

BEFORE YOU GATHER

Title: Part 1 – “When the Season Highlights What's Already There”

Date: November 9, 2025

So good to see all your faces this morning! How’s everyone doing? Hey, would you guys put your hands together and help me welcome everyone joining us online or through our app! We’re incredibly grateful you’re part of our church family. If there are ways we can pray for you or serve you this week, please don’t hesitate to let us know.

If you have a Bible with you or on your device, we’re going to be in Lamentations chapter 3 today. I know—some of you are already like, “Lamen-what-did-he-say? Is that in the Bible?” Yes, it is, and it’s about to become really important to some of you.

Let me set this up for you. Lamentations is basically a collection of brutally honest poems written by the prophet Jeremiah during one of the darkest chapters in Israel’s history. We’re talking about violent deportations, the destruction of the Temple, families ripped apart, everything they knew being torn down. Jeremiah witnessed all of it.

So, here is Jeremiah, one of the few remaining survivors in Jerusalem, and everybody that was left kept telling themselves that surely the worst was over. But God told Jeremiah that the worst was yet to come, and Jeremiah was given the task of telling everyone the armies of Babylon would keep coming until nobody was left. Imagine that being your job—to tell people, that you love, who have seen unspeakable tragedy, that the worst was yet to come!

To make matters worse, nobody believed Jeremiah; they called him a traitor and put him in a dungeon where Jeremiah 38:6 says he sunk up to his armpits in mud. It was from this hellhole that Jeremiah composed these poems. Which might explain why they are so dark!

All that to say, if you think you’re in a bad situation, trust me, Jeremiah gets it. Your friends may not understand. But Jeremiah would have understood. So, let’s dive down into the middle of this mud pit with him: (Lamentations 3:1-26)

I am the man who has seen affliction by the rod of the Lord’s wrath. ² He has driven me away and made me walk in darkness rather than light; [The word “driven” in the original language means driven like an animal, as in with whip. He’s probably recalling how he’s seen his people—family members and friends—driven away into captivity] ³ indeed, he has turned his hand against me again and again, all day long. ⁴ He has made my skin and my flesh grow old and has broken my bones. ⁵ He has besieged me and surrounded me with bitterness and hardship. ⁶ He has made me dwell in darkness like those long dead. ⁷ He has walled me in so I cannot escape; he has weighed me down with chains. ⁸ Even when I call out or cry for help,

he shuts out my prayer. [You ever feel like that? Like God is not listening? Even more troubling you wonder, "God, are you behind this?"] ⁹ He has barred my way with blocks of stone; he has made my paths crooked. ¹⁰ Like a bear lying in wait, like a lion in hiding, ¹¹ he dragged me from the path and mangled me and left me without help. ¹² He drew his bow and made me the target for his arrows. ¹³ He pierced my heart with arrows from his quiver. ¹⁴ I became the laughingstock of all my people; they mock me in song all day long. ¹⁵ He has filled me with bitter herbs and given me gall to drink. ¹⁶ He has broken my teeth with gravel; he has trampled me in the dust. ¹⁷ I have been deprived of peace; I have forgotten what prosperity is. ¹⁸ So I say, "My splendor is gone and all that I had hoped from the Lord." ¹⁹ I remember my affliction and my wandering, the bitterness and the gall. ²⁰ I well remember them, and my soul is downcast within me. ²¹ Yet this I call to mind [This might be one of the most profound transitions in the Bible. Here's Jeremiah, in his dungeon, sunk up to his armpits in mud, thinking about a child he lost, or a wife, wrestling with the prospect that he might never see them again, and saying DEFIANTLY "But this I call to mind:"] and therefore I have hope: ²² Because of the Lord's great love we are not consumed, for his compassions never fail. ²³ They are new every morning; great is your faithfulness. ²⁴ I say to myself, "The Lord is my portion; therefore I will wait for him." ²⁵ The Lord is good to those whose hope is in him, to the one who seeks him; ²⁶ it is good to wait quietly for the salvation of the Lord.

Amen!

Today we're beginning a brand-new collection of messages called *"Before You Gather"* which is going to help us prepare our souls for this upcoming season. Here's what I mean:

- Before you sit down at the Thanksgiving table with your family...
- Before you walk into that office Christmas party...
- Before you spend five hours in a car with relatives who know exactly which buttons to push...
- Before you scroll through everyone else's picture-perfect holiday posts while sitting alone in your drab home...
- Before you smile through another awkward family gathering pretending everything is fine...

Let's check your heart! Because here's what I've learned:

The holidays have a way of exposing what's already there.

The season doesn't create your emotions—it reveals them. It's like turning up the volume on feelings that have been playing quietly in the background all year. Think about it:

That **ENVY** you've been managing. It explodes when everyone starts posting their elaborate Thanksgiving spreads and Disney Christmas vacation photos.

That **ANGER** you've been suppressing. It erupts when your mom makes that comment she makes every year, or your dad brings up politics at dinner, or your in-laws critique how you're raising your kids.

That **SHAME** you've been hiding. It intensifies when you walk back into your hometown and see people who knew you "back when," or when family brings up your failures from the past like they happened yesterday.

AND that **DEPRESSION** you've been fighting. It crushes you when everyone around you seems so full of joy and gratitude, and you're just trying to survive until January.

SO, hear my heart church, I love you guys, and I desperately want you to experience Jesus in greater and greater ways, so this Holiday Season let's pay attention to those emotions. The 5th-century theologian Augustine noticed that our emotions often function like smoke from a fire—they tell us what's really burning in our hearts. In other words, our emotions aren't usually the problem. They're indicators pointing to the problem.

So, over the next four weeks, we're going to look at four emotions that should function like warning lights on the dashboard of your life: depression, anger, envy, and shame. And here's my promise to you: If you'll go on this journey with me, if you'll do the hard work of figuring out what these emotions are telling you, this could be the best holiday season you've ever had! Not because your circumstances will magically change, but because you'll finally understand what's going on under the hood of your soul.

AND what's under the hood of so many of our souls is an undercurrent of depression, so that's what we are going to explore together today. Now, some of you are sitting here thinking, "Great, Brian. A message about depression right before the holidays. Way to kill the vibe, man!"

But here's the thing—there's actually a reason we're talking about this now. There's even a clinical term for it: Seasonal Affective Disorder. The acronym is literally S-A-D. Which feels a little on the nose, doesn't it? Like someone at the American Psychiatric Association had a dark sense of humor when they named it. But it's real. The shorter days, less vitamin D, cooler temps, the pressure of the holidays, the family dynamics—all of it can trigger or intensify depression. And that's just the seasonal component.

Because here's what I need all of us to acknowledge today: Depression is complex. It's not just something you can just snap out of. It's not something you can just pray away, though prayer is absolutely part of the solution. BUT I want you to know I'm not coming at this with easy answers, but I am standing here today to tell you there is hope.

Depression operates along a continuum. On one end is discouragement, which we all feel from time to time. On the other end is clinical depression. And in between are a whole lot of factors—spiritual factors, biological factors, psychological factors, relational factors, and even seasonal factors like I just mentioned.

For some of you, there's a chemical imbalance in your brain that needs to be addressed medically, and you should absolutely talk to your doctor about that and not just continue to tough it out. For others, there are traumatic experiences from your past that need to be processed with a professional counselor. Our church partners with a Christian counseling center called Life Connections here in our area and we would be happy to give you a referral. I personally have seen two of their counselors there, and there is absolutely zero shame in getting help.

But today, I want to focus primarily on the spiritual dimensions of depression. Not because I think that's always the primary cause, but because it's often a significant contributor that we ignore. In fact, God made us psychosomatic creatures—it's impossible to separate our souls from our bodies. What happens in one inevitably affects the other.

For example: have you ever notice how unspiritual you get when you haven't slept enough? How irritable you become when you're hungry? I can get downright mean when I'm hangry. Cheryl has learned to keep snacks around because apparently I turn into a toddler when my blood sugar drops. Now, that's technically a spiritual problem, right? Nothing should justify me being rude to my family. But the reality is, my rudeness is being triggered by my physical condition. So yes, I should pray for patience. But I should probably also take a nap and eat something.

Research shows that 75% of spiritual breakthroughs come from getting a good night's sleep and staying hydrated. OK, I made up that percentage, but you get the point. Sometimes the most spiritual thing you can do is go to bed on time and drink lots of water.

BUT again, there's more going on here. And Jeremiah is about to show us what depression is really telling us about the state of our hearts.

BUT before we do, can we just acknowledge how dark our main text is today? Was anyone else reading along and thinking, "Is this really in the Bible? Shouldn't an editor have cleaned this up?" I mean, Jeremiah is comparing God to a bear waiting to maul him

and a lion in hiding, ready to pounce. He says God has made him grind his teeth on gravel. He says his soul is deprived of peace and he's forgotten what happiness even feels like.

But here's what I love: When the early church was deciding which books belonged in Scripture, God could have nudged someone to say, "You know what, guys? What we need are more positive, encouraging Psalms like 'The Lord is my shepherd' and 'still waters' and 'cups running over.' That's what people need. Nobody's going to buy a poetry collection where the prophet says God is like a bear waiting to maul me and He made my teeth grind on gravel."

But this made it into Scripture through the Holy Spirit's prompting because:

God wants those who are suffering to know that He knows how you feel.

And it's okay—it's actually healthy—to express those emotions to God. This lament is honest even if it's not entirely accurate. It's an honest reflection of how Jeremiah feels, even if it doesn't account for everything God is doing behind the scenes.

And I want you to see that it's okay to be deeply, brutally honest with God. Sometimes we're too quick with our churchy answers: "Are you feeling sad? Just turn on some worship music! Shouldn't Christians be joyful all the time?"

No! Sometimes you need a God who walks through pain with you, not one who just snaps His fingers and makes it disappear.

Listen to me carefully: The greatest Christians in history were not those God delivered FROM all pain and misery, but those He delivered THROUGH pain and misery.

Charles Spurgeon—widely considered one of the greatest preachers who ever lived—told his 15,000-member congregation in the 1800's:

"I have spent more days shut up in depression than probably anybody else here."

Martin Luther went through times so dark that his wife would remove all the knives from their home for fear he'd hurt himself. He wrote:

"For more than a week I was close to the gates of death and hell. I trembled constantly. I could find no thoughts of Christ, only desperation and blasphemy of God."

So, if you're sitting here today feeling ashamed because you're depressed heading into this holiday season—the season you're supposed to be grateful and joyful—you're not alone. You're actually in really good company.

BUT then we get to verse 21, and this might be one of the most profound transitions in all of Scripture. Look at this again, Jeremiah says:

²¹ Yet this I call to mind and therefore I have hope:

Here's Jeremiah, sunk up to his armpits in literal mud, in a dungeon, thinking about loved ones he's lost, wrestling with the possibility he might never see them again. And he says, almost defiantly, "But this I call to mind."

That phrase is everything. It means this thought isn't naturally occurring. It's not automatically there. He has to intentionally, deliberately PUT it there. He has to preach to himself! A famous British pastor once said, "The primary task of Scripture is to teach us how to talk to ourselves." And that's what Jeremiah is doing here. He's preaching to himself.

Because here's what you and I need to understand: **Our emotions aren't intelligent.** They can't think. They can't rationalize. They can't show faith. You have to think for them. You have to show faith. And then you tell them how to feel.

Write this down, this is critical:

Never feel your way into your beliefs; you have to believe your way into your feelings.

A lot of Christians understand that we walk by faith and not by sight. But we don't understand that we also walk by faith and not by feeling. For many people, what they feel is their most reliable indicator of what's true.

"I feel like God has forgotten me... I feel distant from Him... I feel abandoned..."

And Jeremiah says, "Yeah, I feel all those things too. But God's Word tells me they're not true, and I CHOOSE to believe Him even though I can't feel it right now."

This is what Martin Luther called drowning out the voices of despair with the louder Word of the Gospel. At times, he would literally shout at the devil: "NO! I have not been abandoned! I have not been forsaken! God's Word tells me so, and Jesus's death proves it!"

Maybe you need to do that! I'm serious, find somewhere quiet where people won't call the cops on you, and out loud declare: "I have not been abandoned! I have not been forsaken! God's Word tells me so, and Jesus's death proves it!"

Neuroscience is now catching up to what Scripture has been saying for thousands of years. Research shows that the act of verbally declaring truth actually rewires neural pathways in your brain. When you speak truth out loud, you're not just thinking it—you're creating new patterns of thought that override the old, destructive patterns.

Dr. Caroline Leaf, a cognitive neuroscientist, says that it takes about 21 days of consistently speaking truth to begin rewiring a thought pattern, and 63 days to make it permanent. That's not magic—that's how God designed our brains to work.

SO, what does Jeremiah call to mind? Right? What was this truth he declared over his life that allowed him to pivot so beautifully? Let me show you four spiritual realities that combat depression:

1. Anchor yourself in God's character.

Write that down. Jeremiah had to anchor himself in God's character from the bottom of that pit! Look at what he preaches to himself, this time from the New Living Translation, Jeremiah says: (3:21-25, 32-33)

²¹ Yet I still dare to hope when I remember this: ²² The faithful love of the Lord never ends! His mercies never cease. ²³ Great is his faithfulness; his mercies begin afresh each morning. ²⁴ I say to myself, "The Lord is my inheritance; therefore, I will hope in him!" ²⁵ The Lord is good to those who depend on him, to those who search for him. [Now verse 32] ³² Though he brings grief, he also shows compassion because of the greatness of his unfailing love. ³³ For he does not enjoy hurting people or causing them sorrow.

Jeremiah is reminding himself that God's steadfast love never ceases, and He does not afflict from His heart. Meaning that like any good father, God sometimes allows His children to go through pain, but He never enjoys it. He only allows it because He knows the pain will ultimately produce greater joy later.

Think about when you take your kid to get their shots. That was one of the most traumatic experiences of my early parenting years. My daughters both looked at me with those big eyes like, "Daddy, I trusted you, and you betrayed me!" They should offer support groups for parents after they walk through this! Amen? As a parent you know the momentary pain is worth it. But it absolutely breaks your heart.

That's what Jeremiah is clinging to. That God is a good Father who doesn't enjoy our suffering.

AND how do we know God is good? Because of what His Word reveals about His character. We know He saved the children of Israel from slavery when He didn't have to. We know He sent Jesus to die for our sins when He didn't have to. In the life of Jesus, we see His heart break over every lost sinner. We see healing and compassion flow to everyone who approached Him.

And honestly? We can see it in creation too. The God who paints sunsets He knows most people will miss, who programs birds to migrate thousands of miles, who makes snowflakes that no two are ever alike—that's not a God who does things halfway. That's a God who delights in beauty and detail and generosity, even when nobody's watching.

We know from these things that He's a good Father. AND we choose to believe that even when we can't see it or feel it right now in our circumstances.

BUT this will not come automatically. Even as you mature in your faith this doesn't always come naturally. Jeremaih said he had to "remember" or "call to mind" God's character. That means you have to preach to yourself! You have to drown out the lies with truth!

You have to be more influential to yourself than anyone else, because guess what? You're already talking to yourself all day long anyway. The question is: What are you saying? Come on, you're not crazy for talking to yourself. You're crazy if you're saying the wrong things to yourself!

Some of you wake up every morning and the first thing you do is rehearse your failures: "I can't believe I said that yesterday. Why am I like this? I'm never going to change. God must be so disappointed in me."

Stop it! Start preaching to yourself:

- God's steadfast love NEVER ceases!
- His mercies are new THIS morning!
- He is faithful even when I'm faithless!
- He's working all things together for my good because I love Him and I'm called according to His purpose!

Come on, do you realize what this means for you this holiday season? When you're sitting at that table and someone brings up that thing from your past that you're ashamed of—you can preach to yourself! When you're scrolling through everyone else's perfect family

photos and feeling like a failure—you can preach to yourself! When you're lying awake at 3 AM wondering if things will ever get better—you can preach to yourself!

God's steadfast love NEVER ceases! His mercies don't run out! They're not on backorder! They don't have limited availability! They're new EVERY morning, which means yesterday's failure doesn't determine today's potential! Great is His faithfulness to YOU!

Here's the second way to spiritually combat depression:

2. Stay curious in your suffering.

In other words, are there any lessons that God is trying to teach you? Is God up to something you have been unaware of until now? Right?

AND I want to be careful here because I don't want you to think that every time you suffer it's because God is trying to teach you something or just get your attention. Sometimes suffering just happens because we live in a broken world. But look at what Jeremiah says: (3:26-28)

²⁶ So it is **GOOD** to wait quietly for salvation from the Lord. ²⁷ And it is **GOOD** for people to submit at an early age to the yoke of his discipline: ²⁸ Let them sit alone in silence beneath the Lord's demands.

Why would it be good? Because God often does His best work in us when we suffer, even when we don't know why we're suffering.

Jeremiah wasn't suffering because of his own sin. He'd been a faithful prophet since he was young. But God was still using that suffering to shape him, refine him, prepare him for what was coming next.

Here's what God *might* be doing in your suffering—I say **might** because I'm not saying this is always the case BUT:

Sometimes God uses suffering to remove an idol from our lives. David wrote in Psalm 119: "*My suffering was good for me, because it taught me to pay attention to your decrees.*" Sometimes we don't realize how attached we've become to something until God takes it away. And we discover that thing had become more important to us than God Himself.

Sometimes God uses suffering to get our attention about something we need to change. When this happens, the Holy Spirit usually makes it pretty clear. You'll know exactly what He's dealing with in your life.

Sometimes God uses suffering to humble us. In 2 Samuel, David was on the run after being falsely accused. This guy follows him down the road, shouting insults and throwing rocks at him. One of David's men says, "Let me go take care of this fool." And David says, "No. Even though I don't deserve this treatment, I think God told him to do it to humble me." And suffering does that, it humbles us. **AND...**

Sometimes—and this is huge—God uses suffering to prepare you for ministry. This is so common in Scripture I'd call it God's standard operating procedure. Moses, David, Jesus, Paul—they all endured seasons of suffering that prepared them for the ministry ahead.

Sometimes God is giving you the ability to relate to and help others in ways you never could without the pain. That's what Paul said: *God comforts us in our affliction so we can comfort others with the same comfort we've received from Him.*

Some of you have experienced this. You lost a child, battled cancer, walked through a divorce—and now you're able to minister to people going through those same situations in ways no one else can.

SO, listen to me carefully: Sometimes the lesson God wants to teach isn't even about you! Amen? Sometimes the lesson God wants to teach isn't even about you it's for someone else who's watching how you handle suffering. Your faith in the fire might be exactly what someone else needs to see to believe God is real.

Anchor yourself in God's character, stay curious in your suffering, and here's another way to combat depression:

3. Jesus is enough, but He's not done.

There are two extremes people fall into when suffering:

Extreme #1 – Jesus said we'd have trouble in this world and people would hate us, so there's no point praying for things to get better. We should just expect misery until heaven. Jesus is all I need...

Extreme #2 – God has appointed us to walk in blessing! You're in prison now, but that's just temporary. He's using the prison to prepare you for the palace! The breakthrough is right around the corner!

BUT both extremes are unhelpful when you are battling depression because the truth is both answers are partially correct, and both are incomplete by themselves. Look at what Jeremiah says:

²⁴ "The Lord is my portion," says my soul, "therefore I will hope in him."

"Portion" was the word Jews used for their allotment of land, the family inheritance passed down from generation to generation. Jeremiah is saying, "I don't have any land left. The Babylonians stole it all. But God Himself is my portion. He's my inheritance."

Practically speaking: there's nothing wrong with praying for friendship, marriage, a better job, more money, healthy kids. But God is better than any of those blessings! God Himself is the best piece of the pie!

Did Jeremiah want deliverance from prison. Yes! Did he want vindication. Yes! Did he want reunion with his loved ones. Absolutely! And he believed God could and would change things eventually. BUT he also declared that God was enough. God is my portion. He is my supply. He is all I really need.

This is the both/and of the Christian life.

God IS your portion. He IS enough. If He never changes your circumstances, if He never gives you what you're asking for, He is still good, and you are still blessed beyond measure because you have HIM. That's not just religious talk—that's reality! Having God means you have everything because you have the One who owns everything and promises to work all things for your good!

But that doesn't mean you stop praying for change. It doesn't mean you stop hoping for healing!

You wake up depressed tomorrow morning, and you pray: "God, I hate feeling this way. I'm asking you to lift this. I'm asking you to change this. I believe you can. I'm going to look for your goodness today. BUT even if nothing changes today, you are still my portion. You are still enough. You are still good." Amen?

You sit at that Thanksgiving table with family drama swirling, and in your heart you're praying: "God, I wish this was different. I wish we could be closer. I wish there wasn't all

this tension. I'm asking you to heal our family. BUT even if that never happens, you are my portion. I have you, and that's enough."

You look at your bank account or your medical diagnosis or your relationship status, and you say: "God, I want this to change. I'm praying for breakthrough. I'm believing for better. BUT I'm not waiting until things change to be satisfied. You are my portion right now. You're enough right now."

This is the secret Jeremiah discovered in the mud pit: You can be completely satisfied in God while simultaneously believing for something better.

{CUE SOUND AND WORSHIP TEAM}

AND that takes us to this as the worship team comes to help us close this out:

4. Get up tomorrow and look for the goodness of God.

Turn to someone around you and tell them you gotta get up! I know this seems like the most impossible thing if you are battling depression, but you gotta get up! Look at Jeremiah's posture here:

²² The steadfast love of the Lord never ceases; his mercies never come to an end; ²³ they are new every morning; great is your faithfulness.

God's mercies and faithfulness are like the sun coming up new every morning, washing away the shadows and darkness of the night. Today might feel like a dark, never-ending night of mistakes and despair. But God's mercies rise fresh every morning. This is the hope that drives depression away!

Your emotions may be telling you there's nothing ahead but darkness. But you must call to mind that Jesus got out of the grave, which means He has good plans for you and your family! Your story will end in victory, not defeat! For many of you, this will be a watershed moment in your life. Stop letting your emotions dictate reality to you! Your emotions don't have brains! They can't think! They can't reason! They can't show faith!

You have to preach to yourself: The steadfast love of the Lord never ceases! His mercies never come to an end! They are new every morning! Great is His faithfulness!

Get up tomorrow morning—Thanksgiving morning, Christmas morning, New Year's morning, whatever morning is ahead of you—and look for the goodness of God! Even if

it's small. Even if it's just your kid's laugh, or your dog being happy to see you, or the fact that you woke up breathing. Look for it!

And when you find it, thank Him for it! Call it to mind! Preach it to yourself!

Because the most influential person in your life is YOU. You're the one you listen to the most. So, make sure you're saying the right things!

Before you gather with your family... before you walk into whatever situation is ahead of you this season... check your heart. If depression is there, don't ignore it. Don't mask it. Don't just medicate it.

Follow the smoke to the fire and preach the Gospel to yourself. Call to mind what God has done. What He's promised. Who He is. And believe your way into new feelings.

This is how you prepare your soul for the season. Let's pray together.

[PRAYER TIME]