SERMON
LAMENTATIONS 3: 19-33
GOD'S NATURAL AND STRANGE WORK
SUNDAY, 25 JANUARY 2026
FPGJ

Opening Prayer

This week: we are continuing this series that is looking at Jesus – more specifically, we are looking at the gentle and lowly *heart* of our Savior. In church, we talk a lot about what Jesus *does for us* – this is right and proper, and this is a crucial aspect of what makes the Gospel good news for us.

But just as important as this, we also need to pay attention to *who Jesus is* – because *who he is* tells us and helps us better understand, embrace, and *delight* in *what he does for us*. To put it another way, *when we know who Jesus is, that is when we can trust what he does for us*.

Over the past few weeks, we have taken a purposeful look at the Trinity, which is the core doctrine and foundational truth of the Christian faith – Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. We have heard that the Holy Spirit is the One who enables us to be Christians and is the One who advocates/comforts/convicts us about the truth of the Christian faith. We have also heard that God the father is the *perfect* embodiment of mercy – and is the Father of mercies. No matter what kind of experience we have had with our own earthly fathers – good, bad, or somewhere in between – we see the truest and most real expression of paternal care in the tenderness and mercy of the father. As Tom said last week, it's not like the Father is some sort of distant, uptight, or angry

disciplinarian, and Jesus the Son is the one who calms the Father down and helps him see reason. Instead, the Jesus the Son is the one who *shows us exactly who the Father is, and how the Father desires to interact with us as his beloved children*.

When it comes to the Trinity, it bears repeating that we are swimming in the deepest possible waters of the Christian faith – the Trinity is not something (or someones) that we are called to put under the proverbial microscope and "understand" or "nail down". Rather, the Trinity strains at the limits of human language, and it proclaims, "here is we believe to be true about the God we fully see in Jesus – let's abide in relationship with this triune God – let's be in relationship with the Father, through the Son, in the power of the Holy Spirit - and because of this, and through this, let's be in fellowship with other believers."

So, with Ortlund, we have considered how Jesus relates to the other persons of the Trinity—in the Trinity, we see that Jesus fully shows us God and shows us who God fully is. Full stop.

As Tom has said, these next four chapters of Ortlund's book are dealing with another crucial aspect of the person and work of our gentle and lowly Savior—the relationship between Jesus and the Old Testament.

It's worth saying it out in the open: this is a *big* topic, and really needs *far more* than four weeks, but we can still make some very important headway on the crucial topic of Jesus and the Old Testament.

It's worth saying one more thing out in the open: in his book, Ortlund has many good and valuable insights, but at a few different points in this chapter, I found myself writing "no!" in the margin of the book. Maybe there have been points in this book when you have felt the same way – if so, I think that is OK. Ortlund's book is not the Gospel (and I think Ortlund would say a hearty "amen!" to that). No commentary, no work of theology, no book *about* the Christian life is going to be perfect, and they don't need to be. On this side of eternity, the *best* that *any* of us can hope for is to awkwardly point in the direction of our gentle and lowly Savior.

So I have just told you that I did not fully agree with Ortlund in this chapter. Before I say more about that, I want to bring our attention to one part of this chapter by which I wrote "yes!!" in the margin. On page 135, he writes,

"What I want I want to demonstrate in this chapter and the next three is that when we see Christ unveil his deepest heart as gentle and lowly, he is continuing on the natural trajectory of what God has already been revealing about himself throughout the Old Testament."

When I read these words, my mind immediately went back to one of the classes I took in seminary. That class was called "God in the Old Testament"

with Patrick Miller (we jokingly called him “the Godfather of the Old Testament”). On the first day of that class, Professor Miller stood at the lectern at the front of the classroom, looked around at all the students in the room, smiled softly, and said,

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There is nothing new in the New Testament.

After he said that, you could hear a pin drop in the classroom. Prof. Miller seemed to have expected a stunned reaction (and probably enjoyed it a little) and then went to explain what he did and did not mean by that.

What he did *not* mean is that the Old and New Testament are the same. He *did not* mean that. He did not mean that the incarnation – God becoming flesh in Jesus – did not and does not matter.

What he *did* mean is that the God who we encounter in Jesus is the *same* God that we encounter in the God of Israel in the first part of our Bibles, which we commonly call “the Old Testament”. The same God, with the same redemptive intentions towards creation.

I am sure that Ortlund would say a hearty “amen” to this, too.

And yet, there are many in the broader Christian tradition who would *not* say "amen" to this. Centuries ago, there was a theologian named Marcion (second century AD). In his own study of scripture, Marcion looked at the Old Testament – he emphasized the violence and judgment of the Old Testament – and he looked at the New Testament, especially at the person and work of Jesus, and he concluded:

These must be two separate Gods.

In the early church, it didn't take very long for Marcion to be identified as a heretic. But his ideas did not die with him. Even to this *very day,* Marcion continues to exert influence on how we read the Bible.

How does Marcion continue to influence us, you might ask? Any time we subordinate the OT to the NT, Marcion's influence continues to be felt. Consider *these* words of John Calvin, which are quoted by Ortlund on page 136:

"As Calvin put it, the Old Testament is the shadowy revelation of God—true but dim. The New Testament in the substance."

Now, Calvin did not consider himself a Marcionite—but language that subordinates the Old Testament to the New Testament still unintentionally echoes Marcion's contention that the Old Testament needs to be "solved" or "remedied" by the New Testament.

Now what I am going to say next might sound like an exercise in language, but it is so much more than that—so please stay with me.

This tradition of subordinating the OT to the NT continues today, often in subtle but important ways.

Quick question: what do we call the first part of the Bible (not a trick question)? We have heard it several times already – **The Old Testament.**

And what do we call the next part of the Bible? **The New Testament.**

Old…and new. Take just a moment to sit with these terms. If we are being honest with ourselves, when we hear the terms *old* and *new*, our minds are making value judgments – especially in our American culture. What is "old" is obsolete, or in need of replacement, and what is "new" is exciting, and an improvement on what has been before. This might be different in other cultures that place higher value on age and respecting elders, but so much of western culture does not do this.

For those of us who were raised in the church and went through Sunday school, we are taught a lot about the Bible, and so much of it is wonderful and formative for life. When it comes to the Bible, we are often taught that What we call the Old Testament is the "promise", and the New Testament is the…anyone know? **The fulfillment.**

Old, and New. Promise and fulfillment. Can we hear how this language gives priority to the second part of the Bible?

What happens if we shift the language from "Old and New Testaments" to "First and Second Testaments", or "Hebrew Scriptures and Apostolic Writings"? A change in language often leads to a change in attitude, and a change in attitude often leads to a change in *belief*. I want to challenge us to think about this, and to use different language – but I know this can be a big ask, and so for now, I will keep using the traditional language for our parts of the Bible.

I am saying all of this at the start of this four-week section to drive home what *is* a crucial point in our lives as Christians: **The Old Testament is just as vital for our lives as the New Testament.** We cannot have one without the other. The Old Testament is incomplete without the New Testament, and the New Testament cannot be understood without the Old Testament. We must have both—together.

So, because the OT is just as important as the NT, we have to listen very carefully to what it has to say to us about the character of the God who is fully revealed in Jesus Christ. To be completely transparent, this can be a very hard exercise, especially when it comes to a book like Lamentations, which is largely about its title. To echo one of Ortlund's questions, how do we square our Gentle and Lowly Savior with a book centered on the themes of devastation, grief, and divine judgment?

First, we must do so very carefully. When we come to the book of Lamentations—historically attributed to the prophet Jeremiah—we must understand what kind of book this is, and what kind of book it is *not*.

Lamentations is not a polished theological treatise. It is not a book on *why* suffering happens. It is not a neat and tidy answer to the reality of human pain.

Lamentations is a *prayer.* More specifically, it is a prayer of lament. And, it was written as a prayer of lament after one of the greatest catastrophes in Israel's history.

Jerusalem had fallen; the temple was destroyed; the city had been burned; many people lost their lives; and those who survived were taken into exile. And, Lamentations makes it unflinchingly clear that this was not random destruction, but was instead a series of punishments that God *allowed* and maybe even *caused* to happen (as Israel understood it).

This last claim about God's agency is affirmed by what Lamentations says a few verses before today's reading, starting in verse 13, through verse 17:

He shot into my vitals the arrows of his quiver; I have become the laughingstock of all my people, the object of their taunt-songs all day long. He has filled me with bitterness, he has sated me with wormwood.

He has made my teeth grind on gravel, and made me cower in ashes; my soul is bereft of peace; I have forgotten what happiness is.

This is pretty harsh stuff, isn't it?

And then in verse 19-20 (the start of our printed reading), Jeremiah says,

The thought of my affliction and my homelessness is wormwood and gall! My soul continually thinks of it and is bowed down within me.

The Israelites did not have our current categories of thought, but this is undoubtedly the voice of trauma. This is the voice of woundedness.

Now, our natural inclination may be to rush past these verses, or to ignore Lamentations altogether. We might think, "I want to get to the Good News part of the Bible and not sit in all of this messy pain!"

But in a strange way, Lamentations is also good news for us. The book of Lamentations also gives us profound insight into the gentle and lowly heart of our Savior.

What do I mean by this? I mean that the presence of Lamentations in the Bible tells us that God—fully seen and known in our gentle and lowly Savior—does *not* shy away from the deepest depths of human pain and trauma.

Some years ago, during my first year as an ordained pastor in Scotland, I remember that the senior pastor of the church that I served preached a sermon on Good Friday. During that sermon, he said to the congregation, "do you know why I believe that the Gospel is true? It isn't because it tells us to buck up, smile, and pretend that everything is OK. No, I believe it is true because Jesus' pain on the cross goes as deep as the deepest human suffering."

Lamentations has the aroma of the Gospel because rather than denying, dismissing, or explaining away our pain, it accepts it, it gives it real voice in prayer and worship. Lamentations is good news because it reminds us that we do not, *do not* have to sanitize ourselves before we come to God in prayer and worship. We don't have to have it together. We can be an absolute *mess* and still be in relationship with God.

Lamentations reminds us that in order to hear the Good News, in order to have real hope, we have to deal with the messy stuff first—and God gives us room to do so.

Of course, today's reading *does* end on a note of hope, doesn't it? But it is a hope *connected to the pain of what came before* – that's crucial. Here is the rest of the text again:

But this I call to mind, and therefore I have hope: The steadfast love of the Lord never ceases, his mercies never come to an end; they are new every

morning; great is your faithfulness. "The Lord is my portion," says my soul, "therefore I will hope in him." The Lord is good to those who wait for him, to the soul that seeks him. It is good that one should wait quietly for the salvation of the Lord. It is good for one to bear the yoke in youth, to sit alone in silence when the Lord has imposed it, to put one's mouth to the dust (there may yet be hope), to give one's cheek to the smiter, and be filled with insults. For the Lord will not reject forever. Although he causes grief, he will have compassion according to the abundance of his steadfast love; for he does not willingly afflict or grieve anyone.

And here is where I both disagree *and* agree with Ortlund. In this chapter, Ortlund calls judgment and wrath the "strange" work of God, and mercy and love the "natural" work of God. Ortlund argues that when he gives our judgment and wrath, God is conflicted within himself (hence the "strange" work). But I think Ortlund misses something here – judgment seems strange to us, mercy feels natural to us – not to God.

It would be more accurate to say that nothing that God does is "strange" to God—but it might feel strange to us. But I think the Bible is clear—when it comes to God, we have to hold justice together with mercy, and love together with wrath.

But (there is almost always a "but").

I think Ortlund is correct in claiming that God's "deepest heart…is merciful restoration". All of God's actions are ultimately in service to his mercy and grace. God is not capricious – there is no cosmic coin-toss between judgment and mercy. Instead, everything that God does is for our ultimate healing and salvation.

This is the great hope expressed in Lamentations, and throughout the entire Bible, expressed so well by Paul in Romans 8:28,

God works all things for the good of those who love him, and who are called according to his purpose.

This doesn't mean that pain is secretly good – it is not. This does not mean that we should enjoy suffering – we should not. But the entire scriptural narrative—including Lamentations—reminds us that even the darkest times of our lives have a place in God's wider economy of mercy.

Lamentations does not end with easy answers. That would defeat the whole purpose of the book. It ends with trust that has learned how to wait. *"It is good that one should wait quietly for the salvation of the Lord."* That is not passive resignation; that is hope that refuses to leave.

Many of us come this morning carrying grief that still presses down on our souls. Many of us are tired of trying to be strong. Many of us feel like faith should have fixed things by now—and it hasn't. the book of Lamentations tells

us something important: We do not have to clean ourselves up before we come to God. We do not have to hide our anger, our sorrow, or our exhaustion.

The God we meet in these pages—the God who gives us words when hope feels thin—is the same God we meet in Jesus Christ, our gentle and lowly Savior. He does not rush us past our grief. He does not shame us for our wounds. He meets us there—and he remains.

So today, we do not leave with everything resolved. We leave with words to pray. We leave with permission to tell the truth. We leave trusting that the mercies of the Lord are new every morning—and that our gentle and lowly Savior will meet us again, even here.

Let’s pray.