

"GOD'S FAITHFULNESS IN TIMES OF DISCOURAGEMENT"

Lamentations 3:1-3, 14, 17-26

(Holman) "I am the man who has seen affliction under the rod of God's wrath. ² He has driven me away and forced me to walk in darkness instead of light. ³ Yes, He repeatedly turns His hand against me all day long. ¹⁴ I am a laughingstock to all my people, mocked by their songs all day long. ¹⁷ My soul has been deprived of peace; I have forgotten what happiness is. ¹⁸ Then I thought: My future is lost, as well as my hope from the Lord. ¹⁹ Remember my affliction and my homelessness, the wormwood and the poison. ²⁰ I continually remember them and have become depressed. ²¹ Yet I call this to mind, and therefore I have hope: ²² Because of the LORD's faithful love we do not perish, for His mercies never end. ²³ They are new every morning; great is Your faithfulness! ²⁴ I say: The LORD is my portion, therefore I will put my hope in Him. ²⁵ The LORD is good to those who wait for Him, to the person who seeks Him. ²⁶ It is good to wait quietly for deliverance from the LORD."

INTRODUCTION

In the early morning hours of Monday, December 28, 1908, the lovely community of Messina (near Sicily's northeastern tip), rested securely as Italy's 3rd largest city and one of the most flourishing towns of all Europe. Weeks earlier, its citizens adopted a series of unspeakably wicked resolutions against all religious principles. Then they held a festival to celebrate their abandonment to the immoral behavior the Bible condemns. They had no fear of retribution from the God they had declared did not exist. The journal *Il Tleefono* (the telephone), still printed today, published in its Christmas issue a twisted and profane parody of the Christmas story, daring the Almighty to make Himself known by sending an earthquake if He was displeased. December 28, three days later, a 7.5 magnitude earthquake struck. At least 70,000 townspeople died (40% of population) and 91% of its buildings collapsed. This almost totally destroyed Messina. The quake and the tsunami it spawned leveled dozens of surrounding towns, as well, raising the death toll over 100,000. Aftershocks continued into 1913. To this day, the Messina tragedy remains one of the 10 deadliest quakes in recorded history and Europe's worst natural disaster.

God's judgment upon all ungodliness is certain, even if He does not call us to account in this life for despising His commands. But sometimes, an individual, community, or nation may scornfully defy the LORD God to the point He takes action now, as He did with Messina, to remind us He's fully aware of our shamefully disgusting behavior and we will each face a day of reckoning with Him, sooner or later. **Psalms 50:16-21** (NLT) confronts those who claim God's blessings despite their wrongdoing: "God says to the wicked: 'Why bother reciting My decrees and pretending to obey My covenant? ¹⁷ For you refuse My discipline and treat My words like trash. ¹⁸ When you see thieves, you approve of them, and you spend your time with adulterers. ¹⁹ Your mouth is filled with wickedness, and your tongue is full of lies. ²⁰ You sit around and slander your brother—your own mother's son. ²¹ While you did all this, I remained silent, and you thought I didn't care.'" If God is "silent" when we do things that disgust Him, does this mean He condones or approves of our evil? Of course not! He is granting us time to come to our senses and repent of our filthy actions. As **Romans 2:4** (NLT) graciously proclaims, "Don't you see how wonderfully kind, tolerant, and patient God is with you? Does this mean nothing to you? Can't you see that His kindness is intended to turn you from your sin?" But is such grace guaranteed to us? No. God's words to us in **Psalms 50:21-23** are convicting and terrifying: "'While you did all this, I remained silent, and you thought I didn't care. But now I will rebuke you, listing all My charges against you. ²² Repent, all of you who forget Me, or I will tear you apart, and no one will help you. ²³ But giving thanks is a sacrifice that truly honors Me. If you keep to My path, I will reveal to you the salvation of God."

William Claude Dukenfield ran away at age 11 from his poor Philadelphia home. He began his career as a juggler, practicing hours a day to perfect his skills. By age 15 he supported himself by performing juggling acts at churches and theater shows. He earned the reputation in his 20s as the greatest

juggler in the world. He drank neither alcohol nor coffee early in his career. But he couldn't stand to be alone due to deep insecurities. His Irish Catholic father and German Protestant mother gave him some Christian upbringing, but he chose to use alcohol to attract visitors to his dressing room to fill the void in his heart. He started drinking to be sociable and soon became an alcoholic. Witnesses testified he drank two quarts of martinis each day. The more alcohol became his master, the more cynical and self-serving he became and the more he closed his heart to God. To excuse his godless lifestyle, this seasoned con man became an avowed atheist who viewed all religions with suspicion. Yet, when hospitalized for the last time at a Los Angeles Sanatorium while enduring a bout of delirium tremens, two friends caught W. C. Fields (his stage name) reading the Bible. "You're an atheist, Bill. What are you doing reading the Bible?" He replied, "I'm looking for a loophole." He died on Christmas Day, 1946, without Christ.

Lamentations, written by Israel's "weeping prophet," Jeremiah, demonstrates what happens when the Lord is justified in saying to a nation, "You refuse My discipline and treat My words like trash." Nearly five centuries after the Israelites established God's nation in Canaan's Promised land, flagrant disloyalty to the LORD caused Israel to be torn in two in 931 B.C. For 200 years, the northern Kingdom increasingly abandoned the LORD'S worship and His principles of society and morality. They became "God's people" in name only. In 721 B.C., God allowed the Assyrian Empire to so thoroughly enslave and forcibly relocate Israel's 10 northern tribes that the northern Kingdom was effectively wiped off the face of the earth! To this day, few Jews can trace their ancestry to the "ten lost tribes" of Israel. The southern Kingdom of Judah remained far more faithful to the LORD and God protected the people from the Assyrians and other threats. But after the death of their last great, godly King, Josiah, in 609 B.C., many Jews resumed their headlong rush into making gods of everything and everyone else. They trusted keeping up appearances of loyalty to the LORD would be enough to retain His blessings. God warned them in **Jeremiah 7:3-4**, ""This is what the LORD of Hosts, the God of Israel, says: Correct your ways and your deeds, and I will allow you to live in this place. ⁴Do not trust deceitful words, chanting: This is the temple of the LORD, the temple of the LORD, the temple of the LORD."" In 586 B.C., God allowed unrepentant Judah's Kingdom to fall to the Babylonians, the walls and every major building were burned and battered into rubble, including the once magnificent Temple Solomon had built to God's glory nearly 400 years earlier, and all but scattered handfuls of the people were carried into captivity.

Thoughts of experiencing the LORD'S wrath should send shockwaves through us. This is no laughing matter. Yet, we may think we're about to face terrifying judgment when it's a false alarm. A man riding in a cab tapped the driver on the shoulder to get his attention. The driver screamed, lost control of the cab, nearly hit a bus, went up on the sidewalk, and stopped inches from a department store window. After a few seconds of stunned silence, the driver recovered, turned to his passenger, and gasped, "Look mister, don't ever do that again. You scared me half to death!" The passenger apologized. He didn't realize a little tap like that could scare him so much. The driver replied, "You're right. I'm sorry; it's really it's not your fault. Today is my first day as a cab driver. I've been driving a hearse for 25 years."

Jeremiah's **Lamentations** describes Israel's utter devastation as individuals and as a nation. Its Hebrew name means, "How sorrowful!" or "How wretched!" Jewish synagogues prescribe **Lamentations** to be read on the anniversary of the Temple's destruction (August 13 in 2016). Jeremiah pulled no punches in his graphic portrayals of God's justice and the utter doom that will befall all who persist in scornfully defying God's loving calls to correct us. But this was not his primary purpose. Jeremiah's main goal was to assure us that no matter how far we may have strayed from the LORD, we may still rely upon Him to faithfully fulfill His every promise to us for peace, prosperity, and joy, if we return to the LORD with a faithful, repentant heart. Our country's current headlong rush to embrace acts hideous to the LORD, and the judgments of God we're experiencing as citizens of the United States, will make the assurances found in **Lamentations 3:21-26** more precious to us as faithful Christians in coming days.

This is the first of a two-part message, God's Faithfulness in Times of Discouragement. There will be one extended Outline Point that compares causes of Human Unfaithfulness with God's Faithfulness.

HUMAN UNFAITHFULNESS COMPARED TO GOD'S FAITHFULNESS

We can experience rough times as a community or as individuals because we fail to follow God's protective guidelines for our lives. But we also experience troubles even when we are faithful to God. Storms, illnesses, and death occur simply because we live in a sin-cursed world, do they not? Or a sinful world may turn upon us, as is increasingly happening in America today, when we take a stand for God. But would you confess with me that we sometimes struggle to be truly and consistently faithful to the Lord even in the ordinary tests that confront us in the normal routine of our lives, let alone in the more extraordinary challenges we face? We will consider four of the reasons we often prove unfaithful in our God-given responsibilities. We will then ask if any of these factors that limit us would keep God from maintaining His faithfulness toward us.

A. LIMITED RESOURCES

We are subject to many limitations, aren't we? Many good things we would like to do are simply beyond our abilities. Two parents I knew were concerned if they could afford to send their oldest child to college. I was close to them and offered to help. But then the Christian school where I taught faced a severe financial crisis and laid off half the staff overnight, including me! I fell on such hard times that I was no longer in a position to help these parents. Thankfully, they were able to manage without me.

But will there ever be a Christian in need that God does not have the ability to help? Are there limits upon God's resources? Are God's claims in **Psalms 50:10-12** really true: "[E]very animal of the forest is Mine, the cattle on a thousand hills. I know every bird of the mountains, and the creatures of the field are Mine. If I were hungry, I would not tell you, for the world and everything in it is Mine?" During World War II, a group of Filipino Christians gathered in crisis prayer. They were suffering terribly under the Japanese occupation. They were literally starving to death. In desperate need of the LORD'S aid, they claimed His promise of **Psalms 34:15**: "The eyes of the Lord are on the righteous, and His ears are open to their cry for help." They had just concluded their round of prayer when they heard a loud knocking on their door. One of them timidly opened the door, only to discover a fully armed Japanese soldier staring him in the face. "Oh, no," he thought to himself, "Are things going to get worse even after we prayed?" But after a few moments, this Japanese soldier broke into a broad smile. He said to him in broken English, "You Christian? I Christian, too." Then he ushered them out and proceeded to show them a truck loaded down with food that God had commanded this soldier to bring to His people!

B. CIRCUMSTANCES BEYOND OUR CONTROL

Many situations are not only beyond the limits of our resources; they are also beyond our control. Sometimes we wish we could snap our fingers and fix some crisis, but we can't. Did you know it is no harder for the LORD to move Heaven and earth to come to our aid, if need be, than it is for us to lick a postage stamp to send a card of encouragement to a friend? Because there are no limits to His resources, there are no circumstances beyond His control!

Have you heard the saying, "Don't doubt in the darkness what God tells you in the light?" Abraham and Sarah were middle-aged by our standards (he was over 75 but lived to be 175, **Genesis 12:4; 25:7**), when God promised them they would give birth to their own son (**Genesis 15:1-6**). **Genesis 15:6** states, "Abram believed the LORD, and He credited it to him as righteousness." Abraham and Sarah were still "in the light" when circumstances made the fulfillment of God's promise of a son seem possible. But more than 20 years passed and "the darkness" closed in around them because Sarah was no longer physically able to bear children. When 99-year-old Abraham scoffed at God's promise that 89-year-old

Sarah would still produce a son, God wisely reminded him, "Is anything too difficult for the LORD?" (**Genesis 17:1, 17; 18:14**). **Hebrews 11:11-12** describes the miraculous blessings they gained when they determined to put faith in God's promise despite the darkness of their circumstances: "By faith even Sarah herself, when she was unable to have children, received power to conceive offspring, even though she was past the age, since she considered that the One who had promised was faithful.¹² Therefore from one man—in fact, from one as good as dead—came offspring as numerous as the stars of heaven and as innumerable as the grains of sand by the seashore."

You may recall the hundreds of thousands of Arizona's acres ablaze in the summer of 2002. Sunday June 23, the Rodeo and Chediski fires joined to form the largest fire in the known history of the Southwest. It soon raged to within a mile of Show Low. While watching television news that night, Loretta and I heard it was only a question of *when* the fire would burn through this town of 15,000 residents, not *if*. In December of 2004, I met a man named John of the Arizona Game & Fish Department. He was part of the fire crew on the outskirts of Show Low that very night. The fire captain went down their line stating they'd done their best but the fire had won and Show Low would be burned. Yet, while watching the TV news, we sensed God's Spirit stirring that He wanted to intervene for this community and He led us to pray accordingly. We later learned the Mayor of Show Low, a devout Christian woman, received God's promise that same evening that He would save her town. The LORD God of Heaven and earth then caused two remarkable events. Early the next day, an unexpected weather system began to draw ocean moisture into the White Mountains. This raised the humidity enough to retard the fire's progress. Secondly, God turned the winds back upon the fire that had been driving it for several days. These two factors allowed firefighters to build sufficient fire lines to protect the town and Show Low was saved!

We'll conclude this message next Sunday. Let us go forth from Church today with these words from **Lamentations** assuring us of our Lord's unlimited faithfulness toward us: "Then I thought: My future is lost, as well as my hope from the Lord. . . . Yet I call this to mind, and therefore I have hope: 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."