

Northwest Community Evangelical Free Church / July 18, 2021 / Pastor Jeff Harrison
Un-Bottled: Jesus and Your Emotional Life Series
Grief, with God (various passages)

Relevance: We've all been through sorrow

Thank you, Pastor Manuel, we're excited for next Sunday! Good morning. As Ryan mentioned, we want not only to learn some of what the Bible says about sorrow, but also give space to grieve. So I'll teach first this morning, and then we'll sing and hear testimony. Let's pray now for the service...

Over the past year and a half, we've all been through challenges, losses, and sorrows, big and small. Things like canceled travel plans, unexpectedly schooling your kids from home, illness and hospitalizations, pressures to be constantly vigilant, racial injustice, church only online, power outages and busted pipes, canceled prom and graduation, not seeing some friends and family, political strife, lost income and work, conflict over masks and vaccinations, missing handshakes and hugs, the passing of loved ones...

While all this has been going on, your workplace, or family, or your own expectations may have burdened you further by expecting you to keep bringing your normal productivity even in this abnormal season.

A season many thought would be over much sooner. Back in March 2020, we had to postpone our church Welcome Class. I rescheduled it in my mind for July 2020, thinking surely we'd be done with COVID and back to normal by then. Little did I know we would end up delaying that Welcome Class for over a year.

On top of that uncertainty, the expectations, and what we've all been going through, you've had your own personal challenges and sorrows in this season. So with all this hardship and sorrow, how do we respond?

Teaching: Grieve, with God

Take the time needed – Should people of faith just get over their sorrows quickly, speeding past our grief to joyful praise?

Well, there is a whole book of the Bible called Lamentations, so we instead want to take time to grieve, with God.

Lamentations was written by Jeremiah the prophet to mourn the sufferings of God's people as their capital city Jerusalem was sieged and destroyed by the Babylonians in 587BC. If you look at the Hebrew Lamentations was written in, the book laments people's suffering and sin using an acrostic that covers the whole Hebrew alphabet, letter by letter.

To give an acrostic example in English, I found an acrostic poem online about a friend. It says for the letter A, a friend, "Accepts you as you are" and for the letter B, that a friend, "Believes in you" and for the letter C, "Calls you..." And so on, letter by letter, from A to Z.

Jeremiah is using the same acrostic structure in Hebrew. But his acrostic laments God's people's suffering and sin. In Lamentations, Jeremiah starts with the Hebrew letter for A, and laments, and then moves to the Hebrew letter for B, and laments, and so on until he's gone through the whole Hebrew alphabet.

And Jeremiah doesn't grieve, "A-Z", through the Hebrew alphabet once, he does it four times in a row. Jeremiah laments using the whole Hebrew alphabet, letter by letter, in chapter 1, then laments through the whole alphabet again in chapter 2, and then again in chapter 3, and then again in chapter 4.

Jeremiah takes the time needed to grieve, to pour out his sorrows. And he doesn't grieve all alone, by himself, Jeremiah grieves, with God. Jeremiah mourns Jerusalem's suffering and destruction, with God. And mourns the failings of the religious leaders and the people's unrepentant sin, with God. And cries out to God for justice against the unjust. Jeremiah also occasionally expresses hope or praise in his sorrow, showing us that we can hold the truth of our grief and of our hope at the same time.

Jesus was full of hope, and yet He took the time to weep over Lazarus, even though He knew He was about to raise Lazarus from the dead. And Jesus gave Himself the freedom to experience deep anguish in prayer in the garden of Gethsemane. And Jesus said on the cross, "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?" instead of in that dark moment saying, "God is great and victorious, praise Him."

Jesus' life, as well as the book of Lamentations, shows us that it's not healthy to try to just stuff our sorrows or to try to prematurely move on from them. Our sorrows are significant and it's important to take some time to grieve with God. As an author notes about

Lamentations, "one cannot *rush* through an acrostic"¹ In Lamentations' case, there are four grieving acrostics in a row, "A-Z" through the Hebrew alphabet four straight times.

So as I, and you, think about your sorrows over the past year and a half, have you just thrown a quick metaphorical band aid over big wounds and tried to soldier on, or have I, and you, taken the time needed to grieve, with God?

As those around you have experienced sorrow over this past year and a half, have I, or you, pressured them to just hurry and get over it and move on, or have you and I encouraged them to take time needed to grieve, with God?

Grieve honestly, "un-bottled" – As we all take that time to grieve, what does it look like, can we really be honest with God about how we really feel?

The Old Testament book of Psalms shows us it's important to grieve honestly, "un-bottled" with God. Bible scholars have put all 150 Psalms in categories and found that there are more lament Psalms than any other kind of Psalm. So we're invited to grieve frequently.

God has given us in the Psalms an invitation to bring our deepest sorrows and bitterest complaints to God. And not only by ourselves, also together, corporately, as some of the lament Psalms we're designed for when we gather in worship together.

Real honesty with God like, "I've been remembering you God, even as I'm drowning in tears, and yet God You've forgotten me." We'll have on the screen some verses from the Psalms that express these kinds of feelings. As I read through some honest laments from God's Word, see if any of them are putting words to the cry of your heart this morning. First are some tearful verses from Psalm 42: **(3, 9)**

³ My tears have been my food day and night, while people say to me all day long, "Where is your God?"

⁹ I say to God my Rock, "Why have you forgotten me? Why must I go about mourning, oppressed by the enemy?"

In the Psalms, God even invites honest complaint about Him in the midst of our sorrow. See if you resonate with the beginning of Psalm 13, which says: **(1-2)**

¹ Eugene Peterson, *Five Smooth Stones for Pastoral Work*.

¹ How long, LORD? Will you forget me forever? How long will you hide your face from me?

² How long must I wrestle with my thoughts and day after day have sorrow in my heart?

How long will my enemy triumph over me?

Now many of these lament Psalms end on a note of hope, or praise, because as we process before God, we can sometimes hold the truth of our grief and of our hope at the same time. However, lament Psalms, like Psalm 88, don't end with any note of hope or praise, just dark emotions and perspectives on God. Listen to the last verses of Psalm 88: **(13-18)**

¹³ But I cry to you for help, LORD; in the morning my prayer comes before you.

¹⁴ Why, LORD, do you reject me and hide your face from me?

¹⁵ From my youth I have suffered and been close to death; I have borne your terrors and am in despair.

¹⁶ Your wrath has swept over me; your terrors have destroyed me.

¹⁷ All day long they surround me like a flood; they have completely engulfed me.

¹⁸ You have taken from me friend and neighbor— darkness is my closest friend.

Maybe you resonate with some of that this morning. You can share it with God. God even invites us to share with Him our rage that has arisen from our sorrow. Like, “God, I’m so grieved and angry about these abusive Babylonians that I want to see their babies murdered. As Psalm 137, verses 8-9 darkly express about their Babylonian enemies:

⁸ Daughter Babylon, doomed to destruction, happy is the one who repays you according to what you have done to us.

⁹ Happy is the one who seizes your infants and dashes them against the rocks.

All these deep, dark laments aren't in the book of Psalms as models of the ideal way to pray. Rather, they show us that we really can bring even our deepest, darkest feelings to God, that we are free to grieve with God honestly, “un-bottled”. Through the book of Psalms, God graciously endorses bringing even our deepest sorrows, darkest feelings, and bitterest complains before Him.

It's because God loves us deeply, as our heavenly Father. And thankfully, as God, He can easily handle our darkest outbursts and deepest sorrows. God already knows these dark

things in us, and yet He has already fully accepted us in Jesus. All who believe in Jesus are loved without conditions, so we're free to grieve honestly before Him.

As we grieve, with God, it opens our emotions up to His loving, transforming work. Repressed sorrow has power over us, but when we honestly grieve with God, He can help us see if our sorrow comes from a healthy place, or an unhealthy one. And only God can really touch and heal the deepest, darkest, most sorrowful corners of our hearts.

Sometimes you can't, or you shouldn't, speak honestly with others about the ways they've hurt you. But Psalms has showed us that you can always speak honestly to God about your losses, hurts, and sorrows.

So the Worship Team is going to come up now. As we sing, or just tearfully listen, let's take this time together to grieve, with God. After that, I'll come back up and share a story of grieving, with God. As the Worship Team sets up, let's pray... (Song set)

Jane models grieving with God – Thank you Worship Team. I recently learned of Jane, a young Christian modeling grieving, with God. Here's Jane's story, in her own words:

“After the doctor told me I was dying, and after the man I married said he didn't love me anymore, I chased a miracle in California and sixteen weeks later, I got it. The cancer was gone. But when my brain caught up with it all, something broke. I later found out that all the tragedy at once had caused a physical head trauma, and my brain was sending false signals of excruciating pain and panic.

I spent three months propped against the wall. On nights that I could not sleep, I laid in the tub like an insect, staring at my reflection in the shower knob. I vomited until I was hollow. I rolled up under my robe on the tile. The bathroom floor became my place to hide, where I could scream and be ugly; where I could sob and spit and eventually doze off, happy to be asleep, even with my head on the toilet.

I have had cancer three times now, and I have barely passed thirty. There are times when I wonder what I must have done to deserve such a story. I fear sometimes that when I die and meet with God, that He will say I disappointed Him, or offended Him, or failed Him. Maybe He'll say I just never learned the lesson, or that I wasn't grateful enough.

But one thing I know for sure is this: *He can never say that He did not know me.*

I am God's downstairs neighbor, banging on the ceiling with a broomstick. I show up at His door every day. Sometimes with songs, sometimes with curses. Sometimes

apologies, gifts, questions, demands. Sometimes I use my key under the mat to let myself in. Other times, I sulk outside until He opens the door to me Himself.

I have called Him a cheat and a liar, and I meant it. I have told Him I wanted to die, and I meant it. Tears have become the only prayer I know. Prayers roll over my nostrils and drip down my forearms. They fall to the ground as I reach for Him. These are the prayers I repeat night and day; sunrise, sunset.

Call me bitter if you want to—that's fair. Count me among the angry, the cynical, the offended, the hardened. But count me also among the friends of God. For I have seen Him in rare form. I have felt His exhale, laid in His shadow, squinted to read the message He wrote for me in the grout: "I'm sad too."

If an explanation would help, He would write me one—I know it. But maybe an explanation would only start an argument between us—and I don't want to argue with God. I want to lay in a hammock with Him and trace the veins in His arms.

I remind myself that I'm praying to the God who let the Israelites stay lost for decades. They begged to arrive in the Promised Land, but instead He let them wander, answering prayers they didn't pray. For forty years, their shoes didn't wear out. Fire lit their path each night. Every morning, He sent them mercy-bread from heaven.

I look hard for the answers to the prayers that I didn't pray. I look for the mercy-bread that He promised to bake fresh for me each morning. The Israelites called it manna, which means "what is it?"

That's the same question I'm asking—again, and again. There's mercy here somewhere—but what is it? What is it? What is it?

I see mercy in the dusty sunlight that outlines the trees, in my mother's crooked hands, in the blanket my friend left for me, in the harmony of the wind chimes. It's not the mercy that I asked for, but it is mercy nonetheless. And I learn a new prayer: thank you. It's a prayer I don't mean yet, but will repeat until I do.

Call me cursed, call me lost, call me scorned. But that's not all. Call me chosen, blessed, sought-after. Call me the one who God whispers His secrets to. I am the one whose belly is filled with loaves of mercy that were hidden for me.

Even on days when I'm not so sick, sometimes I go lay on the mat in the afternoon light to listen for Him. I know it sounds crazy, and I can't really explain it, but God is in there—even now. I have heard it said that some people can't see God because they won't look low enough, and it's true.

If you can't see him, look lower. God is on the bathroom floor."

Those are powerful words² of a woman who has taken the time to grieve with God, honestly, “un-bottled”. Now let’s see the fruit of her intimacy with God, as Jane, also known as Nightbirde, sings and shares at a talent show audition.

Show edited version of <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=CZJvBfoHDk0>

Next Step

Wow, wasn’t that incredible? You don’t get to where Jane has, to the healing presence of God, by stuffing your grief, or grieving alone. You get there by taking the next step of grieving, with God, even on the bathroom floor. Grieving as God’s Word invites us to, and as Jane has bravely modeled.

So the Worship Team is coming back up now to perform a final song. It’s called *The Road, The Rocks, and the Weeds*. It’s from a Christian artist reflecting on how he doesn’t have any answers for heartbreaks or cancers. How he doesn’t know what to say when his kids bring him heavy questions, and he fails to fill their heaviness with peace.

But, he says that he knows a God Who bleeds, a God Who came to stand inside his pain. Though he’s got no answers for hurt knees or cancers, he’s got a Savior Who suffers them with him.

So as we receive this final song, let’s stand and grieve, with God, knowing that in Jesus, God has suffered for us, and suffers with us, and will one day wipe every tear from your eye that you cry today. Amen.

Worship Team plays and then Jake prays and dismisses service.

² <https://www.nightbirde.co/blog/blog-post-title-three-2rjnk> Accessed 7/15/21.