

Last in God's Faithfulness series, Sept 7 2014
Baz & Raymond mish moment, 2 Kgs 24:20b-25:7 & 27-30
Boone UMC; Jason Byassee

God's Faithfulness Amidst Tragedy

I'll start out today with thanks. I'm grateful to Kelly Broman-Fulks and Maggie Tilley for their leadership in church last week. I'm also grateful to Pastor Jeff, whose sermon was so good I am driven to jealousy. When I miss church, I *really* miss it, and I'm glad to be back with you.

I have a question for you.¹ Is God good for us? May seem a strange question. For many of us God is the most important part of our lives. More of God means more happiness. Studies show that faithful religious people live longer happier lives. A friend who works in health care wonders whether they'll have a future disease called not-religious-enough. It'll have a health insurance code and treatment plans. Get this—Methodist ministers are in worse shape than the *average* North Carolinian—all those potlucks. But we live longer than the average North Carolinian! Apparently God overcomes the obesity and heart disease. Nobody can tell whether religious people live longer because of God, or because of the side effects—the friendships and people looking in on you. But it works.

But let's look at this question another way. Does *the bible* suggest God is good for us? Read carefully. The bible's central figure winds up on a cross. The apostles die violent deaths. The prophets too. Julian of Norwich famously complained out loud to God² "If this is how you treat your friends it's no wonder you have so few of them!"

Today is the final sermon in our series on the faithfulness of God. We'll look at God's faithfulness in the face of tragedy. Tragedy is not mere pain. We can stand pain if it makes us better.³ "Whatever doesn't kill you makes you stronger," Nietzsche said, and we like that, even though Nietzsche was modernity's most famous atheist. By tragedy I mean pain for no good reason, sorrow that's unnecessary. We Americans are not good at tragedy. Our stories *have to* end with a happy ending. We like musicals. Little Orphan Annie sings, "The sun'll come out tomorrow." That may be our actual national anthem, we are always optimistic. The bible is not. The bible is filled with more tragedy than anyone can take.

In the story I'm about to read to you, Israel is laid waste. Its temple is destroyed, its people carried off in exile to Babylon, its king Zedekiah has his sons killed in front of him before his eyes are put out. There will be no more king, no more land, no more temple, God's promises have failed. If there is to be a cure for atheism, this chapter of the bible won't be part of it. It concludes with the prior king of Israel, Jehoiachin, released from prison and invited to dine with the king of Babylon. Is this a sign of hope? Or just a king treated like a child? Hear this tragic word.

Zedekiah rebelled against the king of Babylon. 1 And in the ninth year of his reign, in the tenth month, on the tenth day of the month, King Nebuchadnezzar of Babylon came with all his army against Jerusalem, and laid siege to it; they built siegeworks against it all around. 2 So the city was besieged until the eleventh year of King Zedekiah. 3 On the ninth day of the fourth month the famine became so severe in the city that there was no food for the people of the land. 4 Then a breach was made in the city wall; the king and all the soldiers fled by night by the way of the gate between the two walls, by the king's garden, though the Chaldeans were all around the city. They went in the direction of Arabah. 5 But the army of the Chaldeans pursued the king, and overtook

¹ Question on screen plz

² Julian on screen plz

³ Nietzsche quote on screen plz

him in the plains of Jericho; all his army was scattered, deserting him. 6 Then they captured the king and brought him up to the king of Babylon at Riblah, who passed sentence on him. 7 They slaughtered the sons of Zedekiah before his eyes, then put out the eyes of Zedekiah; they bound him in fetters and took him to Babylon. . .

27 In the thirty-seventh year of the exile of King Jehoiachin of Judah, in the twelfth month, on the twenty-seventh day of the month, King Evilmerodach of Babylon, in the year that he began to reign, released King Jehoiachin of Judah from prison; 28 he spoke kindly to him, and gave him a seat above the other seats of the kings who were with him in Babylon. 29 So Jehoiachin put aside his prison clothes. Every day of his life he dined regularly in the king's presence. 30 For his allowance, a regular allowance was given him by the king, a portion every day, as long as he lived.

That's the word of God, for us the people of God, **thanks be to God.**

If you ask people what religion is for, you'll get a lot of pagan answers. That God is like a magic foot or good luck charm. God makes good things happen for you if you're good, bad things happen to you if you're bad, the end. Thing is, you'll hear this whether the person is religious or not. Christians think it's true and God is good to them; non-believers think it's false so they're not buying what we're selling.

Sometimes we say things like this, "God won't give you more than you can handle."

Well, Israel, God's chosen people, got a great deal more than they could handle. God's city Jerusalem is gone, no walls, no buildings, nothing but ash. The kings of Israel have long been a rogues' gallery. They all do evil in the sight of the Lord. They put up temples to foreign gods. They disobey God's commands and encourage others to. For example, King Manasseh, the worst of the lot, shed innocent blood. And God won't take it anymore. Before our reading for today God says⁴ "For the innocent blood [Manasseh] had shed; for he filled Jerusalem with innocent blood, and the Lord was not willing to pardon." Terrifying words, that God can be past willing to pardon. Judah's last two kings have their names changed. Pharaoh, king of Egypt, changed Jehoiakim's name. Nebuchadnezzar, King of Babylon, changed Zedekiah's name. Israel's kings are a long way from David and his glory, Solomon and the empire he ruled and temple he built. These are puppets of enemy kings. Then the worst indignity. Those few people left after the Exile to Babylon flee *to Egypt*. This is Exodus in reverse, God's story unraveled,⁵ instead of a great people led by miracles, a raggedy bunch of failures straggles back to that place of death:⁶ "Then all the people, high and low, and the captains of the forces set out and went to Egypt, for they were afraid."

Do you still think God won't send more than we can handle?

The bible matches our lives. I'm thinking of conversations I've had with you just this week. Of betrayal within families. The very people you thought you could count on turn their backs and you are alone. Of the loss of job, and so of identity, of who you are and what you're good for. The loss of life too soon, no reason for it, just loss. Some of modernity's most famous non-believers rejected God not because of science, but because of tragedy. Charles Darwin didn't give up on Christianity because of his science. But because of the death of his little girl. Sigmund Freud, whom we had a play about this weekend, speaks often of God, knew Hebrew, admired his Jewish heritage. It was the loss of a daughter and a grandson that undid any actual faith. I have no idea what I'd do if I lost a child. Some of you do have an idea, because you have.

⁴ 2 Kings 24:4 on screen plz

⁵⁵ <http://bokertov.typepad.com/.a/6a00d83451bc4a69e2017ee4436fda970d-pi>

⁶ 2 Kgs 25:26 on screen plz

What then? Does the whole thing turn to ash and dust in your mouth, like all that is left of Jerusalem? Now is the time to ask questions about God's faithfulness. It's easy to believe when life is turning up aces. But what about when all is lost? What then? Is God faithful then?

The book of Lamentations is a great moan of pain in the middle of the bible. Just a few short chapters wail on the loss of Jerusalem, the exile into Babylon.⁷ "God has made my teeth grind on gravel, and made me cower in ashes; my soul is bereft of peace; I have forgotten what happiness is." This poet knows how to lament. Lamentations *in the bible* questions God's very existence and goodness,⁸ "When all the prisoners of the land are crushed under foot, when human rights are perverted in the presence of the Most High, when one's case is subverted—does the Lord not see it?" But then right in the middle of these two laments there is this.⁹ "The steadfast love of the Lord never ceases, his mercies never come to an end; they are new every morning, great is your faithfulness." That line, which inspired a thousand songmakers, is bookended by sorrow and despair. It's like resurrection in the midst of death, salvation in a cemetery. Which is the place you most *need* salvation, isn't it?

Here's another question.¹⁰ Do we believe in God because of his benefits, or because of God himself? Are we faithful for what God can *do* for us? Or because of who God is?

Job loves God. The devil says well of course he does, all you do is bless him. Take away his family, his health, his reputation, and he will curse you to your face. God says ok, the devil takes it all, and Job does not curse. Job says¹¹ "The Lord gives, the Lord takes away, blessed be the name of the Lord." Job doesn't believe because it's good for him. He believes because it's true. Take away family, health, livelihood, reputation, and Job still offers praise. There he is, naked and crushed before God and the world, and he sings a hymn. Like Lamentations. Praise in the face of death, spitting in the devil's eye. I don't know if I could do it honestly. I do know this. We should trust just because God *is*. Not because things go well for us.

One of my favorite memories of my years here so far is Tracy Smith and Jana Greer leading worship the Sunday after the death of Sheriff's deputy William Mast. They were in tears. They leaned on each other. And they led us all in praise. That's trusting God despite the evidence and praising in the face of death.

In my first church, little rural place, I remember a death where the dead woman's most hated enemy came over with a casserole. She set it on the counter and said "Sorry for your loss," then went and sat down with the grieving family. Where else does this happen than the church? Where you grieve someone you didn't even like? How does anyone face tragedy without that?

There is good that can happen in exile. A psalmist in exile asks this,¹² "How can we sing the Lord's song in a foreign land?" The thing is, they learn how. Scholars think Jews started gathering in synagogues in Babylon. They didn't have the temple anymore so they gathered to pray, read scripture, tell stories, remember who they were. It was death. And then something new was born. There's more. Israel wrote the bible down in exile. The best scholarship suggests that the exile was when stories and psalms and laws were put to paper. Maybe while they had the land and God and all was well they didn't need the stories written down. But in exile, in a foreign land with strange gods, they needed the written word.

⁷ Lam 3:16-17 on screen plz

⁸ Lam 3:34-36.

⁹ On screen 3:22

¹⁰ Next question on screen plz

¹¹ Job 1:21 on screen plz.

¹² Ps 137:4 on screen plz.

Friend of mine is a pastor in Charlotte. He was ministering to a dying old man whose family gathered, his middle aged son with him. The man hadn't spoken in days. But as death crouched near, his pastor and friends sang, "A Mighty Fortress is our God." The dying man joined in, sang along, every verse, and then died. The man's son called up *his* son, the dead man's grandson, a college kid. And said 'Son I need you to get to church. I need you to learn the songs. I need someone to sing to me on my death bed a song of defiance that spits in death's eye with resurrection.' Suddenly sleeping in Sundays seems a limp excuse doesn't it?

In exile, God said, "Write this down, it's all true." And Israel did. Not only that. Before the exile Israel believed every nation had its own God. Yahweh is the God of Israel, but the Babylonians have Marduk, the Greeks Zeus and friends, etc. *During* the exile Israel came to believe there is only one God of all, the God of Israel, Yahweh, all others are pretenders, fakes. We might have thought belief in the Lord would dwindle. Instead it grew. This is how the bible thinks. Israel looks like a defeated people in exile. Actually our God reigns, all others are phonies and pretenders.

Some lament that Christians in America don't have more power in politics. Some think Christians have far too much. Some say we're in *exile*. We're here but not in control. And that's good. Israel in exile can witness to the Babylonians. Israel is a distinct people, with synagogues, a written bible. Exile clarifies who we are, who God is.¹³ Exile is not a bad place to be, it's where things grow. Think of that next time you hear lament about Christians lacking power.

I mentioned before the release of King Jehoiachin. The king of Babylon lets him dine with him, speaks kindly to him, gives him an allowance. What is this, patronizing a king? I mean, I give my *kids* an allowance. Or is it a light at the end of a very dark tunnel, a sign that Israel's God has not forgotten her? I don't know. Commentators don't either, they're divided, bless their hearts. This is an ambiguous story about a captive king on an allowance. Here's what I do know. There is another king whose status is ambiguous. He is of the line of David. But he has no army, no palace, no sons, no weapons. He doesn't even have a place to lay his head. When people want to make him king he refuses. All he talks about though is the Kingdom of God, where the poor are blessed and the proud brought low. He is tried as a king and all he'll say is yeah, whatever man, you say I'm a king. And then when he's put to death, his reign is not extinguished, but continues to this day in the church, one day it will fill the whole world. We can deal with ambiguous kings. We got one. King Jesus. His kingdom is forever.

That's the faithfulness of God. It doesn't make everything right. In fact worse things can happen to you following this king than ever would have without him. You have something you're willing to live and die for now, something bigger than yourself, something you want the whole world to see. I've mentioned to you before that the day King Jesus was raised from the dead, no one was more surprised than he. God's faithfulness is not limited by the grave.¹⁴ God reigns from a cross, rules from an empty tomb.

So I can't promise you no tragedy. In fact it's *more* likely as a Jesus follower. Not only that, you can't look away when anyone suffers. You'll shed far more tears than you would living on your own. But you won't be alone. Not ever. The God who made everything from nothing and life from death will be with you. All may be in ashes, dust, like Jerusalem, gone. But never forget what God can do from dust, ash. He scoops it up, blows into it, and makes a universe. Amen.

¹³ Next sentence on screen plz

¹⁴ <http://jimmyakin.typepad.com/.a/6a00d8341bfbfe53ef01538e0c0352970b-800wi>