

**Stuck in the Middle**  
***Unforgettable***  
**October 6, 2019**

Good morning everyone.

It's funny how songs can grow on you. The first couple of times we sang that last song, I didn't like it very much (for various reasons). And then, one day, while we were singing it, I think God actually spoke to me through it.

I'll tell you what I think He said a little later in this message but ...

If you're new with us or you've missed the past couple of weeks, we are concluding our series *Stuck in the Middle* ... which is a series about change and how to deal with it when it happens, especially when it's:

- Unexpected
- Undesired
- And/or unpleasant.

And some of us are in the middle of that kind of change right now because ...

- A doctor said "It's malignant."
- A spouse said "I don't want to be with you anymore."
- An officer said "There's been an accident."
- A boss said "We have to let you go."

Of course, sometimes the changes we experience are actually *desired*. In fact, sometimes we're the one who *instigates* the change. But sometimes it ends up producing consequences we didn't expect and do not like.

So, no matter why it happens, change is almost always hard ... which is why it's so easy to get stuck in the middle between "what was" and "what is" (and could be).

- And when you're stuck, time moves on but you do not.
- When you're stuck, you never fully embrace the present because you can't let go of the past.
- When you're stuck, you go through the motions – you look "ok" – but there's no life and no energy.

And so often the *reason* we get stuck (as we've seen in this series) is that we do not adequately deal with the pain and anger and sadness of losing "what was" and *how and why* we lost it.

And that pain and anger and sadness tends to express itself in one or more recurring thoughts or laments.

**1. "It's just not fair."**

"This shouldn't have happened to me. I didn't deserve this. I shouldn't be in this situation at all."

**2. "They hurt me."**

"They did me wrong. If it hadn't been for him or her, I wouldn't be in this situation."

**3. "It's just too hard."**

"There's no way I can make it through this. I give up."

And we've talked about each of those laments and how to deal with them over the past three Sundays. If you missed any of those messages, you can watch, listen to or read it on our app or website.

Now, today we're going to talk about the fourth and final lament ...

**4. "It won't be like it was."**

- Without him
- Without her
- Without them
- Without that ...

... it can never be as good as it used to be.

- This new way
- This new boss
- This new system
- This new assignment
- This new location ...

... will never measure up to the old.

Ever felt that way? I have and I'm sure you have, too.

We can't accept and engage with our "new normal" because we're convinced it will never be as good as the old normal. All we can focus on is *how it used to be* ... which is why we stay stuck in the middle.

By the way, for those of you who are new with us today, when I say the word “lament,” I’m not talking about random, directionless complaining or going around saying “woe is me” to everyone who will listen. That’s just whining.

*Lament* is actually a biblical and spiritual discipline where we intentionally point out to God the things in our lives (and in our world) that do not seem consistent with who God says He is. In lamenting, we dump our complaints about God’s apparent lack of activity in our situation on God himself.

And we don’t try to clean it up before we do. We don’t theologize and we don’t sugarcoat our feelings. In lamenting, we’re brutally honest.

And that’s OK. In fact, that’s why so many of the biblical Psalms are full of laments and why there’s even a whole book of the Bible called “Lamentations.”

And, when we’re sad and angry because a change means “it won’t be like it was,” it’s time to lament. It’s time to come to God with all that emotion and pour it out on Him.

For example ...

### **A Lesser Glory**

The year is 537 B.C. The place is Jerusalem. Many Jewish men, women and children – about 50,000 in number – have just returned from captivity in Babylon.

- Some were young adults 50 years earlier when Nebuchadnezzar conquered the nation and razed the city and took them into exile. They’re very old now.
- Others were children back then and they remember very little of their homeland.
- Still others had been born and raised in Babylon and they’ve never been in “the Promised Land.” They’ve heard stories from the old-timers, but they’ve Jerusalem and it’s crown jewel – the Temple of YHWH.

And now they’re all here.

But it’s not like it once was in Jerusalem. The walls were never rebuilt and the city lies in ruins. And it’s been that way for *five* decades.

Worst of all, that incredible temple built by Solomon 400 years earlier<sup>1</sup> – what people believed to be the sign of God’s presence and blessing on Israel – is no more.

It’s completely gone ... leveled ... utterly destroyed. In its place lies only a field of rubble.

So thorough is its destruction that, when they see it, the old men and women wonder “was that just a dream? Was it ever really there?”

And yet, in spite of the destruction there is reason to hope. Through the providence of God, King Cyrus of Persia (who had taken down the Babylonian Empire and released all of its captives) has given them permission – actually, an order – to rebuild the temple according to certain specifications ...

... which, as we’ll soon see, are somewhat different from Solomon’s.<sup>ii</sup>

Not that Cyrus himself is particularly religious but kings in those days made a point of not upsetting any supposed deity. So, for him, to rebuild the temple of YWHW is simply a “best practice.”

In any case, the appointed governor of the returning exiles, a man by the name of Zerubbabel, immediately launches a capital campaign to raise funds needed for supplies and workers. And when they’ve collected enough money, the Bible says, in the second month of the second year after their arrival, the work begins.

And a few months after that, when the foundation has been laid and completed,<sup>iii</sup> Zerubbabel declares a national holiday and holds a great ceremony to mark the progress. Almost everyone who has come from Babylon attends.

It’s a very festive occasion but also a solemn one, because they remember the destruction and death wrought by Nebuchadnezzar while, at the same time, declaring that his terrible act would not be the final word on their nation.

**If you remember what it felt like when the rebuilding finally began at the site of the World Trade Center after 9-11 ...**

... you have some idea of the significance of what was happening in Jerusalem that day.

Anyway ... the Bible says that ...

*The priests in their vestments and with trumpets and the Levites with cymbals, took their places to praise the LORD, as prescribed by David king of Israel.*

In other words, the worship band gets in place in front of the thousands who are gathered.

**And ...**

*With praise and thanksgiving they sang to the LORD:  
“He is good; his love toward Israel endures forever.” Ezra 3:10 (NIV)*

And the fact that they were standing where they were standing, doing what they were doing, after what they had experienced as a nation was proof of that.

*And all the people gave a great shout of praise to the LORD, because the foundation of the house of the LORD was laid. Ezra 3:11 (NIV)*

You can just feel all of the pent-up emotion being released.

And when I say "all of the emotion" I mean *all* of it.

### **Because the Bible says that ...**

*Many of the older priests and Levites and family heads, who had seen the former temple, wepi aloud when they saw the foundation of this new temple being laid ...*

*... while many others shouted for joy. Ezra 3:12 (NIV)*

Wow.

*The younger people, who had grown up in Babylon and had no memory of the glories of Solomon's temple, cheered. They were ecstatic to see the beginning of what would become the new normal.*

But *the older folks*? They wailed.

They wailed because the new temple decreed *and designed* by Cyrus<sup>iv</sup> was going to be pitifully small compared to what they had known.

Remember, he was only trying to cover his you-know-what with Israel's god – "just in case" – so he saw no need to go overboard. He saw no need to replace what Solomon had built.

And what Solomon had built had been glorious.

- It was actually described in ancient times as one of the great wonders of the world.
- It had been built of costly cedar imported from Lebanon
- Decked out with precious stones everywhere
- And the whole thing had been overlaid with gold.

The altar, the angels, the floor, the front porch and the holy of holies were all covered with it. Even the *nails* were made out of gold.

That is how ornate and magnificent it was.

Oh, and it was huge.

But, this temple? Not even close, in any way.

And the disappointment for the elders who had seen Solomon's Temple was great because "it won't be like it was." So, while the young people rejoiced ... *they lamented*.

And they did so loudly.

**In fact, Ezra tells us that ...**

*No one could distinguish the sound of the shouts of joy from the sound of weeping, because the people made so much noise. And the sound was heard far away.*  
Ezra 3:13 (NIV)

By the way, I need to throw this in: I just *love* how real the Bible is; how real the people are that it talks about because it's not all sweetness and light.

So many people think of the Bible is about boring, plain-vanilla, goody-two-shoes people who have it all together. *But it's not*. It tells the truth.

And the truth is that *it hurts* when you have seen and experienced something great and things change and it becomes clear to you that "it won't be like it was." It's painful.

## **God Listens**

Now, what's amazing about this story – and again, this is one of the things we've discovered in this series that is so applicable: *when the older people lament, God listens*. God listens and responds.

On the twenty-first day of the seventh month, the Bible says<sup>v</sup> ... five months after the foundation has been laid; five months after that crazy and solemn ceremony ...

*The word of the LORD came through the prophet Haggai.*

**And here's what it said:**

*"Speak to Zerubbabel (governor of Judah), and to Joshua (the high priest), and to the remnant of the people."* Haggai 2:2 (NIV)

In other words, "call everyone together. Have a big assembly."

"And when everyone gathers, here's what I want you to do ..."

**Ask them ...**

*"Who of you is left who saw this house in its former glory? How does it look to you now? Does it not seem to you like nothing?"* Haggai 2:3 (NIV)

Wow! Not only has God heard their lament, He *agrees with them!* He says the same thing they are thinking.

“You’re right. It’s not the same as it used to be. And it’s OK that you’re sad and you’re angry and you’re discouraged and disappointed about that. It’s OK.”

And I wonder today if some of us need to hear that same word; some of us, who are sad and disappointed right now because, we *know* that, going forward, our life is not going to be the same. It’s not going to be like it was. And it was pretty good.

I think you need to hear today that it’s OK with God that you lament what you’ve lost.

It’s OK that you come to Him and say, “What’s the deal? God, are You really good with this downgrade in my life? I thought your glory was supposed to *increase* in my life, not decrease.”

I think some of us today need to hear that pouring out that kind of emotion – that kind of lament – will not surprise or anger God.

- He already sees it.
- He already knows it.
- He already understands it.

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*However*, as we’ve seen each week in this series, the ultimate goal of lamenting is to move forward.

We *grieve it* in order to *leave it*, not so we can stay bound to it. We lament what we’ve lost (and how and why we’ve lost it) in order to fully embrace “what is” (and could be) and *live*.

## **Moving On**

And that’s God’s intention for the older folks in Jerusalem who have been lamenting.

For five months God has graciously listened to their complaint first expressed publicly (in their wailing at Zerubbabel’s ceremony) and again, for sure, in their private thoughts and prayers.

But now, it’s time to move on.

So, after God tells Haggai to speak to Zerubbabel and Joshua and all the people and say, “It’s OK to be sad and disappointed about this Walmart-brand temple” ...

God tells Haggai to say something else.

**“Haggai, I want you to say ...”**

*"Be strong, Zerubbabel,' declares the LORD.*

*'Be strong, Joshua.*

*'Be strong, all you people of the land,' declares the LORD, 'and work.'"*  
*Haggai 2:4 (NIV)*

"Tell them to be strong, Haggai. And then remind them *why they can be strong.*"

*"For I am with you,' declares the LORD Almighty." Haggai 2:5 (NIV)*

And then God says something that, at first, seems a little odd.

He says "Haggai, tell them 'be strong, do what I've told you to do, for I am with you ...'"

**"And remind them ...**

*"This is what I covenanted with you [i.e., this is what I agreed to do for you] when you came out of Egypt.*

*And my Spirit remains among you [i.e., and I am doing it]. So do not fear."*  
*Haggai 2:5 (NIV)*

Now, wait a minute. Where did these people come from?

They didn't come out of Egypt. They came from *Babylon*.

And God hadn't made any kind of agreement with them before they left. Cyrus had just said "go home" and they did.

This is very odd. So, what's the deal? Is God confused?

Not at all. By stating it this way, God is making a very important point to them.

He's saying "long before David or Solomon *ever dreamed* of building that glorious temple you all remember from your youth, I made a promise to their ancestors and your ancestors – the ones who I rescued from captivity in Egypt nine centuries ago."<sup>vi</sup>

"I promised that my Spirit would be with them and with their descendants – that's *you all* – no matter what; regardless of the condition of the temple or even its existence."

**After all ...**

*"Heaven is My throne, And earth is My footstool. Where is the house that you will build Me?"*  
*Isaiah 66:1 (NIV)*



“For the Lord God does not dwell in a temple made by human hands”<sup>vii</sup> – which, by the way, was how it worked with the idols of all the other peoples of that day.

- You built a “god” out of wood or metal
- And then you built a temple
- And then you carried that statue into it and stuck it in the center.

And the presence of that temple and that statue was supposed to be your protection and give you comfort and strength.

But the God of Israel had made it clear: “that’s not how it is with Me. You don’t need a graven image – a statue – so, first commandment, don’t make one. And you don’t even need a temple because My Spirit will be with you wherever you go.”

So what God was saying to those old-timers who were lamenting the loss of Solomon’s temple was ...

### **1. “What you need more than *that is Me*. And You *have Me*.”**

“It’s not going to be what it once was. OK. But you don’t need what it once was. What you need is *Me* and you *have Me*.”

“And not because you are special in and of yourselves. Not because your particular generation is any more righteous or holy than any other generation.”

“You have *Me* because I made a promise long before you were a gleam in your father’s eye; a promise that had nothing to do with you. My Spirit is with you because of who *I* am and what *I’ve* done; not because of who *you* are and what *you’ve* done.”

And I think maybe this morning some of us need to hear that truth as well: that even though it’s not what it was and won’t be again, we are not alone. If we belong to Jesus – if we have come to Him as a sinner in need of a savior who can’t do anything to deserve His favor – then we have Him. We have *Him*. And He is with us.

So, we can be strong.

And I don’t mean a pretend strength where we act like it doesn’t hurt, but a true strength where we look the pain in the eye and we lament – we say “it’s not going to be like it was, but God is with me and He will give me what I need so He can be glorified in my life.”

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Which brings me, finally, to that song I didn't used to like – "Do It Again" – and what God said to me through it ...

A little over two years ago, when I turned 60 (and I can't believe those words just came out of my mouth – I turned 60 two years ago) ...

When I turned 60, it hit me that, as much as I love it, I'm not going to be able to do this job forever.

I thought to myself, "I'm getting old and a lot of the people who are the backbone and core of this church are getting old, too."

So I went to our leadership team – which is Kitti, Ladell, Mica, Shannon and myself – and to our Advisory Council and I said, in essence, "we need to grow younger, and that needs to become our top priority because older churches that don't put intentional effort into reaching younger people eventually die."

And we've all seen that, haven't we?

So they all agreed and we started working on it.

Our leadership team studied best practices, we set some goals, had meetings about those goals, prayed about those goals and one year later – which would be a year ago last August, August of 2018 – we *had accomplished almost nothing*.

Don't misunderstand – we were still doing lots of ministry – but we weren't making progress on our top priority.

And, at the end of a day-long retreat with my team about our top priority, it became very clear to me that our biggest problem was *that team* – both the players and the structure.

You know the saying, "if you always do what you've always done, you're always gonna get what you've always got"?

We didn't know how to do it any differently that we had done it, which is why we weren't getting anywhere.

And something had to change. Radically.

To be completely honest, for a couple of weeks or so, I was tempted to ignore that fact and just ride off into the sunset with my team because I love those people and I have loved working with them.

"Let's just do what we've always done for another five to seven years," I thought to myself. "Let someone else figure out North Heartland 2.0" (which is how we referred to the next phase of what this church should be).

But God said: "You can't do that, Rick, and be the pastor of the church because leaders walk *towards* the mess. Start walking."

So – with our council’s consent – I instigated the change we needed. I blew up our leadership team.

I reassigned everyone (including myself) to what they do best while minimizing their input on and responsibility for what they really aren’t that good at or passionate about or necessary ...

- Which meant we weren’t all together as much as before ...
- Which meant we felt less-connected.
- Which was strange because we had always had such a tight circle.

Furthermore, I realized we needed not just some new (and younger) voices around the table; we needed new tables. But we didn’t even know what tables we needed because times have changed, people have changed, culture has changed.

And then God started sending us new and younger players and we built a new and different kind of leadership structure ...

- Which meant that my “fab four” had less influence
- Which meant there were days when they felt left out
- Which meant there were days when everyone thought, “so we’re just going to get rid of all the old-timers who built this church.”
- Which meant there were days when everyone wondered “am I still wanted here?”

... because *it wasn’t like it used to be* and, going forward, it won’t be.

Now, things are settling down a bit since then and, we’re already seeing fruits of the church but this is why I said last week that this has been the hardest year in a long, long time to be the pastor of this church.

It’s been extremely challenging; full of consequences that I didn’t expect and don’t like.

So, one day, a couple of months ago we were singing that song I didn’t like. And I was thinking about how hard it has been and how hard it’s going to be to pull off NHCC 2.0 – because people are going to think we’re getting rid of the old-timers (and this was before Kitti resigned and some people interpreted it that way).

So, I’m singing and thinking about how hard it is ... and right in the middle of that, God says to me “Rick, it was hard when you started 25 years ago. I’ve made a way before and I will do it again.”

And I have to tell you, I got so choked up I couldn’t sing anymore. I could hardly speak when it came time for the message.

Friends, North Heartland 1.0 or 2.0 – it’s not about you and me and what we think we can or can’t do. It’s about God and what He is going to do.

... which leads to the rest of what God told Haggai to say. He said, “Tell them I am with them,” God said.

**“And tell them that ...**

*“The glory of this present house will be greater than the glory of the former house,’ says the LORD Almighty. ‘And in this place I will grant [shalom].” Haggai 2:9 (NIV)*

What does that mean?

It means that even though “this present house” – the temple they were building – was nothing compared to Solomon’s Temple, in the future – five centuries later to be exact – a Roman governor by the name of Herod would come along and take what they had built and expand it.

He would pour tons of money and tons of manpower into it and it would turn out to be bigger and better than Solomon’s temple had ever been.

But more than that, Herod’s temple would also be the place where the Prince of Shalom – Jesus of Nazareth – would arrive on the scene and become the ultimate sacrifice to atone for the sins of the world. And that would be far more glorious than any building could ever be.

Now, the old-timers lamenting the loss of the “former house” had no idea that God was going to do something that amazing in the future through their present and puny efforts. Neither did the young people working on the new temple.

But He was and they needed to trust that He was and let go of the past and get to work on what was right in front of them.

So what God was saying to them through Haggai was ...

**2. “Focus on the present and trust Me for a more glorious future.”**

“You take care of what’s right in front of you right now. Because I promise you the future will be better than you could ever imagine.”

And I think some of us need to take that same message to heart. We need to focus on the what’s in front of us right now and leave the future to God, trusting that it will be greater than we can imagine.

Now, don’t hear what I’m not saying.

I’m not saying if you’ve lost your spouse or a child or a job or your reputation or anything else that, at some

point in the future, God is going to make it all better ... because, truth is, *in this life* it might not ever "get better".

But for those of us who know Jesus, our life – don't miss this – our life is *more* than just this life.

And we know that there is a day coming when "shalom" – the absolute well-being, fulfillment, productivity, peace, joy that God intended for us – is going to be restored. There's a day coming when sin and its power will be no more.

God sees that day, God is making that day, God is already in that day and God promises that day to anyone who puts their faith in Jesus as their savior and follows Him as their Lord.

### **As the Apostle Paul once put it to the Christ-followers in Corinth ...**

*Outwardly we are wasting away, yet inwardly we are being renewed day by day.  
2 Corinthians 4:16 (NIV)*

We don't have time to go into it but, if anyone had the right to lament that things would never be as good as they once were, it was Paul.

But he understood that his life was more than just this life ...

### **... which is why he wrote:**

*For our light and momentary troubles are achieving for us an eternal glory that far outweighs them all. 2 Corinthians 4:17 (NIV)*

### **And because this is true, Paul says ...**

*We fix our eyes not on what is seen, but on what is unseen, since what is seen is temporary, but what is unseen is eternal. 2 Corinthians 4:18 (NIV)*

He's saying "we understand that even if the 'present house' of our life doesn't measure up to what it once was, because we belong to Jesus, we know there's a day coming of incomparable glory which will outshine anything we've ever experienced or imagined in this life."

And that's the truth. And that's why we can focus on what's right in front of us and move forward. This life is not our whole life. There's much more to come.

And it will be far better than anything we can imagine.

## **Conclusion**

Now, I don't know if or how this message applies to you. I don't know if you're going through a loss or disappointment and you're sad or angry because you know it's not going to be like it was.

But, if you are, I think it would be valuable to spend a few moments reflecting on what God said through Haggai. And even if you aren't, I still think it would be valuable.

God said ... "What you need more than the way it was is Me. And You have Me. So, focus on what's right in front of you and trust Me for a more glorious future."

So, as we draw this to a close, I want you to get it clear in your mind – if this is your situation ...

- What are you lamenting that "it won't be like it was"?
- About what situation or person from the past do you think "that's where God is. That's where safety is. That's where I can be happy. So, without *that*, I just can't go on."

Now, in just a minute, I'm going to be quiet, and whatever those things are, I want you to lift them up to God.

And lift them up in anger if you need to: "God, I don't like that it's not going to be like it was. Why have you allowed this to happen to me?"

Then after the silence, I'm going to read a scripture and then the band will do a song that will be a bit of a challenge and hopefully an encouragement. Then I'll come back and pray.

So, let's be silent for a minute and lift up our losses and laments to the Lord.

<SILENCE>

Now, hear the Word of the Lord through the Prophet Isaiah:

*To whom will you compare me or count me equal?*

*Some [people] pour out gold from their bags and weigh out silver on the scales; they hire a goldsmith to make it into a god, and they bow down and worship it.*

*They lift it to their shoulders and carry it; they set it up in its place, and there it stands. From that spot it cannot move.*

*Though one cries out to it, it does not answer; it cannot save him from his troubles.*

*So remember this, fix it in mind, take it to heart ...*

*I am God, and there is no other;  
I am God, and there is none like me.*

*Even to your old age and gray hairs ...*

*I am he who will sustain you.*

*I have made you and I will carry you;  
I will sustain you and I will rescue you.*

*I make known the end from the beginning, from ancient times, what is still to come.*

*I say: My purpose will stand, and I will do all that I please.*

*What I have said, that will I bring about; what I have planned, that will I do.*

*Isaiah 46:4-111 (NIV)*

“What you need more than the idol of ‘the way it was’ is Me. And You have Me.

“So, focus on what’s right in front of you and trust Me for a more glorious future.”

<BAND START IMMEDIATELY>

#### **Feature – Feeling Good (4)**

Let’s pray ...

God, help us to trust you for the new dawn and the new day and the new life that is possible because you are with us in the present and you are already in the future. And you speak a word of hope about our future – a word that we can trust because of what Jesus did for us in his death and resurrection.

God help us to live in that hope.

We thank you for freely offering that hope to us; that we don’t have to earn it because we can’t, and we don’t have to deserve it because we don’t. We thank you that it is ours simply because we trust in Jesus and what He did for us on the cross.

And we pray in His name. Amen.

#### **CLOSING COMMENTS (2)**

1. Offering at the door
2. Will be posting the video from our anniversary celebration service on our FB page early this week.
3. NHCC 2.0 ... meetings on Wed 23 and Thu 24.

Endnotes

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<sup>i</sup> About 966 BC

<sup>ii</sup> See Ezra chapters 1, 3 and 7 for full details.

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- iii Ezra 3:7
  - iv Ezra 7
  - v Haggai 2:1
  - vi 1446 BC
  - vii Acts 17:24