

**Stuck in the Middle**  
***“Unfair”***  
**September 15, 2019**

Good morning everyone.

“When a heart breaks it don’t break even.”

And the truth is ... *very few things* in life break evenly. Most of the time someone gets the short end of the stick.

- Someone gets less than they deserve while someone else gets more.
- Someone constantly suffers while someone else never faces adversity.

And it’s *just not fair* ... which is what we’re going to talk about this morning as we continue in our series *Stuck in the Middle*.

And I picked that title because this is a series about *change*:

- When the unexpected, unpleasant and undesired happens to us and “what was” no longer is.
- When the “old normal” is gone and we’re now forced to accept and live in the “new normal.”

Unfortunately, many of us are unable to do that. Instead of moving on and embracing the future, we’re stuck – *stuck in the middle* between what was and what is (and what could be).

**Last week we saw a very helpful diagram ...**

... from Dr. William Bridges book, *Managing Transitions: Making the Most of Change*.

Bridges is an expert on change and his diagram illustrates what how change “feels” to us as we’re going through it.

At any point in time after the change happens, you’re actually experiencing three distinct phases of transition.

**For instance, when the change first happens ...**



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... your primary emotional experience is that of “the ending” – which Bridges defines as losing “what was” and being forced to let go of the old world.

At that point you have, at most, a limited idea of the “neutral zone” – which, according to Bridges, is characterized by confusion and disorientation.

And you have even less of a sense of what the “new beginning” – your new normal will be like.

**But as time goes on and you near the end of the transition ...**

- You still have moments where you feel disoriented and confused.
- And there are still occasional pangs of loss associated with the old world and the way things used to be.

But your day-to-day emotions are primarily tied to “the new beginning” – your new normal.

Of course, that's assuming that you don't get stuck in the middle – emotionally and spiritually trapped in the past while living in the present. See, time always moves on but we may or may not.

And last week we learned that a big reason we get stuck – a big reason we get emotionally and spiritually trapped – is that we don't deal with the pain and loss associated with the ending.

Instead of facing those emotions, we tend to ignore them, minimize them or medicate them – which is what our culture encourages us to do.

But the fact of the matter is that you simply cannot embrace the future until you have grieved the losses and disappointments of the past. You can't end "the ending" and move on to "the new beginning" until that

happens.

Or, to phrase it in a way that came to me several years ago when I was personally “stuck in the middle” ...

**“You can’t leave it until you grieve it.”**

That’s why, last week, we talked about what it means to *lament* (and how to do it) because lamenting is a very direct and intentional way to deal with grief. It’s a process that allows us to face our anger and sadness and bleed off the emotional toxins.

Now, if you weren’t here last week and you’re a Christian, I strongly suggest you go to the media section of our app or our website and watch, listen to or read the message.

And even if you’re not a Christian, it might be of value to you, too, although *biblical* lament

assumes a personal relationship with God.

In fact, lamenting is one of the most honest forms of communication with God that a person can have ... which is why the Bible – especially in the Psalms and the Old Testament Wisdom literature – is *chock full* of laments!

In fact, there are so many laments in the Bible that it's no exaggeration to say that lamenting *to* God the realities of life that seem to be inconsistent *with* God is actually a very deep expression of faith *in* God!

Let me say that again.

**Lamenting *to* God the realities of life that seem to be inconsistent *with* God (who He is; His love, His compassion and His power) is actually a very deep expression of faith *in* God.**

Now, we don't tend to think that way,

especially those of us who are Christians, because we think that “faith” means somehow convincing ourselves that “all is well” when it really isn’t.

But that’s not faith at all. Faith means going to God and being honest with God – even angry at God – when all is not well and yet, still expressing our hope in God.

**We saw this in the pattern that biblical laments often follow.**

- Name the pain. Identify the losses and disappointments in your life.
- Confront God over His apparent lack of presence and activity in those situations in your life.
- Leave your complaint with God. You say, “God here it is,” then you just be silent.



- When you are able ... reaffirm your trust in God's love and goodness.

And some of you need to do that – lament, I mean – because you're not leaving the past until you're grieving the loss. And you're going to stay stuck.

And, by the way – someone asked me this after the message last week – you might need to do the lament process more than once after a major change because, as time goes on, you're probably going to uncover and experience different levels or aspects of sadness and anger over what has happened.

And if you handle those episodes well when they occur – if you "lament well" then, over time – as Bridges diagram illustrates – you'll feel the pain less intensely and less frequently. It'll always be there but it won't be controlling your life.

And you won't be stuck in the middle.

## **Lamenting Injustice**

Now, as I said last week, when you're lamenting, you don't try to Christianize your thoughts and feelings. You just let them flow in God's direction.

For example, over the 25 years of being a pastor, there have been seasons where people have gotten mad at me over things I didn't do – over things about which they don't (and can't) know the whole story. And when that happens, the pain of that injustice (in my mind) begins to build up inside of me.

And if they won't talk to me about it, it gets even worse.

And if they leave the church over it, and if they

tell all their friends or post on Facebook what a jerk I am, that pain becomes anger. I get mad. And sometimes I even get demoralized.

Whenever this happens to me, I have to deal with it or I'll get stuck in the middle. I won't be able to fully embrace the present and the future because the negative emotions of the past have me in their grip.

But "dealing with it" doesn't mean trying to forgive them (which is the Christian thing to do – and we'll talk about that next week). Forgiveness comes later because, at that point, I'm still feeling the pain and I need to lament.

I won't go into all the gory details of what exactly I say when I confront God but my complaint sounds like this:

- "After all I've done for them, it's just not

fair that they would treat me this way.”

- “After all I’ve done for You, God, it’s just not fair that You would allow them to do this to me.”
- “What’s the use? If this is how you’re treated in the end, why even try to do the right thing?”
- “If Christians aren’t going to deal with conflicts like Jesus said, what’s the point of doing church? Maybe I ought to quit this stupid job. Oh, yeah, I can’t. This is what You called me to do.”

As I said, I can get pretty demoralized depending on the severity of the situation.

Maybe you can relate to this? Maybe some of you are in a situation right now where ...

- You've tried your best to help someone. You've given it your best shot, but they showed no appreciation toward you whatsoever. Worse, they treated you like dirt. It's not fair.
- You've been a good steward with your money; you've given generously – 10% of your income, sometimes more – to God's work and now you don't have a job. It's just not fair.
- You've worked hard and you've sacrificed as a loyal employee or volunteer and when the position opened up, you didn't get it, someone else did. It's just not fair.
- Everyone around you is dating or getting married or having babies or going on vacation or buying a home or saving for retirement but, for some reason, it's not

happening for you like that.

“It’s just not fair. If there really is a good and all-powerful God on the throne of the universe, then why am I getting the short end of the stick?”

For that matter, why does *anyone* get the short end of the stick? Why is there injustice at all in this world? Why doesn’t God step in to even things out when they don’t break even? Or even to keep things from getting broken the first place?

It’s a tough question for a person who has a deep faith in that God.

It’s a painful question when you’re on the receiving end of the unfairness and God seems to be absent.

And it’s a question that the author of the 73<sup>rd</sup>

Psalm had to deal with.

That author was a guy by the name of Asaph – who we talked about last week. If you were here, you may remember that ...

- He was the chief music director and worship leader of Israel for over 40 years, mostly during the reign of King David.
- He was the guy who put almost all of David's worship poems to music.
- Near the end of his life, he himself wrote 11 songs that made it into the biblical book of Psalms.

Biblical scholars think Psalm 73 was written when Solomon – David's son who had succeeded him as king – had turned his back on God.

It's not a very well-known fact but, in the latter part of his life, Solomon pursued power, wealth and the worship of other gods. He had even begun to enslave some of his own people.

It was a terrible time in Israel's history and a terrible fall from the glory days of David.

And, at some point in that transition, Asaph's brother, Zechariah, apparently spoke out against the corruption that was happening within the leadership of Israel, and he was assassinated in the Temple – of all places – by some of Solomon's supporters.<sup>i</sup>

Can you imagine being a worship leader in *that* situation? Can you imagine what it would feel like if your brother was murdered in the very place where you lead people to glorify God?



We don't have to imagine because Psalm 73 is the record of Asaph's deep struggle with God.

### **He starts out by saying ...**

*Truly God is good to Israel, to those whose hearts are pure.  
Psalm 73:1 (NLT)*

Asaph is telling us right at the beginning that, "Make no mistake, I'm not a skeptic. I'm a believer."

### **Slide**

*But as for me, I almost lost my footing. My feet were slipping, and I was almost gone.  
Psalm 73:2 (NLT)*

In other words, "doubt about God's goodness was pulling me down."

And from the situation, I think we can all understand why he would feel that way...

**... but Asaph actually goes on to explain it in detail:**

*For I envied the proud when I saw them prosper despite their wickedness.*

*They seem to live such painless lives; their bodies are so healthy and strong. They don't have troubles like other people; they're not plagued with problems like everyone else.*

*They wear pride like a jeweled necklace and clothe themselves with cruelty. These fat cats have everything their hearts could ever wish for!*

*They scoff and speak only evil; in their pride they seek to crush others. They boast against the very heavens, and their words strut throughout the earth.*

## **Slide**

*And so the people [of God, when they see and hear this], are dismayed and confused, drinking in all their words.*

*“What does God know?” the people ask. “Does the Most High even know what’s happening? Look at these wicked people—enjoying a life of ease while their riches multiply.” Psalm 73:10-12 (NLT)*

Everyone could see what was going on, Asaph says, and everyone wanted to know “why are these evil leaders getting away with

this oppression? Why are they getting away with murder? Is God unaware?"

And then in the next verse Asaph reveals the question that had *really* bugged him in his time of despair.

**In my despair, I thought to myself ...**

*Did I keep my heart pure for nothing? Did I keep myself innocent for no reason?*

*I get nothing but trouble all day long; every morning brings me pain.*

*Psalm 73:13-14 (NLT)*

Every morning, Asaph felt not only the pain of losing his brother; he also had to watch Solomon and his gang continue to ruin what David had begun. And then he had to watch all of them living it up – without consequence!

And he began to wonder: “They did wrong and they’re getting rewarded. My brother and I did right – what God wanted us to do – and he got killed and now I am suffering.”

“Maybe it’s not worth it to live God’s way. Maybe I worship and honor God for nothing.”

**Even worse, Asaph tells us, he had to keep it all bottled up inside.**

*If I had really spoken this way to others [if I had blurted out what I was thinking and feeling], I would have been a traitor to your people.  
Psalm 73:15 (NLT)*

As a worship leader, Asaph knew he couldn’t just stand up one day in the service and say “hey, folks, I just want you to know that ...

- “I’m seeing all this stuff that’s happened with my brother ...

- And I'm seeing all this stuff that Solomon is doing
- And I'm overwhelmed at the unfairness of this situation
- And I'm thinking about cashing out."

That would have been destructive to the people he was leading, so he had to do his deepest and darkest lamenting offline ...

... which is why, in those occasional times when I'm feeling demoralized, I don't speak about it publicly. I tell God and then I tell *my* pastor, Rusty Savage and sometimes my wife. On rare occasions I'll share it with our other pastors and the Advisory Council.

But I don't talk about it publicly until later – until I've come out the other side – and then,

not to make you feel sorry for me but as a testimony to encourage you ... like I'm doing today. 😊

Anyway ... I think you can see why Asaph had reason to lament. So lament he did.

But then he did something else that was critical to dealing with the terrible changes in his life.

**He went on a personal truth quest:**

*I tried to understand why the wicked prosper. But what a difficult task it is! Psalm 73:16 (NLT)*

Now, if you're paying close attention, you might be thinking, "wait a minute, Rick. Didn't you say that, when we lament, we're not supposed to try to answer the questions?"

I did say that, and that is true.

However, there comes a point when we *need to move beyond lament*.

And this is very important to understand because I do not want to communicate through this series that it's OK to be perpetually sad about your losses and disappointments because it's not. It's not. Weeping and mourning are meant to last only for a season.

Remember, we grieve it – whatever “it” might be – *in order to leave it*, not in order to hang on to it forever and have it hang on to us and rule our lives.

The goal – where we want to go emotionally and spiritually – is *release* so we can move on.



- A true release, not a pretend “oh, everything is fine, praise Jesus” when it really isn’t
- A true release that can, in spite of the pain and loss and disappointment ...

**... proclaim to God:**

*Who have I in heaven but you? I desire you more than anything on earth. My health may fail, and my spirit may grow weak, but God remains the strength of my heart; he is mine forever. Psalm 73:24-26 (NLT)*

Those are the final verses of Psalm 73. That’s where Asaph ended up. That’s Asaph’s “new beginning.”

That’s where I want to end up and I hope you do, too.

**But to get there, the journey – the transition from “what was” to “what is” and could be – must begin with lament and it must end with truth.**

Both of those are critical to the process.

## **Truth Quest**

So, the question is ... what truth did Asaph discover that led to his emotional and spiritual freedom?

Remember, he said he was trying to understand “why the wicked prosper” – in other words, he was trying to understand the unfairness of it all; how, in a universe governed by an all-powerful and righteous God, good things happen to bad people while bad things happen to good people.”

Turns out Asaph did not find the answer to

that question.

Instead, he became aware of another truth that set him free.

**“I tried to understand why the wicked prosper,”  
he wrote ...**

*Then I went into your  
sanctuary, O God ...*

Instead of running away from God he kept pressing *into* God with his lament ...

*... I went into your sanctuary  
...*

I put myself in Your frame of reference, O God  
...

**Slide**

*... and I finally understood the  
destiny of the wicked. Truly,*

*you put them on a slippery  
path and send them sliding  
over the cliff to destruction.*

*Psalm 73:17-18 (NLT)*

What's he saying?

He's saying "I focused on God and I saw things from a different perspective – an eternal perspective – that in the end, the wicked do *not* get away with it and the righteous are rewarded. Justice *does* prevail."

**See, Asaph's struggle came from trying to measure fairness on the timeline of "now."**

And there didn't appear to be any fairness, because in his "now," the wicked were prospering and the righteous were suffering.

But the timeline of eternity was telling a different story. That timeline – the eternal perspective, God's perspective – revealed

that one day, those godless, evil men ...

- Who thumbed their noses at Heaven ...
- And oppressed the people of God ...
- And murdered his brother ...

... will receive exactly what they deserve.

And that truth set him free. It allowed him to move forward into the "new normal" of his life.

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Now, for some of you who have been oppressed and wounded by people who could be described as "godless, evil men (and women) who thumb their noses at Heaven," that perspective might be helpful.

Right now, everything *appears* to be unfair,

but unless they repent and turn to Christ for forgiveness of sin, from an eternal perspective, their destiny is sealed. Justice will be done.

## A Different Scale

For me, however, most all of the folks who, in my mind, have treated me unfairly over the years are *Christians* (which sounds kind of sad) ...

- Which means that none of them fall into the biblical category of “wicked” ...
- Which means that “sliding over the cliff to eternal destruction” experience Asaph referred to doesn’t apply to them – nor would I want it to.

So Asaph’s specific “aha” isn’t all that helpful to me.

However, there's another eternal frame of reference that is. And I think it might help some of you, too.

### **The Apostle Paul once wrote that ...**

*Everyone has sinned; we all fall short of God's glorious standard. Romans 3:23 (NLT)*

And that includes me.

See, the truth about me, Rick McGinniss, is that I am as much of a sinner as any person who I think has done me wrong. I'm living proof that the Apostle Paul really did have it right when he wrote that.

For instance, while I don't wish for people who've mistreated me to slide over a cliff to eternal destruction, the idea of God allowing

them to have ...

- A flat tire in rush hour
- Or a downturn in their 401K
- Or some other kind of misfortune along the lines of what they've done to me ...

... sounds good to me.

My attitude can be pretty horrible at times.

Furthermore – and worse – the truth about me is that I'm not "just an innocent victim" in this life. I, too, have treated others unfairly. There are people in this world who have suffered because of something I did or did not do – and sometimes *intentionally*. They've had to lament because of *me*.

... which means that when I put myself on the same scale on which I want to weigh my offenders, my reading is going to come up



“guilty” just like theirs. And *I* should be sliding over the cliff to eternal destruction!

But I am not.

You know why?

*Because God is unfair.* More specifically, because God’s grace is unfair.

Or as Paul puts it in the very next sentence after he says that everyone has sinned and falls short of God’s glorious standard ...

### **Slide**

*Yet God, in his grace, freely makes us right in his sight. He did this through Christ Jesus when he freed us from the penalty for our sins. Romans 3:24 (NLT)*

Paul is saying that, instead of being

condemned for our sin, God lets us off the hook because of what Jesus did. We're judged not on what we've done but on what He did.

That's certainly not fair because He lived a perfect life and I have not. Neither have you.

And, quite frankly, *that* – grace – is as hard to understand as bad people prospering while good people suffer.

So Jesus once explained it like this.

He said that "grace" is like a crazy farmer at harvest time when work is plentiful; when every morning the farmers go to the center of town to recruit workers for their fields.<sup>ii</sup>

But there's so much work that this one particular farmer, Jesus says, goes back into town in the late afternoon and sees that there

are more workers hanging around the town square waiting to be hired. Given the time of year and the amount of work available, one can assume that these guys were lazy and undisciplined; they had stayed up very late the night before and they showed up very late in the day.

They were the bottom of the worker barrel but, the farmer needs all the help he can get, and so, Jesus says, he hires them. And they go out into his fields as the daylight is beginning to fade.

And when the daylight finally does fade, it's pay time for every person who worked in the field that day. And as all the workers line up to receive their wages, Jesus says there's a great surprise: the latecomers receive a full day's pay *just as if they had showed up at daybreak.*

## **And because of that, Jesus says ...**

*When those hired first [early in the day] came to get their pay, they assumed they would receive more.*

“Last guys to show up received X, I should get X plus.”

*But they, too, were paid a day's wage.*

## **But ...**

*When they received their pay, they protested, “Those people worked only one hour, and yet you've paid them just as much as you paid us who worked all day in the scorching heat.”*

*Matthew 20:12 (NLT)*

Translation: “It's not fair.”

**But the farmer, Jesus said, disagreed.**

*He answered one of them, "Friend, I haven't been unfair! Didn't you agree to work all day for the usual wage? Take your money and go. I wanted to pay this last worker the same as you.*

## **Slide**

*Is it against the law for me to do what I want with my money? Should you be jealous because I am kind to others?" Matthew 20:13-15 (NLT)*

Now, what's interesting about this story is that the first part of it would have been familiar to those who heard Jesus tell it.

That's because the other rabbis of Jesus' day told a similar story but, in their version those who worked for one hour got a whole day's

*pay because they were so much better than everybody else who had showed up at the beginning. They worked so hard – they were so productive – that they were worth the money that they got paid.*

They proved it. They earned it.

But in Jesus' version, that's not how it ends. The emphasis is not on the worth of the latecomers because there is no worth in them.

Instead, the emphasis is on the crazy, breathtaking, overwhelming, reckless generosity of the farmer; his gracious act to people who did not deserve it or earn it!

And Jesus is saying through this parable, "friends, this is what your Father in Heaven is like. He acts in ways that, by your measuring scale, are crazy, reckless, breathtakingly

gracious ... to sinners like you.”

And friends, when I get all the junk out in a lament about how unfair I’ve been treated, this is what I focus on.

Like Asaph, I see and remember the destiny of a wicked heart like mine. I see and remember that, instead of eternal punishment and separation from God, I am totally forgiven of all my sin – past, present and future – because Jesus took my place.

- Unfairly, he was beaten and tortured for my sin.
- Unfairly, he experienced separation from his Heavenly Father instead of me.

Because of what Jesus did for me, like those late-afternoon workers in Jesus’ story, I have received far better than I ever deserved and,

you know, what? It is ... *totally unfair. Totally unfair.*

Tom Hovestol, in his book, *Extreme Righteousness: Seeing Ourselves in the Pharisees*, writes that ...

One reason you and I so strongly react to perceived unfairness is that we cherish a too-lofty view of ourselves.

We forget that we are self-indulgent children of wrath upon whom a gracious God [has] piled priceless gifts; we were spiritual trash who God [has] turned into eternal trophies (Ephesians 2:1-10).

Fairness without grace would have condemned us all to hell. <sup>iii</sup>

## **Conclusion**



And that's the eternal perspective – the truth – that, for me, produces freedom.

It's the message of the gospel: that you and I are far worse sinners than we would ever believe; yet we are far more loved by God than we could ever imagine.

And as we close this service this morning, I want us to take some time to reflect on this; to reflect on the unfairness of grace, because, I think sometimes we just miss this; we take this for granted.

The band is coming up to do the final song and here's what I want you to think about while they're doing it.

If you're going through a time of change and transition in your life because you were treated unfairly – or even if you're experiencing that right now – what I want you

to do is to feel the emotion. Feel the pain.

“It’s not fair that I have to go through this” or  
“I had to go through this.”

Then I want you to think about grace. I want you to think about your sin and how God is so unfair to you by offering you total forgiveness in exchange for faith. <EXPLAIN>

Friends, we worship a God who is good for no reason at all, who is generous for no reason at all, who is kind for no reason at all, and who gives for no reason at all ... except ... that it’s just in His nature to do so. He is just good fundamentally, at the core of his being.

Let’s pray.

# Endnotes

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[http://www.hfcbiblestudy.org/index2.php?option=com\\_content&do\\_pdf=1&id=482](http://www.hfcbiblestudy.org/index2.php?option=com_content&do_pdf=1&id=482)

ii This is from Brennan Manning's talk *Healing Our Image of God and Ourselves*, July 8, 2007.

iii Hovestol, *Extreme Righteousness*, p. 52-53 quoted at <http://www.archangelministries.org/blog/>