and tough it out. It has to get better sometime, right?" So you try to force a smile on your face, but no matter how hard you try, no matter how many people you convince, you know in your heart of hearts that you're on the brink of falling apart. Sometimes the Lord even lets you hit rock-bottom and your natural instinct proves worthless. You can't pick yourself up anymore, and things can't get any worse. Despair looms darkly in the midst of another sleepless night.

In the midst of such darkness, the prophet lamented to the Lord because he had hit rock-bottom. Things couldn't get any worse. Amidst his dark complaints, you would expect a cry of despair, maybe even rejection of the God who caused him to suffer so much. In the midst of all that darkness, however, the prophet sees a light. ***"Because of the LORD's faithful love we do not perish, for His mercies never end. They are new every morning; great is Your faithfulness! I say: The LORD is my portion, therefore I will put my hope in Him."***

When things can't get any worse, the child of God can only cling to the faithful love of the God of free and faithful grace, the God who saves his people because of his endless mercy. This Lord does not abandon his child to darkness and despair, but his mercy dawns in the life of the believer with each new day of grace. This is the Lord who in his mercy picks you up when you bottom out, dusts you off, and strengthens you with the knowledge that there's no need to despair, because he is there for you.

Into that deep darkness, you can confidently cry out, ***"Great is your faithfulness!"*** Was it not such confidence in the Lord's faithful love that caused Jairus and his wife to seek out Jesus in their darkest hour so he could heal their dying daughter? Was it not such confidence in the Lord's faithful love that caused the Apostle Paul to keep proclaiming the good news of Jesus even as he waited to be taken to the executioner?

...But what about your own darkest hour? Does your conscience ever bother you about how you handled things when everything went from bad to worse? Is there a voice in the back of your head objecting? Jeremiah was a prophet of the Lord! Paul was an apostle of the Lord. Even Jairus was a religious leader of his people! Surely they had a stronger faith than me. Surely they handled things better when everything went from bad to worse, but, my friends, when life spins out of control, it's not about you anymore.

You and I have a tendency to think we're in control of our own lives. "I make my plans. I do what I choose to do and know what's going to happen when I do that. I decide what I want to do with my life. I choose the school I attend, the profession I take up, the spouse I marry, the house I own, and the church I attend." You and I do such a great job fooling ourselves into thinking we're in control of our lives that we get blindsided when God reminds us otherwise. We go into a tailspin when suffering or trouble or unexpected difficulty comes into our lives, when people don't do what we expect, when things don't happen the way we want. To that Jeremiah responds, ***"It is good to wait quietly for deliverance from the LORD. It is good for a man to bear the yoke while he is still young. Let him sit alone and be silent, for God has disciplined him. Let him put his mouth in the dust—perhaps there is still hope. Let him offer his cheek to the one who would strike him; let him be filled with shame."***

Do you realize what Jeremiah is actually saying here—this coming from a prophet of the Lord who had just spent 20 verses lamenting what the Lord had done to him? Jeremiah is saying that it's good to bear the yoke of suffering, the yoke of God's discipline. It's good to have to deal with the Lord's discipline that flattens you in the dust, that makes you face the painful consequences of your sin or the sins of others, that fills you with shame for the pride you had in yourself and the control you thought you had over your life, when you were tempted to think you knew better than God.

Your sinful nature thinks that is absolutely revolting. "Submit to God's discipline? See it as a blessing, as something God uses for my good? You've got to be kidding me!" Your instinct is to completely dismiss these words of the prophet, because after all, they are as repulsive as similar words Jesus told his disciples. **"If anyone would come after me, he must deny himself, take up his cross, and follow me."** (Mark 8:34) Why is that so repulsive to your sinful nature? Not everything that goes wrong in your life is a cross, but when that suffering causes you to despair of yourself, to realize there's nothing more important than the Lord's faithful love for you, it becomes a blessed cross, because it drives you back to your faithful Lord.

You see, Jeremiah knew the objections of his heart and yours and mine, so he explains why it's good to bear the yoke of God's discipline and the suffering it entails, **"For the Lord will not reject us forever. Even if he causes suffering, he will show compassion according to his abundant, faithful love. For he does not enjoy bringing affliction or suffering on mankind."** It should be no surprise. It's all about the faithful love of the Lord.

When things can't get any worse, all you have left is the faithful love of the Lord, his endless mercy and boundless compassion. That's God's nature—to love you and me. Now sometimes that means doing not what he wants to do, but what he has to do. He shows tough love as he disciplines you and me as his sons and daughters through faith. He allows you to suffer the consequences of your sins and the sins of others to warn you away from falling under his eternal judgment, which you and I honestly deserve for daily sins

Yet it was that same faithful love that moved the Lord of heaven and earth to send his Son, our Savior Jesus Christ to a world undeserving of his faithful love. God embodied his love in Jesus. God knew how bad things can be or have been for you, so in his faithful love, he put his Son there in your place.

Jesus never had it easy from the beginning of his life with a birth in a barn to a poor, adopted father and an outcast mother to a life where he never had a place to lay his head, his enemies constantly attacked him, and his own people rejected him. Then God punished his Son not for his sins, but for yours and mine. Things went from bad to worse. He was betrayed by one of his own, suffered injury and injustice at the hands of the governing authorities, and faced death on a cross with hands and feet pierced with nails. Then to top it all off, God rejected his own Son on the cross.

For you, however, things had to get worse for Jesus so God could bless you. You see, through Jesus' suffering, God showed how faithful his love is for you. Jesus suffered so your suffering would come to an end one day. Jesus endured what you deserve to grant you forgiveness for all those sins whose consequences have afflicted you. When God, our heavenly Father, turned his face away from Jesus, his Son, he turned his love towards you to save you. You can be sure of that because God's mercy was already dawning in the midst of Jesus' darkest hour. When Jesus was about to die, he cried out confidently, **"It is finished"** (John 19:30), and the work of God's faithful love for you was complete. That mercy dawned in its full brilliance three days later on Easter morning, when Jesus rose from the dead. The Lord remained faithful to you!

Perhaps the Lord has delivered you from a dark hour of your life. Perhaps he is still allowing you to bear a heavy cross during a difficult time in your life right now. Perhaps the Lord is allowing that cross to push your face in the dust with all its pain and shame, but I pray that the Lord has used or is using that to help you despair of yourself and to realize how amazing, how abundant, how faithful his love really is for you.

Then when things can't get any worse, you can see Jesus there—the One who suffered under an even greater yoke of God's discipline for you. Even now, you can see Jesus whose faithful love never ends, whose mercy is new every morning, who will always show you compassion even when you hurt and are ready to give up. When you see Jesus, be confident in his faithful love and seek him when life goes from bad to worse, because **"Great is Your faithfulness, O Lord!"** Amen.