

Luke 3:3, 7-14; Daniel 9:2-7, 16-19; Lamentations 3:20-26
 “New Love, New Mercy”

How do teachers or parents encourage their children to adapt? To change? How can Mom or Dad help children make *better* decisions?

We use a variety of methods, including rewards for good behavior, correction or discipline for bad behavior. We enforce a time out when a child has deliberately disobeyed, and we allow the natural consequences of bad behavior to run their course ...as a teaching tool! The natural consequences of scaling the small branches at the top of a tree – may bring the climber tumbling down when one of those weaker branches snap and break!

The lesson is quickly learned: the smaller branches won’t bear the weight of an exploring child.

But because we love our children we offer corrections and insight in order to spare them from greater danger or pain. We teach our children to understand that the choices they make today can affect the consequences or shape the events of their lives – sometimes weeks or years later. Here’s an example: Investing from your income early in life will produce a greater financial reward later, at retirement. The consequences of good saving habits has a great delayed benefit!

And so we offer all kinds of instruction and counsel to our children in order to help them succeed.

And you know, it’s the same way with God! Our heavenly Father cares about you ...more than you will know! And there’s nothing He wants more than to have that kind of relationship with you! But there are times when I need to change the way I’m acting or behaving in order to “relate” with Him better! When I refuse Him or ignore Him, it’s no different than when I complained to my father, “Do I have to rake the leaves again?” after three straight weekends.

“I’ll just do it myself,” he answered.

But I loved him so much, I didn’t want to disappoint him. And I went to work.

There was a time when God’s people “disappointed” Him for so long. Despite the warnings, despite the coaxing, despite God’s mercy and encouragement, the people of Israel ridiculed the love of God. They turned their minds and hearts to all sorts of selfish ambitions, refusing to acknowledge the promise and covenant God had with them.

Through many messengers, God described consequences that would come if they continued to mock Him with their artificial worship.

The prophet, Jeremiah, warned God’s people in Old Testament days to turn back from their foolishness and immorality. But because of their rejection and their hard hearts, God allowed Jerusalem to be plundered. Unbelievably, the great, majestic Temple for worship was destroyed. The strong men of Judah were tortured and killed, the women were brutalized. And the young were led away as slaves. Their whole way of life was destroyed.

The prophet was clear, interpreting these events: the people of God brought these circumstances on themselves. They had been warned by a God who was “slow to anger!” They could not blame anyone else!

The Book of Lamentations in the Old Testament is an intimate, personal diary of Jeremiah’s grief. Lamentations can be *our* book through our own seasons of crises. He wept to see the great city of Jerusalem destroyed and God’s people in exile. Jeremiah’s pain was like that of a father with a spoiled child. He had pleaded with those whom he loved to return to God, but his pleas fell on deaf ears.

Listen to the opening of Lamentations: [READING Lamentations 1:1-2]

¹ “Look how deserted Jerusalem is!

Once the city was crowded with people.

Once it was important among the nations.

Now it is a widow.

Once it was a princess among the provinces.

Now it does forced labor.

² Jerusalem cries bitterly at night with tears running down its cheeks.

Out of all those who love the city, no one offers it comfort.

All of Jerusalem’s friends have betrayed it and become its enemies.

As you read Lamentations, you discover that it’s all right to be real with God, to be angry, to be disappointed with life, and despair about what tomorrow holds for us. Jeremiah found comfort when he honestly told God how hurt he was. God accepted Jeremiah as he was – angry, tired, and discouraged.

Many of us know the discouragement of a broken economy and a tortured environment. Most of us are innocent bystanders who suffer from the mistakes and sins of others. (I don’t mean we are without fault and sin.) But when the government seems to bicker and argue into one stalemate after another, when investments have been lost and production jobs are vanishing ...from where do we rescue hope? Many of us feel like we’re the victims of other people’s irresponsibility!

Young Daniel and his friends, Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego were among the many innocent bystanders dragged from Jerusalem into slavery and exile because of the decisions of others. But they did not remain victims. With a sustaining faith in God, they faced the reality of their exile and lived to experience *faith* in captivity and satisfaction through their discipline!

Now you’ve got to be curious: How did that happen?

- We see this startling discovery seeping into God’s people *spontaneously* in this period of history. A light bulb goes off! They now *know* there are tragic consequences for wrong choices – or sin.
- With this clear understanding, Daniel and other spiritual leaders arouse God’s people to reach out to this outreaching God ...through confession of sin, uttering their deep sorrow, and through repentance.
- Listen to Daniel’s cry: [READING Daniel 9:2-7, 16-19]

² During the first year of his reign, I, Daniel, was studying the writings of the prophets. I learned from the word of the LORD, as recorded by Jeremiah the prophet, that Jerusalem must lie desolate for seventy years. ³ So I turned to the LORD God and pleaded with Him in prayer and fasting. I wore rough sackcloth and sprinkled myself with ashes.

⁴ I prayed to the LORD my God and confessed: “O LORD, You are a great and awesome God! You always fulfill Your promises of unfailing love to those who love You and keep Your commands. ⁵ But we have sinned and done wrong. We have rebelled against You and scorned Your commands and regulations. ⁶ We have refused to listen to Your servants the prophets, who spoke Your messages to our kings and princes and ancestors and to all the people of the land.

⁷ “LORD, You are in the right; but our faces are covered with shame, just as You

see us now. This is true of us all...

¹⁶ In view of all Your faithful mercies, LORD, please turn Your furious anger away from Your city of Jerusalem, Your holy mountain. All the neighboring nations mock Jerusalem and Your people because of our sins and the sins of our ancestors.

¹⁷ “O our God, hear Your servant’s prayer! Listen as I plead...

¹⁸ ...We do not ask because we deserve help, but because You are so merciful.

¹⁹ “O LORD, hear. O LORD, forgive. O LORD, listen and act...!”

- Here’s the KEY: Repentance becomes a regular part of their devotional life. The spiritual discipline of repentance is far more desirable than being disciplined toward repentance. I mean, practicing self-examination about your faithfulness with God is better than being disciplined for unfaithfulness. We can take part in repentance as frequently as we practice prayer, worship, praise, fasting, or reading the Bible.

The book of Lamentations tells us that with our confession and repentance there is a new love and a new mercy! With God, it’s never too late. [READING Lamentations 3:20-26]

²⁰ I will never forget this awful time, as I grieve over my loss. ²¹ Yet I still dare to hope when I remember this: ²² The *unfailing love of the LORD* never ends! *By His mercies* we have been kept from complete destruction. ²³ Great is His faithfulness; His *mercies* begin afresh each day. ²⁴ I say to myself, “The LORD is my inheritance; therefore, I will hope in Him!”

²⁵ The LORD is wonderfully good to those who wait for Him and seek Him. ²⁶ So it is good to wait quietly for salvation from the LORD.

Here’s the incredible good news! Despite the troubles surrounding us today, despite the problems we may have brought on, despite our sin or shame, God is calling you to something greater. God wants to lift you out of your heartache and worry and despair – and set you *free*! If you will trust in God, “waiting on the Lord,” He can set you free!

You see, sin acts as an enemy in my desire to commune with God! When I give in to the pollution and corruption of my own thought-life or to the chaos or criticisms in the world around me, I find that I live with more anxiety. When I really give second thought to that idea of anger that blows across my mind, you know that thought that asks, “What in the world is she doing ...Why did he say that...?” I allow criticism to take root as I dwell on something that offends me, and I make it easier for my mind and heart to be distracted by anger, worry, bitterness. Whatever it might be. Think about how that happens in your own life, in your own mind.

But the Spirit of God wants to conquer the shame, the anger, the fear, or the greed or lust.

We connect with God through prayer, confession, and repentance. With your prayerful invitation, you give the power of God permission to clean the clutter and corruption from out of your heart! Are you allowing Him access into your life?

These words of lament that you’ll find are not strange for many friends today.

Those in recovery programs, recovering from addictions, know that the painful consequences they suffer – the divorce, the bankruptcy, the pink slip from an employer – can be a special *gift* from God. Though we agonize, we learn to take responsibility for the mistakes we make, or acknowledge that suffering comes from other people’s mistakes. We learn that God can use our pain to lead us to an intimate, spiritual growth. (Lamentations) “I will never forget this awful time, as I grieve over my loss. Yet I still dare to hope when I remember this: The unfailing

love of the LORD never ends! By His mercies we have been kept from complete destruction. Great is His faithfulness; His mercies begin afresh each day.”

To confess sin means to agree with God that what He declares to be wrong really is wrong!

So I want to recognize my wrongs when they occur, because each time we confess a sin – it is washed away! (1 John 1:8-10) Some areas of my life need more cleaning than others! And God doesn’t get angry when we come back to Him repeatedly.

I believe we have to *fight* for God’s righteousness in our lives! In this world of perversion and temptations we have to keep repenting! I mean, a daily expression of repentance is this simple: “I don’t ever want to do that again!” (“I don’t ever want to say that again!” “I don’t ever want to ignore that warning!” “I don’t ever want to fail to do that...””) We need to be persistent in the care of our spirit and mind because what we see, what we think and what we accept shapes the health of our spirit.

Real repentance has two sides: turning away from sin, from disobedience to God, and turning toward God! And I’m doing that over and over with some of the habits in my life. But understand, God’s remedy for sin is to bring it into the open – through confession and repentance – so that the soul can be cleansed and healed!

Hey, I’m going to make mistakes! But if I’m connected to God through repentance I’m going to learn from those mistakes, with the help of the Spirit of God, and find the healing of God in my life.

What change is God calling from you today?

What fear or sin or critical attitude is He moving you to confess? Where does God want to bring healing and wholeness into your life?

What do you want to say to God? How shall we enter into repentance? We begin with acknowledgment; confession. We apologize. But we also set in our mind to move in a new direction – moving away from the bitterness or the temptations ...into the heart of God.

Invitation to Prayer:

Help us, Lord, to grow up in Your grace and love. Inspire and revive us to understand what it means to be a godly wife/husband, to be a godly man or woman in the places where we work, in our neighborhoods, among friends, and within Your Church – the Body of Christ.

Forgive us Father, when we sometimes put more hope in the things of this earth than in the incredible promises of Your Kingdom ...where we have citizenship forever. **Amen**