

## **No Doubt About It Part III**

# ***If God Is So Good Part Two***

**June 27, 2021**

Good morning everyone. As Andrew mentioned today we are continuing in our series, No Doubt About It, part three. And as he said, you will need some paper for today's service so if you are on campus please make sure you have the half sheet of black paper we passed out at the doors or that is placed on the table in the café and family room and those watching online make sure you have some.

Well, in week one of this current series, Rick spoke about whether or not there is evidence to believe that all of this (our world that is) was created or was it just an accident.

Last week, he hit on the age old question, if God is totally good and all powerful why does evil exist in our world.

And if you are new or were not able to be a part of those services, I want to strongly encourage you to go back and listen to those messages (as well as the rest of the messages in this 3 part series) which can be found on our website, app or podcast.

Rick has done an awesome job of tackling these intellectual and theological questions. He has given us a lot to think about but this week, we are going to push pause on the head and focus more on the heart.

When we began this collection of doubt series back in April, we took a survey of the congregation about what doubts you all have about God and about faith.

And as Rick concluded the service last week, he mentioned that one of the “doubt” responses he got really stood out. It said, “I get the theology, but the pain still hurts.”

That card could have been written by any one of the many North Heartlanders for whom I have officiated funerals for their loved one in this past year.

See one thing I’ve learned over my time on staff here at North Heartland is that when evil comes to call, when death steals the one you love...all the explanations in the world, don’t ease the suffering.

Even when we know the person is in a better place, when we know their suffering has come to an end, it’s gut wrenching. For those left behind, they have a giant hole in their

heart from the loss of their loved one. They groan and ache and long for just one more day.

And when the death is sudden, unexpected or the person is way too young, that feeling is almost unbearable. Like someone has just reached in and ripped out your heart, because in a way death has. It has stolen from you something you hold so dear, someone who matters so much.

And so each time I do a funeral, I'm reminded that even if we completely understand the theology, even if *know* about and look forward to and long for the future day when Jesus comes back to kill off death for good, no more pain, no more evil, no more suffering, we still have to live in *this* day where the curse of sin is still in operation in

the world and in us. And by the way, I know not everyone is there yet that some of you are still doubting, still questioning, still investigating and that's ok but even if you had all your questions answered, that would only address your head, it would not ease the pain.

So how do you do that? How do you handle the pain of living in this fallen, broken and messed up world?

The book of Ecclesiastes tells us that there is “a time for everything and a season for every activity under heaven.” There's a time to laugh ... but there's also *a time to weep*. There's a time to dance ... but there's also *a time to mourn*.

Unfortunately, you and I live in a culture that's very intentional about laughing and dancing

but has no clue when it comes to weeping and mourning – *lamenting* – when loss and disappointment visit our lives.

Instead, what most people do when grievous things happen – and let me first be clear about what I mean by “grievous things:” I mean traumatic losses that come upon us suddenly, all at once, like the death of a loved one, but also things like ...

- The end of a marriage, or divorce
- Diagnosis of a serious illness
- Disability of some kind
- Infertility or a miscarriage
- Being personally violated in some way
- The break up of a dating relationship
- Betrayal by a friend or spouse
- Being rejected in some way such as being fired from a job

- Conflict that ends a friendship
- Loss of a pet
- Family situation that doesn't measure up to our expectation
- Death of a dream
- Transfer to a new job or new school
- Moving or having a close friend move

But, by “grievous things” I also mean losses and disappointments that are non-traumatic – things that happen gradually, over time, such as:

- Growing old and losing our youthfulness.
- Having a child and how that changes your life and for women, your body. Having that same kid grow up and graduate and move out. Having a child who chooses a path that is destructive

to them and their future.

- Retirement and loss of identity
- Loss of independence, for whatever reason in your life
- Loss of health over a slow period of time
- Disillusionment w/church and or God

All of those situations – traumatic and non – represent loss and disappointment at some level. I'm sure that everyone in this room has experienced those or is experiencing at least a few of them right now.

But instead of lamenting when these kinds of grievous things happen, what most of us do is to follow one of four other strategies.

### **#1. We try to deny it.**

We try to deny our loss or disappointment. “It doesn't hurt that bad” ... “other people have it



far worse than I do” ... “this is just how life works” ... “Christians are supposed to rejoice in all things, so I just need to put on the happy face – Rejoice in the Lord always, and ignore how I feel.”

## **#2. We try to get over it.**

We tell ourselves “they wouldn’t want me to cry” ... “he/she/it wasn’t that great anyway” ... “anger is a useless emotion” ... “I’m not going to waste my life being sad all the time” ... whatever it takes to motivate ourselves to run past the pain into whatever is next.

In fact, a lot of us who are Christians have been taught that spiritual maturity means getting over our pain as quickly as possible. *Jesus is bigger than death and he uses all things for his glory and our good, so let’s move on!*<sup>i</sup>

**#3. We try to medicate the loss of pain or disappointment with drugs, alcohol, adrenaline, work, TV, sex, money ... or whatever we think will numb the pain.**

Now, the problem with all three of these strategies is that they only delay the inevitable. Pretending, running or medicating does not change the facts or alter the reality that *we have lost something and we are wounded*. Eventually, over time, the toxin of that unresolved pain leaks out in ways that are destructive to us and everyone around us.

Now, on the opposite end of the spectrum, there's a fourth option, and this is what some people do with loss and disappointment ...

**#4. Dwell on it and become consumed by it.**

Old Testament scholar Walter Brueggemann, who is an expert on the biblical concept of “lament,” says that people who dwell on their losses do things like talking about those losses over and over again until eventually they get so comfortable with their losses that they begin to play the victim in their lives. They become consumed by self-pity and they close themselves off from the rest of the world, including God.

Have you ever used any of those strategies when you were hurting? Are you using any of them now? I know I have.

Here’s the thing, those four options will not help you heal from the evil in this world. Try those options and trust me, you will end up bitter and stuck and full of toxic emotion but there is a better way. The way of lament.

## The Way of Lament

Now, since we're not very conversant with the idea of lament, it's easy to get it confused with strategy #4, where we dwell on our losses. Lamenting for most people conjures up images of wailing and whining about our troubles as if the whole world revolves around us ... which it does not.

However, that's not what lament – at least, as it's described in the Bible – is all about.

Lament, Brueggemann says, isn't dwelling *on* loss.

**Lament is dwelling *in* loss – facing  
directly into the wind of pain, laying  
that pain at the feet of God in worship  
and waiting for Him to act.**

Very different. See, when we lament, we

don't just *express* our grief to whoever might be listening or to no one who might be listening; we *direct* that grief towards God. Listen to this passage from the Old Testament book of Psalms which is an example of the kind of "lamenting" that we are talking about.

In Psalm 6, David writes ...

*Be merciful to me, LORD, for I  
am faint;*

*O LORD, heal me, for my  
bones are in agony.*

*My soul is in anguish.*

*How long, O LORD, how  
long?*

*I am worn out from groaning;*

*all night long I flood my bed  
with weeping*

*and drench my couch with  
tears.*

*My eyes grow weak with  
sorrow;*

*they fail because of all my  
foes [everything that's stacked  
against me].*

*Psalm 6:2-3,6-7 (NIV)*

Some of you, you know exactly what he's talking about, you feel it in your bones.

Actually, two thirds of the Psalms are laments - complaints to God where David shouts at God. He prays wild prayers. Tells God exactly what he is feeling. And this is

interesting because Psalms is the one worship and prayer book in the whole Bible, and two-thirds of it is complaining and lamenting to God!

So, lament is not dwelling *on* loss but dwelling *in* loss – facing directly into the wind of pain and laying that pain at the feet of God in worship and waiting for Him to act.

More specifically, Bob Kellerman writes that ...

**Lament grieves the reality of life that seems inconsistent with the character of God.**

Lament is a naming of the bad which has been allowed by the Good while also expressing our radical trust in God's reliability.<sup>ii</sup>

Along the same lines, Michael Card in his book *The Hidden Face of God*, says that ...

“Lament happens when we experience suffering that seems inconsistent with God's unfailing love, when the door to His Presence seems locked and barred from the inside. Such moments are often signaled by the word *why*. *Why* am I sick? *Why* does my enemy triumph over me? *Why* did my loved one die? God, if indeed You are defined by unfailing love, then *why* ... *why* weren't you there ?<sup>iii</sup>

Now, one of the problems in thinking about lament is that it sounds like something only a spiritually immature person would do. Your faith is just not very strong if you're lamenting what is happening in your life. But, Peter Scazzero, author of *The Emotionally Healthy*



Church and Emotionally Healthy Spirituality,  
writes ...

“We so often associate anger, sadness, grieving with being unspiritual, as if something is wrong with our walk with Christ. We’re convinced that we are failing and going backwards. Biblically, the very opposite may be true.”<sup>iv</sup>

The story of Job is one of terrible tragedy in which Job laments directly to God while three of his friends basically tell Job to, “shut up, repent of your sin and keep all of your feelings to yourself. After all,” they say, “God is God and we have no right to complain. If something is going wrong, it must be our fault.”

But, Job doesn’t listen to them. Instead, he loudly grieves the reality of his life that seems

inconsistent with the loving character of God –and God actually answers him in the story.

But, what’s fascinating is, after God answers Job, he turns around and speaks to Job’s three friends:

*“I am angry with you and your two friends, because you have not spoken the truth about me, as my servant Job has. So now take seven bulls and seven rams and go to my servant Job and sacrifice a burnt offering for yourselves. My servant Job will pray for you [the most unspiritual man you know – he’s going to pray for you], and I will accept his prayer and not deal with you*

*according to your folly. You have not spoken the truth about me ...” Job 42:7-8 (NIV)*

And the truth about God is that God can handle our laments ... and so we should bring them to Him - no matter what they look like, no matter what they feel like, no matter what they sound like - which is why David wrote in the Psalms:

*Trust in him at all times, you people; pour out your hearts to him for God is our refuge. Psalm 62:8 (NIV)*

Or, as one commentator puts it:

“Lament is a daring theological maneuver, in that it presupposes there

actually IS someone who is listening; that that person is not offended by our honest, even abrasive speech towards Him; that, in fact, He invites it, and that our rage does not need to take us *outside* of Him, but can and should actually take place *within* Him.”<sup>v</sup>

## **The Practice of Lament**

So, with all of that as a background, how do we actually go about lamenting? How do we put this into practice?

I'm grateful that I have learned a process here at North Heartland for lamenting and I actually take time at least once a year to go through this process.

In fact, in February I took time away to go lament on a silent retreat. I was grieving

loved ones who had passed, some relationships that had changed, friends who had moved, and more.

I was reminded once again how the practice of lament is so very helpful and healing to our souls.

The process I learned here at North Heartland has four components.

### **1. Name the pain you're feeling.**

... Take time to think about the recent past. Think about things that cause you to clench up: people, events, situations. Write them down using four general categories of lament.

- it's not fair
- it won't be the same
- it's just too hard
- they hurt me

Once you've named the pain ...

## **2. Confront God with your emotional confusion and anger over His apparent lack of presence in your life.**

When I make my list, I work through it point by point and person by person.

- God, it's not fair my friend Amy had to die and leave behind her husband and her two sons and so many family and friends. She was too young God, it's not fair!
- God, this person hurt me. What they said was painful, rude and harsh. Why didn't You protect me better? And, quite frankly, what are you going to do to teach them a lesson in return, because dang it, they've got a lesson coming to them.

- God, this is too hard. Look at this list – all of this pain and loss. It feels so very overwhelming. I’m only human. How do you expect me to go through this?
- God, I love these people who have left, and you’ve moved them on to good things, but, it’s not going to be the same. It’s just not the same. Who even cares anymore? I’m tired of starting over in relationships, what if these next people leave too?

Going through the list is rarely easy but always worth it.

After you have confronted God, you do the hardest part:

**3. Leave your complaints with God and wait in silence.**

When I do this, I often will wad up my list in a ball and then sit in silence. At this point you've got to resist the temptation to try to answer the questions or to jump to the "Christian answer" or to *will yourself* to do the right thing.

When I was on my retreat, looking at the list of people who hurt me and at whom I was still angry, I didn't try to say "oh, Jesus said I shouldn't be angry at them." And he did say that, and I'm not denying that. Don't hear what I'm not saying. I didn't focus on forgiving them and what it would take, because at this point, it's not about dealing with it, it's about feeling it and giving it over to God in an honest way. Working towards forgiveness comes later and that's a message for another day.



So, what I do in this process is to let all the venom and toxin and pain and grief and suffering pour out on that paper. I often sob and pour out my heart to God like what the writer of Psalm 137 did when he prayed:

*O Lord, remember what the  
Edomites did*

*on the day the armies of  
Babylon captured Jerusalem.*

*“Destroy it!” they yelled.*

*“Level it to the ground!”*

*O Babylon, you will be  
destroyed.*

*Happy is the one who  
pays you back*

*for what you have done to*

*us.*

*Happy is the one who takes  
your babies*

*and smashes them  
against the rocks!*

Psalm 137: 7-9 (NIV)

Hard to believe that prayer is actually in the Bible, isn't it? (and I didn't say or pray anything quite that drastic! Just so you know.)

But what the psalmist is doing is taking his lament, his hatred, his anger, and instead of literally going and bashing the heads of babies or holding people at spear point and saying, "you've got to bash the heads of your babies," he gives it to God. He takes that violence within him that really wants to come out and cause damage and he throws it on

God.

And when we lament, we lay our complaint in the lap of God; we give God our toxic poison, which would be so destructive to us and everyone else, and we trust God to do what God always does: which is to respond with justice and mercy.

So, in lamenting, we're naming the pain; we're confronting God and we're leaving our complaint with him while we wait in silence.

But there is one more step in a biblical lament and it happens in every Psalm of lament except for one.

#### **4. When you are able ... reaffirm trust in His goodness.**

Every Psalm of lament except for one moves from complaint and confrontation to

worshipping God because the writers believe that God's unfailing love – his stated, promised love for Israel – obligates him to hear and respond. That is the context of their lament and grief; and they actually lament because they themselves love God and trust him to make good on his promises.

And though you and I are not Jews, we can trust in those same obligations and promises because of Christ and what he did for us on the cross and in his resurrection. Paul makes it very clear that when we trust Him, we are now included into the new Israel, and everything that God promised to do for them, He is promising to do for us. So we can reaffirm our trust in His goodness.

## **Lament Experience**

Now, what we're going to do is to try and

experience some of these elements of a biblical lament. (I'm going to ask our band to get into place right now to help us).

But before we do, I need you to take your paper and fold it in half and tear it. You will need half for this part and half for later on. Go ahead and do that now.

Ok, the first thing we're going to do is to name the pain. Our band is going to play some instrumental music while we have some time to reflect. As they do, think back over these past few months of your life and ask the question: "what have I lost that's caused me emotional pain?" Are there people or events or situations that when you think of them or it, your heart just clenches up?

Take the paper and write down anything that's been bugging you even if it's buried

deep. To help you make your list ... we're going to leave up the four categories of lament.

it's not fair

- it won't be the same
- it's just too hard
- they hurt me

Now that we have named the pain, we're going to confront God over his apparent lack of presence. I'm going to read a part of Psalm 88 and as I do, make these words your own. And do it knowing that God can take it.

*O LORD, the God who saves  
me,*

*day and night I cry out  
before you.*

*2 May my prayer come before  
you;*

*turn your ear to my cry.*

*3 For my soul is full of trouble*

*and my life draws near the  
grave.*

*4 I am counted among those  
who go down to the pit;*

*I am like a man without  
strength.*

*5 I am set apart with the dead,*

*like the slain who lie in the  
grave,*

*whom you remember no  
more,*

*who are cut off from your  
care.*

*6 You have put me in the  
lowest pit,*

*in the darkest depths.*

*7 Your wrath lies heavily upon  
me;*

*you have overwhelmed me  
with all your waves.*

*14 Why, O LORD, do you  
reject me*

*and hide your face from  
me?*

*16 Your wrath has swept over  
me;*



*your terrors have destroyed  
me.*

*17 All day long they surround  
me like a flood;*

*they have completely  
engulfed me.*

*18 You have taken my  
companions and loved ones  
from me;*

*the darkness is my closest  
friend.*

*Psalm 88:1-7, 14, 16-18  
(NIV)*

Now that we have named our pain and we've confronted God, we're going to leave our complaint with him.

The way we're going to do that, if you're willing, if you're able, is to bring your paper to the front and lay it anywhere on the stage. We're not going to read them outloud or anything like that (in fact they will be burned after the service). But, this is kind of a symbolic way to do this. If you are watching online, feel free to rip, shred or throw your list away. During this song, leave your list with Lord and then Hannah will invite us to stand and sing a song together as a way to reaffirm our trust in God and that with Him by our side, we can it will be well with our souls.

## **The Practice of Confession**

As much as I'd love to end the service there, we can't. As Rick mentioned last week, we are both victims and propagators of evil in this world.

The truth is, sometimes the pain and suffering we experience comes from our own free will. We do what we know we ought not to do, we abuse our bodies, we lie, cheat or steal. We make choices that end up causing us pain and suffering.

AND we make choices that cause others to experience pain and suffering. We gossip about someone, we chose to break a promise, to cheat on someone, to lie about them, to belittle them and speak with contempt to them or about them. Truth is we may just very well be on someone else's lament list.

I have heard it said and honestly I think it's often true, that when it comes to others and the pain they have caused, we want the full weight of truth and justice to be poured out

on them but when it comes to the pain we have caused we want there to be mercy and grace, an understanding of why we did what we did, a willingness to see that we are only human and that we made a mistake.

When it comes to dealing with the evil within, that is the sinful side of us, what most of us do is to follow one of four strategies. These may sound familiar.

### **#1. We try to deny or hide it.**

And this starts very young, have you ever been around a three year old who has been told not to eat something, do something, etc what do they do, they try to hide it and do it in secret. Honestly we don't really outgrow that we just get better at hiding and denying.

## **#2. We try to minimize it.**

We say things like...well it's not like I murdered anyone, I didn't steal a million dollars, it's just a little thing-no big deal.

## **#3. We try to justify it.**

I was mad. I was tired. I was lonely. They are never home. They don't act like they care. I was just venting. It's not like they know me, they can just ignore what I said.

Now, the problem with all three of these strategies is that they allow us to live in excuses. Where we justify our bad behavior and are unwilling to look at the truth and reality of the pain and suffering we have caused to ourselves, others, the world around us and God. We ignore our part and we let ourselves off the hook.

Now, on the opposite end of the spectrum, there's a fourth option, and this is what some people do with their sin ...

#### **#4. Dwell on it and become consumed by it.**

We become so obsessed with how bad we are that we are convinced there is no hope for us and from that place of no hope we just keep up the cycle of feel bad, do bad, feel bad, do bad.

None of these are what God wants for us. We know from His word (and honestly from our own experience even if we are not followers of Jesus), that ALL have sinned and fallen short of the glory of God. All of us are messing up. BUT we also know from His word that no one is outside his offer of grace. The truth is our faith is based not on what we

do or don't do but on what Jesus did on the cross. Taking all of our sin past, present and future and paying the penalty for it. Making a way for us to be reconciled with God.

One of my favorite illustrations for this is..well let's just say...

We are standing on the beach in Hawaii and we are going to swim to California (no support boat just our braun). Now I'm an Olympic swimmer, I've swam the English Channel and I train everyday (clear not but go with me). You on the other hand are a good swimmer and have done some training. Which of us makes it to the beach in California?

TRICK QUESTION...neither of us, we both die.

The distance is too great. No matter how great we are at swimming we can never be good enough to bridge that gap and that's how it is with us and God. If on the sliding scale of goodness we are right up there with the apostles and the best of the best, the gap is still too big for us to be considered righteous enough on our own. And even if we are the worst of the worst, we are never too far gone that Jesus' grace is not sufficient for us.

All we must do is confess. We confess our sin.

Then we repent, which means to change our mind, stop believing that we can be good enough on our own or that we are so bad we are beyond hope.

And then place our hope and trust in the



grace of Jesus. His sacrifice, his body broken for us and his blood poured out to cover our sins.

And with the remaining time, that is what I would like to invite you to do. In just a moment, take the remaining piece of paper and write out your confession. All the ways you have messed up, all the pain and suffering you have inflicted on yourself, others, the world around you and on God.

After we have taken time to write out our confessions, the band will play the song “To the Table” and during that song, I invite you to come forward and once again symbolically leave your confession in God’s hands by leaving them by the communion stations. Again these will not be read but burned following the service.

As you leave your confession, I invite you to pick up the communion elements and take them as a reminder of what Jesus did on your behalf.

Following communion, Hannah will invite us to stand and sing a song as a prayer to help us remember that for those of us who have had our sins forgiven by Jesus, we are then called to help redeem this world by continually confessing our sin, fixing our eyes on Jesus and pursuing a life that makes us more like Jesus and less like us.

So let's take some time to confess. There will be some prompts up to help you.

I inflicted pain and suffering on myself when  
I...

I inflicted pain and suffering on others when

I...

I inflicted pain and suffering on the world around me when I...

I inflicted pain and suffering on God when I...

Now as the band sings this next song, I invite you to bring your confession to the communion stations, pick up the elements and receive the communion as a reminder of the grace and mercy offered to you because of Jesus' sacrifice on your behalf.

## Endnotes

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<sup>i</sup> See <http://blog.therefugeonline.org/2008/03/10/kathy-the-lost-art-of-lament/>

<sup>ii</sup> Bob Kellerman, see <http://www.rpmministries.org/category/lament/>

<sup>iii</sup> Michael Card. *A Sacred Sorrow Experience Guide: Reaching Out to God in the Lost Language of Lament* (Kindle Locations 178-179). Kindle Edition.

<sup>iv</sup> Peter Scazzero, *Enlarging Your Soul Through Grief and Loss*.

<sup>v</sup> See <http://re-formingfaith.blogspot.com/2008/02/lost-art-of-lament.html>