

Stuck in the Middle
When Everything Changes
September 8, 2019

Good morning everyone.

That certainly was an interesting progression of thought musically. I don't know if you noticed it or not – and I'm sure it wasn't planned on our part (since I was part of the planning) – but ...

- We started out with a song about singing and dancing and being joyful over what God has done for us.
- And we ended with a song about being broken; crushed like grapes in the making of new wine.

Even though it wasn't planned, I love that progression of thought because it's a realistic description of life as a Christian.

For those who follow Jesus, there are many days of joy and gladness where we feel like singing and dancing. But there are also days that leave us emotionally, spiritually and sometimes physically broken and crushed.

Being a Christian doesn't magically protect you from the difficult experiences of life.

As Jesus once put it to his first disciples: "in this world you *will* have trials and tribulations." That's just part of life for everyone. No one gets a free pass.

And that's what we're going to talk about over the next five Sundays. We're going to talk about when your life goes from "singing and dancing" to "crushing and breaking."

- When the unexpected, unpleasant or undesired happens and you hear words like:¹
 - "It's malignant."
 - "I've found someone else."
 - "Your son has been arrested."
 - "There's been an accident."
 - "I think I'm pregnant."
 - "We have to let you go."

- Or when the natural progression of things means that "what was" no longer is.
 - Your youngest child moves out and you officially become an empty-nester.
 - Your body can no longer do the things it did when you were younger.
 - Your pet dies.
 - You downsize your home.

- Your best friends move away.
- Your job changes and you no longer have the influence you once did.

Some of us are experiencing those kinds of things right now or we've experienced them in the past. The circumstances of our life have changed – the "old normal" is gone – and we have to figure out how to accept and live in the "new normal."

And by the way, that's not just a "Christian thing." Everyone, regardless of their faith or non-faith, goes through these times and everyone has to deal with it. But, I think you'll see over the next five weeks that Christians – those who trust in Jesus and follow Him – have a huge advantage when they do.

And, if you're *not* a Christian, I'm glad you're here with us or watching online because I hope this series will help you see that and

maybe even encourage you to turn to Jesus, trust in Him and follow Him along with us.

Change vs. Transition

Now I want to start out by giving you a “mental model” for change that comes from Dr. William Bridges who is probably the foremost expert on the subject. He’s written several books, the most noted being *Managing Transitions: Making the Most of Change*.ⁱⁱ

And I like this model because it helps us to better understand why change can be so challenging.

The first thing you need to know, according to Bridges, is that “change” and “transition” are not the same thing.

Change is situational ...

... a move to a new city or a new home, taking a new job or losing a job, retirement, graduation, empty nest, stock market decline, marriage, divorce, illness, death, etc., etc.

Change is situational, while ...

Transition, he says, is psychological.

It's the mental, emotional and even spiritual process we go through as we attempt to come to terms with the new normal that results from the change in our situation.

Transition is about *how we handle and adjust* to the move, the job, the graduation, empty nest, stock market decline, etc., etc.

Now, the reason this distinction is important is that is that, most of the time, we have very little control over the changes that take place

in our lives.

However, the same is not true about the transition. We have a great deal of control over that. Regardless of who or what brought about the change in our situation, we are the ones who decide how we are going to respond.

And how well we do that – how well we manage the transition from “what was” to “what is” determines, to a great extent, whether or not we’re going to make it ... whether or not we’re going to be happy and productive in our new normal.

So, what does successful transition look like? According to Bridges you have to make it through three stages:

Stage 1. The Ending – where we’re forced to let go of the “old world” – of “life as we once knew it.”

This is often a time of sadness, grief and maybe even anger.

There's typically a loss of identity: "I knew who I was in *that* world. I knew why I was here" which is why retirement is often very challenging, especially for men. It's the ending of a huge part of life.

This stage typically produces lots of resistance internally and sometimes, even, externally. And it can take a long time to get through this stage, and some people never do.

But if you do, then there is:

Stage 2. The Neutral Zone – which Bridges calls “exploring the new world.”

For the most part, in this stage, we've released our attachment to the old world. We've let go of that identity and purpose, but

it's still not clear what we will be and do going forward.

Things aren't the "old way" but they also aren't fully the "new way", which is why this stage is often characterized by feelings of confusion and disorientation.

I remember experiencing this many years ago when Jetta and I first moved to Kansas City.

I had left a "regular job" as a software engineer to go to back to school at Midwestern seminary. And my schedule was very different. Instead of being at my desk at 8:30 every morning, it was very random. I had a class Tuesday at noon, Thursday at 2, Monday night at 7.

So, during the day I found myself with lots of free time. And from time to time Jetta would

say "since you're not doing anything right now, can you go shopping? Or can you do <whatever>?"

And, of course, I said "yes, dear."

I remember the first couple of times I did that. Here I was in the middle of the day, standing in the checkout line with all these mommies and their babies and I'm going, "This is not where I'm supposed to be. I'm supposed to be at a desk looking at a computer screen."

For several months, it was very disorienting. It was very confusing.

And that's what the neutral zone is like.

"Coping with this stage takes most of people's energy," Bridges says, which is why, if you're in the Neutral Zone, you just feel blah or tired a lot of the time.

Finally, there's stage 3. The New Beginning – where we develop a new identity and purpose.

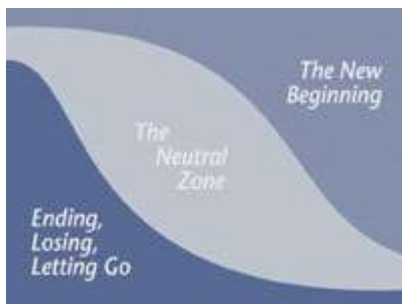
In this stage, Bridges says, our focus has finally shifted from the old world to the new. We have a vision of what could be and we're motivated by it.

We're more and more freed up emotionally and spiritually to become productive and fulfilled in our new environment.

So, got the picture here?

Change is a shift in your situation. *Transition*, on the other hand, is the process of dealing psychologically with that shift and also that new situation; it's the process you go through to let go of the way things used to be and take hold of what they have now become.

Bridges has a nice little diagram that illustrates how transition works in real life.



--- > Time --->

The thing to notice is that, at any point in time after the change happens, you're actually experiencing all three phases of transition.

For instance, when the change first happens ...

... as you can see by looking at the left side of the graph, your primary experience at that point is that of ending, losing and being forced to let go of the old world.

You have, at best, a limited idea of the

confusion and disorientation you're going to experience in the days ahead. And you have even less of a sense of what the new beginning and the new normal will be like.

But as time goes on and you near the end of the transition (look on the right side of the graph) ...

.... your day-to-day experience is primarily that of the new beginning.

However ...

- You still have moments of disorientation and confusion associated with the neutral zone.
- And you also still have occasional pangs of loss associated with the old world and the way things used to be.

For instance, it was a little over two years ago

that my mom died after a battle with lung cancer. And, even though my dad and my sisters and I have transitioned into our new normal – we’re pretty far down the line on that graph – as the anniversary of her death approached, I felt down and depressed.

That’s because the ending (the weeks leading up to her death) and the neutral zone (the months immediately following her death) are still fresh in my mind. Even though I’m primarily experiencing the new world, they’re still part of me and they always will be at some level.

Deal With It

Now, the reason I’m showing you this model is to point out that there is no guarantee that we’ll make it from stage one to stage three. Change is a given. But transition – being able to *embrace* and *make the most of* the new

normal – is not.

Sometimes – especially when the change is unexpected or undesired or unpleasant – we get stuck in the middle. We get emotionally and spiritually trapped between “what was” and “what is” (and what could be).

Time moves on but we do not.

And when we’re stuck, instead of being characterized by purpose and motivation of the next phase of life, our day-to-day experience remains colored by sadness, anger, loss and confusion. We feel disoriented and disinterested. We have little energy for anything but our own emotions and memories.

A great example of this is a biblical character by the name of Asaph.

Asaph was the chief music director and worship leader of Israel for over 40 years, from before the beginning of King David's reign through at least part of the reign of David's son, Solomon – in other words, during the glory days of Israel.

- He was the guy who led the temple musicians and singers in worship back when congregational worship was invented.
- 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.

We're going to look at his story in more detail next week but for today, suffice it to say that Asaph experienced an undesired,

unexpected and unpleasant change in his life and he had great difficulty transitioning to the new normal.

In one of the Psalms he wrote, Psalm 77, he described what it feels like to be stuck in the middle.

*I think of the good old days,
long since ended,
when my nights were filled
with joyful songs.
I search my soul and ponder
the difference now. Psalm
77:5-6 (NLT)*

Asaph was constantly ruminating on what had happened to him and what he had lost. "How did I get *here* from *there*?"

And when you're stuck, that's how it is. Your mind and heart keeps going back to "what

was" and what or who caused you to end up "here."

In this particular case, Asaph actually blames his situation on God – which is a pretty bold move for a worship leader.

He continues:

*Has the Lord rejected me
forever? Will he never again
be kind to me? Psalm
77:7 (NLT)*

*Is his unfailing love gone
forever? Have his promises
permanently
failed?*

Psalm 77:8 (NLT)

*Has God forgotten to be
gracious? Has he slammed*

*the door on his compassion?
Psalm 77:9 (NLT)*

Wow.

That dude was down-doo-by-do-down down about the changes in his situation. He could have written that song we heard at the beginning of the service: "have you ever seen the rain?"

Now, as I said, next week, we'll go into detail on what happened to Asaph and why he felt the way he did, but what I want to point out to you today is that what he wrote – what we just read – *made it into the Bible*.

And not just any part of the Bible. It made it into *the worship manual* of the Bible – the book of Psalms! Asaph's pain and questioning was actually part of worship in ancient Israel.

... which not only means that God must be OK with us feeling like this and talking like this and questioning Him like this – and I'll say more about that in a minute ...

It also means that processing these feelings and questions properly instead of ignoring them, minimizing them or medicating them – which is what our culture encourages us to do ...

It means that properly dealing with the pain from what we have lost *is part of the healing process*. It's part of getting unstuck.

- That's why there are lots more songs like this one in the Psalms.
- It's why there's a whole book in the Bible called *Lamentations*.

- It's why the Apostle Paul tells Christians to "weep with those who weep" instead of "try to cheer them up."
- It's why Jesus not only wept when his friend Lazarus died, he was angry.

Point being ... 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."

This is a lesson I have come back to again and again over the years because, when you've been a pastor in the same church for

almost 25 years, you get to experience a lot of painful endings.

- People you love and care about ... die or move away.
- People you've helped ... get mad at you or the church and they leave without warning.
- People who've helped you ... get mad at you and leave without warning.
- People who don't know the whole story unfairly judge you when you have to make a hard call ... and they leave and tell everyone else what a jerk you are.

And all of that is on top of the monumental challenge of trying to help people know, love and follow Jesus – and so often failing at it.

And, in telling you this, I'm not looking for your sympathy. All of us could make a list of things we've experienced that are personally painful.

Instead ... my point is ... I've learned that if I don't deal with these losses properly, my day-to-day experience becomes colored by sadness, anger, loss and confusion. I feel disoriented and disinterested. I have little energy for anything but my own emotions.

I'm stuck in the middle and I can't go forward.

And that's why, from time to time, I have had to literally call a "time out" on life and go off into the woods or the mountains somewhere and do what the Bible calls "lamenting."

And I taught about this very briefly earlier this year in the series *State of Mind* but, today, I want to go into it in more depth because it's

so important and so few of us understand it.

Lamenting Losses

Now, truth is ... no one wants to be a "lamer" (for lack of a better word) because the word "lament" conjures up images of overly emotional people who just like to whine: "ohhhh ... my life is soooooo hard."

And lamenting sounds like something that only a spiritually immature person would do. "Your faith must not be very strong if you're lamenting what's happening in your life."

However, 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. Biblically speaking, the very

opposite may be true.”

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.

Compounding the problem for those of us who are Christians is the misconception we’re supposed to be happy-sappy about everything that happens to us. “Praise Jesus, isn’t that special!”

But if you pay close attention to what the scripture actually models for us, what you see is the exact opposite.

Two thirds of the Book of Psalms (the “worship manual” of the Bible) are David and other writers like Asaph ...

- Shouting at God
- Praying wild and crazy prayers
- Telling God exactly what they're feeling

... and all without fear of retaliation.

The Book of Job models the very same principle.

For reasons he is unaware of, Job suffers terribly and he complains loud and long to God about it. Three friends who have come to console him hear his lament and counsel him to stop. They advise him to keep his feelings to himself, confess his sin and avoid committing blasphemy.

And then God shows up.

But instead of squishing Job like a gnat, God speaks directly to one of Job's friends.

He says ...

"I am angry with you and your two friends, because you have not spoken the truth about me, as my servant Job has." Job 42:7 (NIV)

You're giving him bad advice ...

- Because the truth about God is that God doesn't ask us to pretend that bad is good.
- The truth about God is that God isn't offended when we bring our laments to Him.
- The truth about God is that God can handle it when we pour out the pain and anguish without first trying to clean it up.

That's why David encourages us to ...

Trust in Him at all times, you people; pour out your hearts to him for God is our refuge.

Psalm 62:8 (NIV)

What a picture! Lamenting those situations and experiences which are *not* good (pouring out our hearts to God – being honest about how we feel) while trusting that those same situations and experiences are tools that God can and will use *for* good – our good.

That's why one author defines "lament" as a ...

... naming of the bad which has been allowed by the Good while also expressing our radical trust in God's reliability.ⁱⁱⁱ

And that balance is not only what keeps the Christian faith from turning into something fake and inauthentic.

It's also helps us keep from getting stuck in the middle between what was and what is and could be.

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

I think there are four steps. And you might want to write these down for later.

Also, you can check our Facebook page where we'll post this list along with a link to this message.

1. First is to name the pain you're feeling.

Sit down and think about the recent past. Think about things that cause you to clench up when they come to mind: people, events,

situations. Write them down. Call it your “loss and disappointment” list.

The first time I did this after a really hard season in my life, I noticed something about my list which might be of help to you when you do yours.

I noticed that all of my complaints seemed to fall into one of four general categories.

- “It’s not fair”
- “They hurt me”
- “It’s just too hard now”
- “It won’t be the same”

By the way, those are the same experiences Job had.

- What happened to him was unfair.
- His friends hurt him with their accusations and advice.

- The physical and emotional pain he was suffering was unbearable.
- And his life going forward would never be the same.

And those experiences – those categories of lament – are universal barriers that keep us from moving forward and fully embracing the new beginning God has for us. So, we're going to look at each one of them beginning next Sunday with "it's not fair."

But, for today, if you're trying to identify the pain you're feeling and wondering, "gee, where do I start?" this is it. Organize your laments in those four categories.

Once you've done that – once you've named the pain ...

2. Confront God over His apparent lack of presence in your life.

Express your anger and your confusion to him.

By the way, this is exactly what a lot of Christians don't do. Oh, we name our pain to everyone else. We talk to everyone else but we don't dump it out on God.

But that's the next step.

When I do this, I take my list and I work through it point by point, person by person. And I say things like ...

- "God, it's not fair that I got blasted for doing the right thing. Why did you let this happen to me?"
- "God, what she did hurt me. What he said was painful. 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 these things have happened to me. I'm just one man; I'm a 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 without them. Who will help me to do this task you've called me to?"

Going through my list with God is not a happy time. Going through yours probably won't be either.

Then, after you have confronted God, you do the hardest part:

3. Leave your complaints with God and wait

in silence.

At this point you've got to resist the temptation to jump to the "Christian answer." You've got to resist telling yourself to do the right thing.

For example, whenever I do this and I look at the list of people who hurt me and at whom I am still angry, I don't say to myself "now, now, Rick, Jesus said you should forgive them."

And He *did* say that. And I *do* have to do that eventually.

But, at this point, it's not about *doing* something. It's about *lamenting*. It's about feeling it and then giving it over to God in an honest way. It's about ...

- Laying your complaint in the lap of God.
- Giving God the toxic poison in you which

is so destructive to you and everyone else.

- And then trusting God to do with it what God always does: which is to respond with justice and mercy.

Now, whenever I've done this, I've found it helpful to do something to symbolize giving my complaints to God.

For example, the first time I did this was in the Colorado mountains. When I got to this point in the process, I took the list of all of the complaints and laments that I had written out and I ripped the page into tiny little pieces.

And then I found a private place on the side of a hill where the wind was blowing and I tossed those pieces into the air said, "there you are, God. You take them."

And I didn't say anything else. I got in my car and drove back down into the valley.

So, in lamenting ...

- We're naming the pain
- We're confronting God
- And then we're leaving our complaint with Him while we wait in silence.

But there is one more step in a biblical lament.

4. When you are able ... reaffirm trust in God's goodness.

Every Psalm of lament except for one moves from complaint and confrontation to worshipping God because the writers believe that God's goodness and unfailing love *obligates* Him to hear and respond.

That is the overall context of their lament and grief. They lament because they believe God loves them. And they believe He will make good on His promises.

The sad song of Asaph that we read earlier is a great example of this pattern.

- First, Asaph mourns what has happened to him
- Second, he confronts God for seemingly rejecting him, failing him and forgetting him.
- And then there's this funny little Hebrew word that shows up at that point in Asaph's song. It's a musical term – "selah" – which means pause or silence. Asaph just stops. He is leaving his complaints with God and waiting in

silence.

And then, after that pause, the song continues.

I said, "This is my fate; the Most High has turned his hand against me."

But then, Asaph says ...

I recall all you have done, O Lord; I remember your wonderful deeds of long ago.

They are constantly in my thoughts. I cannot stop thinking about your mighty works.

Psalm 77:10-12

(NLT)

Asaph is reaffirming his trust in God's goodness.

He has moved from naming his pain ... to confronting God ... to silence and waiting ... to reaffirming his faith.

And he gets there not by continuing to ruminate over his present situation or trying to figure out the future and how God will work it all out. He gets there by taking the long view of history; pondering what he calls God's "wonderful deeds" and "mighty works" of long ago.

And I'm going to say a little bit more about that in just a minute but, first, I need to point out that when you read the Psalms Asaph wrote, it's clear that he had to do this spiritual exercise more than once.

And so do we because lament is rarely a one-and-done process. And we'll see that over the next four weeks.

But it is this process that enables us to accept “the ending” and move through the neutral zone and into “the new beginning.” It’s what keeps us from getting stuck in the middle.

So, if you’re struggling to let go and move on, if you’re struggling to move forward, if you’re feeling stuck in the middle between what was and what is and could be ... I strongly suggest that you find a quiet place this week and work through these four steps.

The Long View

Now, as we bring this to a close, I want to say something about taking the long view of history because this is where, as I said at the very beginning of this message ... this is where Christians have a huge advantage.

The Apostle Paul puts it like this:

We know that in all things God works for the good of those who love him, who have been called according to his purpose. Romans 8:28 (NIV)

And ...

If God is for us, who can be against us? Christ Jesus who died—more than that, who was raised to life—is at the right hand of God and is also interceding for us. Romans 8:31,34 (NIV)

Point is when we are broken and crushed by unexpected, undesired and unpleasant change we can have confidence that God is actually doing something – He is breaking new ground, creating new wine, changing us (not our situation) so that we can fulfill His purpose for our lives.

We can have that confidence because we see the long view of history.

What is that view?

It's that we can look back (not forward) and we see that Jesus of Nazareth was a real man and he lived a real life and died a real death. And then, he was really raised from the dead as God's power was displayed in overcoming sin and evil and death.

And that power is working in us and for us if we believe in Him and receive Him as our savior.

And that's why we can trust that God's plan for us can never stopped by circumstances, even when everything seems to say: "This situation is hopeless. This is spiritual calamity in its last stages. It's over."

It's not. God works all things for good and we know it's true because of what he did in and through Jesus in the past. And that's why we can trust He will do it for us in the future.

Let's pray.

<PRAYER>

Feature – Help Me Find It (4)

Endnotes

ⁱ See Atteberry, Mark. *Walking with God on the Road You Never Wanted to Travel*. Thomas Nelson.

ⁱⁱ <http://www.amazon.com/Managing-Transitions-Making-Most-Change/dp/0738208248>

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