

“If It Ain’t Broke...”

Lamentations 3:1-33

[58] Welcome to God’s house. This is a place where we expect lives to change, where we expect healing to take place. Turn to your neighbor and tell them, “God’s not finished with you, yet.” We want to instill hope in each person who comes here, because we have found hope in Jesus. If you are here for the very first time, know that God is ready to do a miracle in your life, too.

Please pray with me. God, we are ready to hear your voice this morning. Clear our minds, release our fears and anxieties, and help us to put away any distraction that would prevent us from encountering you. This is your house, and we are here to worship you. Come, Lord Jesus. Amen.

[59] Thanksgiving is just around the corner. I could start my message this morning with the standard list of things that I’m thankful for. You know: my family, my new job, my church, my home, the fact that I have warm clothes to wear and food on my plate. I could just be thankful for the huge family meal I will probably consume, which might put me into a semi-coma and leave me sprawled on the couch watching some football game I suddenly unexpectedly care about. I could just simply tell you, that’s what I’m thankful for, and we could all go on with our day. And if I really did that, I am hoping and praying some of you would have some strong words for me on Monday!

[60] But I’m not going to do that. While I am truly thankful for my blessings, I’m also thankful for something else, something unusual that we don’t normally thank God for. I’m thankful for brokenness, and I’ll tell you why. Brokenness is the number one tool God uses to shape people for ministry. God has used my brokenness to make me who I am today.

[61] Finish this sentence for me: “If it ain’t broke....” (*Wait for a response.*) “Don’t fix it.” Now, it would do me a world of good to apply this expression in my life. I’m a tinkerer. I look around the house, and I often see something that’s just not quite right, and I think, “I can improve that easily.” The trouble is, me and power tools don’t always get along. If I try to improve something, more often than I’d like to admit, my whole project ends up in the trash, and I end up with a lot of bandages and ice packs and have to make several trips to the hardware store. A lot of us have that urge to fix things, don’t we? Not just as homeowners,

but as people in relationships. When someone has a problem, we just want to fix it and get on with life. However, God has other plans for us.

[62] I have been shaped by brokenness. Most people look at me and think, "You must have always wanted to be a pastor, right?" They have this image of God speaking to me, clouds opening, and boom! Suddenly, there I am standing in a pulpit. Well, that's not what happened to me. I actually thought I would be an engineer. For nine years, I pursued that career. I started out well enough, getting my bachelor's degree from Northwestern, and then landing a well-paying job. That ride didn't last, though, and I remember waking up every morning, dragging myself out of bed, barely having the energy to go to work. I felt stuck. I hated sleepwalking through the daily grind, and my spirit was just...blah. I thought, "I need to fix myself. I need to go somewhere else to get away from my problems."

So I moved to Germany. I thought, "International experience will help me get my life straight." Germany was nice enough. I met my wife there! But even when I was working for a German engineering company, some of that same blandness and depression crept back in. The change in surroundings didn't solve my problem.

[63] So I thought, "If I get another degree, and things will change." I came back to the States and entered graduate school. Sadly, my depression grew worse. Much worse. At the time I was talking to friends, family, pastors, counselors, even professors....and asking them all the same thing: "What's wrong with me? How can I fix it?" I was still waiting for someone to give me that perfect answer, the ol' "Chin up! Do this, this, and this; and when you wake up in the morning, you'll have a smile on your face and sunshine in your heart. Woo-hoo!" Yeah, it didn't happen.

I graduated one Saturday, got married a week later, and started living at home with my parents while I was still trying to figure out what to do next. That's right: I was twenty-seven years old, married, and living with mom and dad. That is not the portrait of success! I was so lost, I took life-guarding lessons, just to pass the time and find something to do.

[64] Then, something incredible happened. Katja and I returned from our honeymoon, and there was a message on my parents' answering machine. A church had called me. They said, "We'd like you to come and use your gifts in our

music and youth ministries." And suddenly a whole world opened up to me that I had no idea God had been preparing for me.

[65] Here's the thing. When I was depressed, I kept asking God, "Why? Why did you make me like this? Why can't I change? What's wrong with me?" I went through all the right motions. I attended church. I worshipped. I gave. I prayed. I really, really prayed. And God's answer was always, "Just wait and be faithful."

[66] When I finally started working with students, I got it. God could use me to minister to the broken because I had been broken myself. I could empathize with those who were down because I had been there. I knew disappointment, loneliness, and rejection. I remember talking with a sixth grader whose parents were in a rough spot. He looked at me and said, "How could you possibly understand?" I said, "Because my parents had a rocky marriage when I was in middle school, too." After all that time in the fog of my depression, God told me, "Now you're finally ready for ministry. You have been through the valley. Go lead others out."

[67] Have you ever felt broken? Have you had times in your life when you prayed and God didn't answer the way you wanted? Then I have some good news for you this morning. Check out 2 Corinthians 12:9. In your brokenness, in your weakness, God's strength is made perfect.

[68] God has been using brokenness to his glory long before I was here. Take for example the book of Lamentations. It is literally the saddest book in the whole Bible. The prophet Jeremiah cries his heart out as he sees his hometown, Jerusalem, destroyed by an invading army. Talk about someone shaking his fist at the sky and shouting, "Why?" His people were being enslaved, exiled, and killed. His home was burning, crumbling. Jeremiah is often called the weeping prophet. You would be, too, if Houghton burned to the ground. And yet in the middle of his weeping, we read these incredible, life-giving words:

[69] "Yet this I call to mind and therefore I have hope: Because of the Lord's great love we are not consumed, for his compassions never fail. They are new every morning; great is your faithfulness." (Lamentations 3:21-23)

Has life ever consumed you? This week has been filled with tragedies beyond my imagination. Conflicts, death, illness. Literally, I am praying for someone whose best friend was murdered. It doesn't get much worse than that.

Read it again with me. "Yet this I call to mind and therefore I have hope: Because of the Lord's great love we are not consumed, for his compassions never fail. They are new every morning; great is your faithfulness." (Lamentations 3:21-23)

Today we will sing "Great is Thy Faithfulness." This song is partly inspired by the worst calamity in Israel's history. I don't know about you, but I am shocked that a crisis precipitated these incredible words of comfort. Then again, maybe I shouldn't be. Jesus once said, "with God, all things are possible." (Matthew 19:26)

[70] Do you know the tragic story of Job? The Bible says Job was a man who loved God and lived a righteous life, yet despite this, he saw everything ruined: his house destroyed, his possessions robbed, his children killed. Job became so sick, he sat in a pile of ashes for days.

Here is Job's response in the midst of his tragedy: "Shall we accept good from God, and not trouble?" (Job 2:10) Job had the right perspective. He knew God could do anything, and Job trusted God to come through for him.

There is an old riddle: "What can't be used until it's broken? An egg." The statement "If it ain't broke, don't fix it," might work for household jobs, but it does not work in real life. People are more like eggs. By faith, the saying should be, "If it is broken, God can use it."

[71] Take a very simple example. If you went to see someone for grief counseling, would you rather talk to someone who has had a perfect life, has never lost a loved one, and only knows what they have read in books? Or would you rather talk to someone who lost a spouse, a parent, or a child, and yet found a way to recover and find joy in life again? I don't know about you, but the answer is obvious for me. I want to talk to someone who has been there and made it through.

[72] This is exactly what the gospel is all about. Hebrews 4:15 says, "For we do not have a high priest who is unable to empathize with our weaknesses, but we have one who has been tempted in every way, just as we are--yet he did not

sin." That high priest is Jesus. Jesus literally knows what you are going through, because he lived on this earth and went through the same things. Hunger. Exhaustion. Betrayal. Death of his friends. He saw the multitudes with their pain, and he had compassion on them. (Mark 6:34)

[73] And what's more, Jesus faced death on our behalf. Christ knew that the only thing that could ultimately save us from sin was his own death on the cross. Romans 5:8 tells us the depth of God's love for us: while we were yet sinners, Christ died for us, to save us. Christ knew the ultimate brokenness – the death of God's own Son – would bring about the greatest healing the world had ever known.

Each person has the chance to accept this gift of grace, and with God's love, receive the power to keep going. God's love changed the world, our world.

[74] I could be thankful only for all the good things I have this Thanksgiving. I truly am grateful. But this Thanksgiving, I am also thankful for my brokenness. Instead of just fixing me, God let me stay broken long enough to turn my life into something he could use. My prayer for all of you is that you will be grateful for all that you have, including your brokenness. In your brokenness, reach out to God. Let brokenness bring you to an awareness of how much you need Jesus. Brokenness is the most powerful tool God has to change your heart and shape you for ministry. Be beautiful in your brokenness.

Song – "If We're Honest"

Confession and Pardon

Generous God, you send us the Spirit of courage, but we have been afraid. You send us the Spirit of truth, but we cling to our illusions. You send us the Spirit of healing, but we cannot let go of our hurts. Holy Spirit of forgiveness, come to us again: shake our hearts, set our souls on fire with your love: send us out into the world rejoicing in your power. We hold out to you all our particular burdens of guilt and sin, and we ask for your help to live the way of your justice and love. Amen.

Silent Confession

Declaration of Pardon (Ephesians 2:8)

Leader: By grace you have been saved through faith,

People: And this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God.

Memory verse: 2 Corinthians 12:9 (NIV)

"But [the Lord] said to me, 'My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness.' Therefore I will boast all the more gladly about my weaknesses, so that Christ's power may rest on me."

Reflection questions:

1. Recall a time when you felt broken. Looking back, can you see God working through that situation?
2. How have your struggles allowed you to develop empathy for others who have similar challenges?
3. What character in the Bible do you resonate with? (Job, Joseph, Jeremiah, Peter, Mary, or someone else.) How did God help them overcome their struggle?
4. Pray for God to make you a grateful person no matter the circumstances you face, and pray that God provides you the strength to overcome your challenges.
5. Pray for someone you know who is struggling. How might God use you to help them, without trying to solve their problem?