

Northwest Community Evangelical Free Church

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Sermon manuscript

Sermon Series: The Story of Our Lives...and God

(Growing through Job's story)

The Hard Grace of Lament

(Job, chapter 3)

Study #3

Introduction: Grumble, grumble, grumble...

I have looked in vain for the loophole in Philippians 2:14.

When the Apostle Paul wrote to his good friends in Philippi, he included this line: ***“Do all things without complaining...”***

I have found no help from the original language. In Greek ***“all things”*** means ***“all things.”*** There is no loophole. (So, when things go sideways, I can't call the ***“wambulance.”*** Thanks, Bruce Willis, for that line from the movie, “The Kid”)

Being a follower of Jesus means that we are not to complain. But we're not alone in this. God set the same standard in the Old Testament for the Jews.

In fact, it was due to their complaining (or “grumbling”) that they suffered some of their worst disciplines in Old Testament times.

For instance, once, when the people were in the wilderness and they complained because times were hard, God sent a plague of poisonous snakes into their encampment. The snakes' fatal bites were to dissuade the survivors from any more complaining.

God really doesn't like it when His people complain.

OK. We get it. Complaining is bad. Don't grumble.

So, when we open our Bibles to the third chapter of the book of Job, we might have questions.

When Job lost his material wealth and his ten children in one horrible day, he worshiped God.

And when he lost his health and suffered chronic, debilitating pain due to an outbreak of boils all over his body, he held fast to his integrity and accepted this adversity as from God, and he worshiped.

Two great responses. And then, following seven days and seven nights of silence with his three good friends, Job spoke again.

***[3] “May the day on which I was to be born perish,
As well as the night which said, ‘A boy is conceived.’***

***[11] “Why did I not die at birth,
Come out of the womb and pass away?***

***[23] “Why is light given to a man whose way is hidden,
And whom God has shut off?***

***[25] “For what I fear comes upon me,
And what I dread encounters me.***

***[26] “I am not at ease, nor am I quiet,
And I am not at rest, but turmoil comes.”***

We didn't see THAT coming.

To this point, we've been extremely impressed with Job. But now, having been reminded how awful it is to complain, we wonder if maybe we were a bit too impressed with Job a bit too soon.

I would say, ***“Relax.”*** In the verses I just read, Job was doing something other than what we would call ***complaint***. He was offering up what the Bible calls ***lament***.

A lament is a particular way of crying out to God in grief or sorrow. It is intense. Job's lament is extreme and intense, and God commends lament.

Lament is legit and we find laments scattered throughout the Bible.¹

Lament...

Dozens of the psalms were written in the form of a lament. And there are laments found in other places, too, among them, Jeremiah (see especially chapters 15 and 20), the whole book of Lamentations, and Ecclesiastes.²

Sometimes, groups of people expressed their grief by lament. These are *communal* laments. Groups would say or sing their laments together when life was really hard, when it seemed like hope was gone, or when it seemed that God was no longer with or for them.

One extreme example of this type of psalm is Psalm 137. The psalmist wrote it against the backdrop of the Babylonian Exile (587-538 BC) when the people of Israel had to live outside the land of Palestine.³ They lamented that God had caused them such hardship.

Much more common, though, were the *individual* laments.⁴

A woman named Hannah, who eventually became the mother of Samuel, prayed her grief to God. This was before she bore Samuel and was childless. She lamented her barrenness.⁵

Many of the psalms of individual lament are of this variety. They arise out of a situation of personal pain.

¹ Laments in Psalms, Jeremiah, Lamentations, and Job all follow the same general format. This suggests that the writers were all following a generally accepted literary form, as poets do today. It was evidently a form used in many ancient Middle Eastern cultures.

² Psalm 88 is another extreme lament. After 18 bleak verses, it ends with "*darkness is my closest friend.*" (This would be a better translation than the NASB's "*My acquaintances are in darkness.*")

³ Joel laments because of a locust invasion. Joel 2:17 and following preserves the actual lament which the priests uttered on the occasion.

⁴ Individual laments include Psalms 3, 4, 5, 7, 9-10, 13,14, 17, 22, 25-28, 31, 35, 39-43, 52-57, 59, 61, 64, 69-71, 77, 86, 88-89, 109, 120, 139, 140-142.

⁵ See 1 Samuel 3.

The worshipper - while in pain - seeks the Lord and expresses grief, sorrow, or confusion. That's lament. It isn't at all a bad thing.

Even Jesus spoke words of lament when He cried out from the cross, [*Matthew 27:46*] "**My God, My God, why have You forsaken Me?**" That is a direct quote from Psalm 22, a psalm of lament.⁶

I just read a few verses out of Job's lament. Many Bible scholars tell us that his lament is about the bleakest and the most extreme example of lament found anywhere in the Bible.

We're going to pay attention to Job's lament in a moment. But first I want to speak about lament, generally.

Remember, complaining is bad; lament is good. But there are, of course, similarities between grumbling and lament.

...vs. grumbling

Both grumblers and complainers verbalize their anguish, their anger, and their confusion. A grumble can sound a lot like a lament.

But they are different. And I'm not just putting the lipstick of lament on the pig of complaining.

A lament...

...honestly expresses grief while seeking to know God and His ways.

...is not a random rant at the universe; it is directed toward God.

...is energized by a desire to seek God.

...courageously asks questions of God.

...moves toward God.

Lament is positive and God's people have always engaged in lament. So, what sorts of things drive people to lament to God?

About what do God's people lament?

⁶ [*Luke 23:46*] "*Into Your hands I entrust My spirit*" is a quote from Psalm 31, another psalm of lament.

Let's start with this: Our faith is based on what God has done.

We believe certain things about God: He is powerful, faithful, just, and loving. These things are all true.

But our faith in these propositions is rooted in the knowledge that God has, *in time*, performed wonders, kept promises, acted righteously, proved Himself to be loving.

- The Red Sea parted.
- Water appeared in unexpected places in the desert.
- He provided quail for food and manna from heaven.
- Jesus raised the dead and walked on water.
- Jesus died on the cross for our sins and was raised from the dead!

We know all of this about God and *lament* because we very often don't see what it seems to us that we should see from a miracle-working, loving, faithful, God.

You might lament because you are confused about God's ways. What is happening in your life doesn't seem to square with what you believe about God.

Any of us might lament because God sometimes seems to be absent or uncaring - or both.

Of course, we today know more about God than those in the Old Testament did. In Jesus, God has shown Himself to be powerful and faithful and loving in personal ways that He had not in the days of Job.

But today we are still in a transitional period. The dawn is breaking, but the day has not yet fully arrived. There is still a lot of darkness and wreckage and brokenness all around us.

Because of that, we face tests of faith. We can see a day coming when all will be well. Now, all is not well now.

And now, when by faith we understand what should be (and what one day WILL BE!) and do not see it or experience it, we lament.

Seeing lament as the act of faith it is

For that reason, lament is not a faithless exercise. Lament actually requires faith.⁷

People without faith complain and grumble. Or they feel a pressure to put forward a good face. Without faith, people pretend "*all is well*" when all is clearly not well.

Faith-filled people courageously look reality in the face. They hope and trust. They desperately and honestly lament what is.

That is what we'll see Job doing today.⁸

Over the past two Sundays, we have seen Job's great losses. By the time we come to Job 3, weeks or months have passed since his troubles began.

He has just spent seven days and nights in silent grief in a state of utter collapse surrounded by good friends. But Job can no longer contain himself. So, he gives voice to his lament.

This speech divides, roughly, into four stanzas. Each stanza has one main thought.

Job Laments the Day of His Birth (vv. 1-10)

The main thought of the first stanza (vv. 2-10) is this: *Despite the blessings of his "life before the sufferings," given his current state, it would have been better if he had never been born.*

Just listen as I read the beginning of Job's lament.

[3] "May the day on which I was to be born perish,

⁷ The psalms of lament lead us to faith's acknowledgment that the God who reveals Himself in history remains hidden.

⁸ The section (3-31) begins and ends with lament (3, 29-31), with an extended, acrimonious debate in the middle (4-27).

As well as the night which said, 'A boy is conceived.'

[4] "May that day be darkness;

May God above not care for it,

Nor light shine on it.

[5] May darkness and black gloom claim it;

May a cloud settle on it;

May the blackness of the day terrify it.

[6] As for that night, may darkness seize it;

May it not rejoice among the days of the year;

May it not come into the number of the months.

[7] Behold, may that night be barren;

May no joyful shout enter it.

[8] May those curse it who curse the day,

Who are prepared to disturb Leviathan.

[9] May the stars of its twilight be darkened;

May it wait for light but have none,

And may it not see the breaking dawn;

[10] Because it did not shut the opening of my mother's womb

Or hide trouble from my eyes.

That's raw.

And without stopping to catch his breath, Job continues with the second stanza where there is, again, one main thought.

Job Laments the Fact That He is Alive (vv. 11-19)

That main thought is: *He wishes he hadn't been conceived, born, nurtured, or cared for. He wishes that he had been allowed to die.*⁹

**[11] "Why did I not die at birth,
Come out of the womb and pass away?"**

**[11] "Why did I not die at birth,
Come out of the womb and pass away?"**

**[12] Why were the knees there in front of me,
And why the breasts, that I would nurse?**

[13] For now I would have lain down and been quiet;

I would have slept then, I would have been at rest,

[14] With kings and counselors of the earth,

Who rebuilt ruins for themselves;

[15] Or with rulers who had gold,

Who were filling their houses with silver.

[16] Or like a miscarriage which is hidden, I would not exist,

As infants that never saw light.

[17] There the wicked cease from raging,

And there the weary are at rest.

[18] The prisoners are at ease together;

They do not hear the voice of the taskmaster.

[19] The small and the great are there,

And the slave is free from his master.

Yes, this is, again, strong language. But, no, Job hasn't "lost it." He hasn't gone off the deep end. He believes in and trusts God. He knows to Whom he is lamenting – and means every word of it.

This is a man who is facing a ghastly ordeal with eyes wide open. He is perfectly sane facing an insane life. He is utterly broken.

Listen to these words from Mike Mason, the author of The Gospel According to Job (a very good book, by the way): *There is a point at which every one of us throws in the towel. Not that we abandon faith or God. But we eventually get sick and tired of trying to put a good face on things. This (Job's speech) is not sin. It is honesty. Job is a forthright and plainspoken man, the sort of person who isn't afraid to say what is on his heart.*

Mason's words explain why, after all this time of silence, Job cuts loose and speaks as he does. He has "had it." He can't take it anymore.

Maybe you are uncomfortable with the way Job speaks here. Maybe his negativity makes you squirm. It's distasteful. You want to turn away - don't turn away.

Learn from Job.

⁹ Ecclesiastes 4:2-3 is similar to Job 3. Both authors argue that non-existence is preferable to the utter futility of innocent suffering.

His lament is a prayer, and prayer need not always be positive and upbeat and optimistic. You need not feel the pressure to always rise from a time in prayer deeply encouraged and filled with fresh hope. It is possible to have prayed well and to still feel deep sadness.

That was certainly the case with Job.

It might be hard for us to believe that a believer could ever say what Job says here. Could someone who has walked with God, ever utter these words? Yes.

I've heard faithful Christians describe walking through certain times with God like going through surgery, wide awake, without anesthesia.

When there is stabbing pain, trust cries out. It is fear, suspicion, and a lack of faith that keeps silent. Job's words are dark, but they give voice to his faith.

Maybe now is the time for each of us to ask a question of ourselves. *"What kind of hope do I actually have?"*

Is your hope a genuine hope that God is good, that all the promises in the Bible are true, that He will do what He says He will do? It is? Great!

And how does THAT hope show itself when something (to say nothing of everything!) makes it seem that He's not all that good and that His promises don't have a snowball's chance in San Antonio of coming to pass?

Do you lament? Or do you keep a stiff upper lip, maintain a grim stoicism? Do you feel a pressure to smile, to pretend that you aren't in pain?

Is your hope and mine the kind of hope that hides from reality or that embraces – and laments - reality?

While painful to hear, Job's honesty points the way for us to respond when life hurts. He keeps speaking. He doesn't lighten up.

Job Laments that God has "Fenced" Him in (vv. 20-23)

Just as in the first two stanzas there was one thought, so here, in the third, there is one thought. Here it is: *Fences have a dual function. They keep things out and they keep things in. God's fence has kept blessings away from Job.*

At the beginning of the story, Satan had accused God of putting a fence of protection around Job.

Satan told God, *"Of course Job 'loves' You. You have built a fence around him and have allowed nothing but blessing to come his way."*

Satan accused God of cocooning Job with sweetness and light. Job might have agreed. Post-trials, though, Job sees the "fence" quite differently.

***[20] Why is light given to one burdened with grief,
And life to the bitter of soul,***

***[21] Who long for death, but there is none,
And dig for it more than for hidden treasures;***

***[22] "Why is light given to a man whose way is hidden,
And whom God has shut off?"***

***[23] "Why is light given to a man whose way is hidden,
And whom God has shut off?"***

It's popular to pray "a hedge of protection" against natural disasters and against human and demonic powers. We like to think that God will keep all evil from us.

Jesus even taught us to pray, ***[Matthew 6:13] "...deliver us from evil."*** (or, *"the evil one"*)

But - and here's the important thought - God often allows evil / trouble / affliction / problems / persecution / Satan's "thorns" (See 2 Corinthians 12:7-10) to find their way into our lives.

Job complains of being surrounded by a pyracantha hedge that keeps out good, not evil.

He's so desperate that he wants to die. He just can't seem to find a way to pull it off. He won't (or can't?) commit suicide and God won't give him the ultimate relief of death.¹⁰

Job Laments His Great Pain and Suffering (vv. 24-26)

The cry of lament ends with the fourth stanza and it, like the others, can be summarized by one thought:
The one thing Job had feared most has happened.

**[24] "For my groaning comes at the sight of my food,
And my cries pour out like water.**

**[25] "For what I fear comes upon me,
And what I dread encounters me.**

**[26] "I am not at ease, nor am I quiet,
And I am not at rest, but turmoil comes."**

We know Job's losses.

Piled on top of his lost health and wealth, piled on top of the loss of his children and his physical pain, piled on top of his wife's temptation to just get it over with - "**Curse God and die!**" - is his confusion over the ways of God.

As much as anything Job can't understand why the God he has worshiped and served his whole life has allowed his life to become a nightmare.

All of this, taken together, is what Job, in happier times, would have told us he feared the most. And it has happened.

He didn't stub his toe. His life came apart at the seams.

So, should I now ask, "*What do you fear the most?*" or "*What is your worst nightmare?*"

¹⁰ If you are troubled by the thought that Job despaired of life, see Acts 27:14-20. After Paul had endured a two-week long Mediterranean storm that ended in shipwreck on the island of Malta. Luke writes that they (he, Paul, and others) came to the point where *[20] all hope of...being saved was gradually abandoned.*

Wouldn't that be a bit melodramatic? Maybe. But I'll bet that this is exactly the question the author of Job wants us to ask ourselves.

Job's story invites us to put ourselves in Job's sandals, walk a few miles and wonder, "*What would I do if what happened to him happened to me?*"

Conclusion:

With that thought dangling, let me preview where we're going in the weeks to come.

After next week's message from Charlie Laughlin (from Romand 8:28), our studies in Job will take us into a series of debates between Job and his three friends.

His friends offer their thoughts to Job and Job tells us what he thinks of their thoughts.

We're going to spend a couple of weeks listening to the friends and then a couple more weeks listening to Job as he evaluates his friend's words AND as he evaluates...God.¹¹

But today, we've heard a serious, God-fearing man lament. As we wrap up, I want us to think about what Job's lament might say to us. I offer two thoughts.

First, a thought about compliance.

Compliance

No parent wants a disobedient child. All parents want their children to know how to obey. To comply.

¹¹ Job's lament supplies the point of departure for the speeches of his friends, that of Elihu, and of God Himself. No doubt, the perceived irreverence of Job's lament was what prompted his three friends to respond after seven days of silence.

But all parents also want their children to learn discretion. Moms and dads want their kids to learn to not obey the stranger who invites them to get into his car. Not all commands or commanders are to be obeyed.

So, parents teach their children to disobey some people (strangers), to obey some people with some discretion (like teachers, and other adults in positions of authority), and to obey them (the parents) implicitly.

When parents tell their child to not play in the street, they had better not play in the street. When they tell the child to not touch the stove, they need to not touch the stove. They might not fully understand the parents' commands. They need to comply, anyway.

So, we want compliance. But with some commands and commanders, we want compliance with discretion. Ask questions. Get the big picture. Know the "Why?" behind the command.

Now consider the story of Job.

We know exactly what led to Job's affliction. We know that it was because of a test made in heaven between God and Satan. And maybe you have wondered why God didn't tell Job about the test.

After all, if he had known the reason all these trials had come his way, he would have had a much easier time trusting and would have, in the long run, done way better with his trials.

Why not just give him the "big picture" at the front end?

The reason for not giving Job "the big picture" is a huge part of the story of Job, and what I'm about to say, you'll hear again in the weeks to come. Here it is.

God wants us to trust Him even when - *especially* when - we don't know the "big picture." He wants our 100% implicit compliance.

A simple explanation of the meaning of his suffering might have helped Job obey.

But what Job needed more than anything else IF he was going to worship and walk with God rightly was to know that obedience is required even when he doesn't know why, even when he doesn't know the backstory.

THAT obedience, the kind that says, "*I will obey even when I don't get it. I will worship no matter what*" is the path to follow if he wants to know the Lord.¹²

When you suffer, you would love to know the "why." Of course. I would, too.

God may often withhold the "why" so that we will learn the grace of trust-in-the-dark. And trust-in-the-dark is the sort of trust that, in the long run, brings us closest to Him. Makes us most like Jesus.

The second closing thought has to do with the freedom that Job's example gives you and me, today, to lament.

Freedom to lament

Job's lament was not an indication that Satan was winning the bet with God. Job didn't sin by lamenting.

His lament was an expression of faith in a God he simply didn't understand.

And when you face trials of whatever variety, you are facing clear evidence that the world in which you live is broken. Things now are not as they were created to be.

¹² From Reitman: By describing how God permitted Satan to test the allegiance of an upright servant without ever explaining the cause of his affliction, the author shatters the myth that our own righteousness can protect us from unjust suffering, in order to challenge our self-serving strategies to earn God's favor and disrupt our complacency over the supernatural battle for our allegiance as human agents of our Creator.

God's beautiful creation has been wrecked. He will one day remake it. That day hasn't yet come. So, you suffer.

That is worth lamenting.

It is worth lamenting in His presence, while seeking Him, while worshiping Him.¹³

So, we are to express our pain not simply because it provides a "healthy release." No, it is the path to intimacy with God. It is a God-ordained way to respond to evil and injustice.

We read Job's brutally honest lament and find freedom to do the same ourselves.

We lament as a cry of protest that things are not as they should be. And when we learn the hard grace of honest lament, we learn to trust God in the storms of life and come to know Him better.

¹³ Stanley Hauerhous: The psalms of lament (and Job's) do not simply reflect our experience; they are meant to form our experience of despair. They are meant to name the silences that our suffering has created.