

"GOD'S FAITHFULNESS IN TIMES OF DISCOURAGEMENT"—Part II

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

(Holman) "I am the man who has seen affliction under the rod of God's wrath. He has driven me away and forced me to walk in darkness instead of light. Yes, He repeatedly turns His hand against me all day long. . . . I am a laughingstock to all my people, mocked by their songs all day long. . . . My soul has been deprived of peace; I have forgotten what happiness is. Then I thought: My future is lost, as well as my hope from the Lord. Remember my affliction and my homelessness, the wormwood and the poison. I continually remember [them] and have become depressed. 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. The Lord is good to those who wait for Him, to the person who seeks Him. It is good to wait quietly for deliverance from the Lord."

INTRODUCTION

Motivational posters and billboards have become hugely popular in the United States. They often capture breathtaking scenery and show people in daring adventure. They also sport inspirational sayings urging people to chase their loftiest dreams. The founders of Despair.com claim motivational products do more harm than good. They set people up for a fall by, "selling the easy lie of success you can buy." The harsh fact of reality is that success and great achievement require more than daydreaming about our "untapped potential greatness"; they require dedication, sacrifice, and hard work beyond what most people care to do or are willing to do. This is why few wind up as successful and prosperous as the people who peddle motivational products to daydreamers. Eighteen years ago, Despair.com launched a counterattack. They spoof the Motivation Industry with their own line of what they call Demotivational posters and Illboards (instead of "Billboards"). Here are a few examples.

We often hear the saying, "the journey of a thousand miles begins with a single step." It's supposed to motivate us that big achievements often have small beginnings. Despair.com counters with its poster, *Ambition*. A salmon is swimming upstream to spawn. Just as it leaps to overcome a waterfall, a grizzly bear at the top of the falls with its jaws open is ready to swallow the salmon whole. The motto is, "The journey of a thousand miles sometimes ends very, very badly." *Distinction* is another Demotivator. It shows one sharpened pencil among three pencils with worn leads. The motto is: "Looking sharp is easy when you haven't done any work." The next poster shows an eight-man rowing team with each person rowing vigorously to cross a wide lake. The lake's horizon fades into a dreamlike brightness. The caption for this *Get to Work* poster is, "You aren't being paid to believe in the power of your dreams."

The Demotivator *Obstacles* spoofs the claim we can do anything if we try hard enough or long enough. A sheet of molten lava engulfing a roadway and everything in its path reminds us, "Some things can not be overcome with determination and a positive attitude." *Perseverance* shows an isolated car on a dirt road with a monstrous tornado about a mile away heading straight towards it. The caption, "the courage to ignore the obvious wisdom of turning back," warns that perseverance in a foolish course of action may doom us. *Tradition* captures Spain's annual event, "The Running of the Bulls." Men dressed in white, with a bright red belt and scarf, seek to escape bulls chasing them through fenced streets. The motto is, "Just because you've always done it that way doesn't mean it's not incredibly stupid."

Is our trust in God's faithfulness as foolish as the "easy lie of success" of the Motivation Industry? Is it wishful thinking to count upon **Psalms 55:22**, "Cast your burden on the LORD, and He will sustain you; He will never allow the righteous to be shaken"; or **Isaiah 64:4** (NLT), "For since the world began, no ear has heard and no eye has seen a God like you, who works for those who wait for Him!"; We can confidently "wait for the LORD" to "work" in our behalf if we are "secure in our Heavenly Father's love

for us," if we "trust His wisdom and goodness regardless of how He chooses to run our lives," if we "place our hope" in His promise that He "causes everything to work together for the good of those who love God and are called according to His purpose for them" (**Romans 8:28**, NLT). We can sing *Great Is Thy Faithfulness* with full confidence our Lord will come through for us with the light of His love and the warmth of His mercy, regardless of how cold and dark our circumstances may become!

In Washington State as part of the Western Army war games, Privates Glenn Sollie and Andrew Bearshield of the 15th Infantry were ordered to take a certain bridge and hold it until relieved. They believed they faithfully carried out their orders. They guarded a bridge for three days and three nights without food or blankets. But then rather than finally being relieved of their duty, they were found by a special detail of the 15th Infantry. They had lost their way in the woods and had taken up their battle stations at a bridge seven miles away from the bridge they were supposed to guard. They were cheered at a special ceremony to honor their extreme and faithful devotion to duty, but they also received a few jeers for their ineptitude in getting so helplessly lost they failed in their mission and had to be rescued from guarding a worthless duty post. Our Heavenly Father, on the other hand, always knows exactly where we are and He will never fail in His duty toward us!

Lamentations was written by Jeremiah, God's "weeping prophet," at Israel's darkest point since it had become a nation. The southern Kingdom of Judah fell to the Babylonian army in 586 B.C. This marked the first time in over 800 years the Israelites had no country to call their own. Israel's northern kingdom was wiped off the face of the earth by the Assyrian Empire in 721 B.C. After two centuries of increasingly abandoning the Lord and His principles of government and morality, they'd become God's people in name only. To protect more faithful Judah from the same dreaded judgment upon the northern Kingdom, God miraculously slew 185,000 Assyrian troops poised to capture Jerusalem (**II Kings 19:34-35**). But Judah increasingly presumed upon God's blessings and protections, no matter how many actions they embraced that God denounced in His word as hideous. The lip service many leaders still gave to honoring the Lord as God and the sizable minority who still faithfully worshiped Him could not save them from disaster when Judah became God's people in name only. Jerusalem's walls and major buildings were burned and battered into rubble, including the magnificent Temple built to God's glory 400 years earlier; and all but scattered handfuls of the people were carried into captivity.

This explains why the Hebrew name for the **Book of Lamentations** means, "How sorrowful!" or "How wretched!" But Jeremiah's main reason for writing this book of laments was not to graphically portray the utter doom that will befall all who persist in scornfully defying God's loving calls to correct and save us. Jeremiah's main goal was to assure us how much we may still rely upon the Lord to faithfully fulfill His every promise to us for peace, prosperity, and joy, despite how far we may have strayed from Him, if we return to the Lord with a faithful, repentant heart. Our country's current headlong rush to approve and embrace acts hideous to the Lord, and the judgments of God we are experiencing and will experience as citizens of the United States, will make the assurances found in Lamentations more precious to us as faithful Christians in coming days.

HUMAN UNFAITHFULNESS COMPARED TO GOD'S FAITHFULNESS

To emphasize God's limitless faithfulness toward us as individuals and as a nation, we are looking at four common causes of human unfaithfulness and asking if any of these factors place limitations upon the Lord. Last week, we considered how Limited Resources may defy our abilities to do many of the good, godly things we'd like to do, and Circumstances Beyond Our Control may defeat our best intentions to carry out our promises and commitments. Can these same factors defy and defeat our Heavenly Father, as well? No. When 99-year-old Abraham and 89-year-old Sarah questioned God's promise they would produce a son, God replied, "Is anything too difficult for the LORD?" (**Genesis 17:1, 17; 18:14**).

There are no limits to our Heavenly Father's resources or power. Nor are there limits to His faithfulness. "O LORD God Almighty! Where is there anyone as mighty as you, LORD? Faithfulness is your very character" (**Psalms 89:8**, NLT). The Hebrew word for "faithfulness" means "trustworthiness." God wants us to understand He's fully trustworthy in everything He says to us and does for us. But circumstances may blur how trustworthy and faithful God is toward us. A faithful but weary husband returned home from his ninth business trip of the year. As he prepared to go to sleep that night, he wrapped his arms around his wife, gave her a kiss, and attempted to let her know how happy he was to be home with her again. Instead, due to jet lag, he sighed, "It's good to be in my own bed, with my own wife!" This made him sound guilty of having been unfaithful to his wife, though nothing was further from the truth. Let's look now at two more reason why we often prove unfaithful in our God-given responsibilities.

C. FORGETFULNESS

Have you ever made a major commitment, failed to take proper steps to make sure you'd not forget it, and then had it completely slip your mind? I have! In early November of 1981, I was given a lead role in a special holiday service for a church in Tulsa. At a dramatic point, I was to carry a large wooden cross down the center aisle; really a position of honor. I was sure the service was on a certain night. So, when the worship leader sent me a reminder letter, I didn't even bother to read it. I was organized. I knew what I was doing. Famous last words. Three days *after* the service had been held, I overheard it being discussed by others and realized I'd failed to show up for it. Talk about feeling ice water running down your spine! To this day, I feel lousy about being so irresponsibly forgetful, so let's go on.

Is it truly possible for God to forget about us? No. It just may seem like it for a time. **Isaiah 49:14-16**, "Zion [spiritual Jerusalem] says, 'The LORD has abandoned me; the LORD has forgotten me!'" God replies, "'Can a woman forget her nursing child, or lack compassion for the child of her womb? Even if these forget, yet I will not forget you. Look, I have inscribed you on the palms of My hands.'" Just as we may write something to remember upon our hand, God takes steps to not forget our needs!

D. LACK OF INTEGRITY—Do we have the right to say "No" to some things we are asked to do? Often, every right in the world. But if we give our word to someone and then realize this is not what we really *want* to do, or we get a better offer to for something else at the same time and there's no honorable way to reschedule or cancel our prior commitment, what is the godliest thing we could do? Honor our pledge anyway. **Psalms 15** asks, in essence, "Who wants to be allowed to draw closest to the Lord?" and then states the conditions for those who wish to qualify. **Vs. 4** (NASB) states, "He swears to his own hurt, and does not change." Have we ever failed to honor our commitments for dishonorable reasons? Here are a few less than noble excuses for getting out of a bad date or appointment. 1) I'd really like to help, but I have some real hard words to look up in the dictionary; 2) I'd love to, but I'm making a home movie tonight called "The Thing That Grew in My Refrigerator"; 3) I promised to help a friend fold road maps; 4) I have to floss my cat; or 5) I have to go to the post office to see if I'm still wanted.

Does the Lord ever fail to honor His commitments because He changes His mind about what He's promised to do for us? Will He ever have a change of heart about how important we are to Him? If you'd known me in May, 1999, I was just shy of turning 48. You'd have thought my prospects of finishing a Ph.D. program begun in 1988, or of finding the godly mate I'd prayed for since coming to Christ in 1969, were pretty rotten. They were so bleak I thought my hopes of a meaningful life might be over. I wanted to read **Lamentations 3** and stop at **vss. 17 & 18**: "My soul has been deprived of peace; I have forgotten what happiness is. Then I thought: My future is lost, as well as my hope from the Lord." But **Lamentations 3** does not stop at **vs. 18**, does it? God remained awesomely at work despite all appearances to the contrary. Loretta, who became my wife in 2002, is proof of this. So is the Doctor of Philosophy degree conferred upon me in 2003. So is this Church, and so is our beloved daughter,

Shaina! Let's read again God's assurances of faithfulness in **vss. 21-26**: "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. The Lord is good to those who wait for Him, to the person who seeks Him. It is good to wait quietly for deliverance from the Lord."

CONCLUSION

You may be face discouraging circumstances in the coming months. I want to leave an image in your mind to remind you of God's faithfulness toward you even when you lose sight of His hand at work in your life, and to challenge you to display God's faithfulness in your dealings with others.

Yellowstone Park may be best known for its geysers. Some spout to dizzying heights and possess imposing names, as "The Monarch" and "The Wonderful." But these spectacular geysers are erratic in their performance. You could watch them 4-5 days and see nothing for your trouble. This is why few people know *their* names. None of these geysers are fitting examples of God's activity in your life. The Lord is not a temperamental Deity, of whom you can never be sure *if* or *when* He wants to work.

But there is another geyser in Yellowstone better known than any of these others. You already know its name, "Old Faithful." It did not gain its reputation from flashy, irregular displays. Day after day, year after year, averaging every 122 minutes today, it shoots up to 8,400 gallons of water as high as 184' into the air. There's no sign of activity until shortly before it erupts, but Old Faithful never fails to perform. No matter how bleak our prospects may sometimes appear, or regardless of how little outward evidence we have that God is at work in our behalf, the Lord will never fail to perform in fulfilling His promises to us. We can fully trust God's character as proclaimed by Jeremiah: "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."

Since God is a God of such faithfulness toward us, what is He expecting of us as Christians in our behavior? To be occasionally awe-inspiring in our performance? Super Christians, for five hours a month? Not really. We would be much more useful to Him if we would simply prove faithful, like the Old Faithful Geyser. The world will better recognize that there is a God who is faithful the more it recognizes there are Christians who can be counted upon to be faithful!