

It's Okay to Feel Things

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[0 : 00] There can be the sentiment that Christians in particular are not allowed to feel things. I don't know if you've noticed, but we, a lot of times I notice that we don't have funerals anymore.

We have celebrations of life. Funeral, it's a sad word. We don't want to just grieve. We want to celebrate everything about a person's life and not necessarily focus on the death.

Even worship services are sometimes not called worship services anymore. The last church I served at had a big sign on it, and it was in permanent letters, which was much to my pastor's anger.

It was called a celebration service. And my pastor was like, he was not the one who made the sign, of course. My pastor was like, but what if somebody's not here to celebrate? What if something is going on in their life that's not worthy of celebration?

And there's a lot of bad advice out there about, you know, what Christians are supposed to do around sadness or anxiety or depression or doubt. So I have some examples on the screen.

[1 : 09] Anxiety, this is all from just like famous pastors that I found their quotes online. They're not worthy of, you know, putting their names on there. Anxiety stems from a lack of faith in our Heavenly Father as unbelief gets the upper hand in our hearts.

Much anxiety, Jesus says, comes from little faith. God promises to be our comforter and protector, but we deny the credibility of God's word and allow fear to set the limits of our obedience.

Again, this is all bad advice, okay? Just because it's on the screen doesn't mean I agree with it.

Next slide. Paul and Jesus explicitly command us not to be anxious, so to be anxious is a sin.

The Bible tells us of a specific evil condition of the heart, namely anxiety. Stop for a moment and think how many different sinful actions and attitudes come from anxiety. Next slide.

Is doubt a sin? If we're questioning who God is or taking lightly the promises he lays out for us, then yes, doubt is a sin. In the Bible, doubt and fear are sins.

[2 : 09] I did not, like, have to go to weird corners of the Christian internet to find these quotes. They're on, like, mainstream websites of people that you probably might recognize their names.

Now, I have some compassion for this sort of bad advice because denial is a form of survival. Denial is a form of survival.

When we are inundated with constant needs to be sad or anxious or depressed or filled with doubt, pushing those feelings away are a way of surviving, of getting through the moment or the day or the month or the season or the year.

One theologian said that the condition of our culture, particularly an affluent culture like America, is covert despair, repressed hopelessness.

This feeling that we might have that things are just getting worse and worse, that the world is burning. And so our only option is not possibly to feel all of that because we would be overwhelmed, but to turn away.

[3 : 22] And so I think some of this advice from, you know, places on the internet with Christian logos on them might come from a place where we are just repressing that sense of hopelessness.

You can't have doubt, you can't have anxiety, you can't have despair because, well, if we allowed that to happen, then we would all just quit. We look around and we see how hopeless things can be. And so the only option is to look away or pretend it doesn't exist. And certain forms, many forms of Christianity buy into this. And it's not just Christians who are guilty of this.

Any sort of like positive thinking movement can be guilty of this sort of like push away the doubt, push away the anxiety. That's not welcome here. But friends, I'm here to tell you that the book of Lamentations exists.

And more than exists, it's in your Bible. It's in the Bible of two different religions. It's in the Hebrew Bible. It's in the Christian Bible. It is a book all about being doubtful and scared and angry and filled with anxiety and a distinct lack of hope.

[4 : 28] Lamentations contains all the things that the above advice tells you not to do. And yet it gets put into this inspired library of books that we call Scripture.

Lamentations questions God's goodness. It questions God's ability to save. It's filled with statements that anybody, nobody needing like a psychology degree could label anxiety or despair. It dares to complain about suffering and to admit that sometimes life just sucks. Lamentations testimony is bitter and raw and largely left that way.

It's filled with conflicting statements about suffering, God's role in the world, and about God, God's self. The poetry of Lamentations assaults God with questions and downright insults the divine. Listen to chapter 1 verse 20. It says this, Pay attention to me, Lord, for I am in distress. My stomach is churning. My heart is wrung inside of me because I am so bitter.

[5 : 36] In the streets the sword kills. In the house it's like death. Lamentations is a book that does not hold back. At its worst moments it can feel like a teenager crying in the bathroom about like a breakup.

And in its best moments it can be this raw, honest sense and writings of just despair and hopelessness. And I find so much hope, permission, I'm not even sure what the right word is, that this exists in the book that we call Holy Scripture in the Bible.

Because it opens up all of these possibilities for what it means to be a person of faith, to be a spiritual person, a person who, you know, maybe or maybe not believes in God, maybe believes in some sort of higher power or transcendent power.

But you can be that kind of person. A person who believes in the resurrection or not, who believes in the goodness of God or not. You can be that kind of person and still be part of a faith community. And in fact, even be elevated, lifted up in that faith community, so that your words are remembered for generations and thousands of years. And so anyone who has told you, who has given you that bad advice, that your doubt is not welcome, that your fear is not welcome, that your anxiety is not welcome, that your hopelessness is not welcome, was just wrong.

[6 : 59] They were just wrong. So a little bit of background. What exactly is Lamentations about? What is Israel lamenting? So Lamentations is about the destruction of Jerusalem and the exile of the tribe of Judah, the people who would eventually be known as the Jews.

And Lamentations was historically associated with Jeremiah, the weeping prophet, though technically the book is anonymous. And it seems to have gotten through lots of permutations immediately after the destruction of Jerusalem.

And then for a couple hundred years afterwards, as like these poems and these deep emotional reactions to the exile were pulled together. So Lamentations, actually you can put up that slide about, it's got like a chart on it.

Yeah, so this is probably a little overwhelming to look at once. But you can see at the very, very top, you see years and so it's BCE, so it works backwards. 640 would be the furthest back from us in the past.

575 over to your right would be closest to us. And Jeremiah is serving over 40, 50 years of ministry. Also the confusing thing about Christian Bibles is that like they're not chronologically ordered at all.

[8 : 17] So Jeremiah has overlap with Nahum, Zephaniah, Habakkuk, Daniel, and Ezekiel. Isaiah, if you're thinking about him, was actually a hundred years before this. And you can see at the top that you have all of these threats to the kingdom of Judah until eventually the Neo-Babylonian Empire and King Nebuchadnezzar puts a siege around Jerusalem, invades it, takes people out of it, and then at last destroys it brick by brick and destroys the temple.

And so that's what Jeremiah's ministry was all about. And that's why Lamentations, which is about this exile and about the destruction of the temple, is associated with Jeremiah. The book of Lamentations is intricately put together.

It's five chapters. And chapters 1 through 4 are all acrostics. So an acrostic uses the letters of the alphabet, in this case the Hebrew alphabet, 22 letters.

And every verse starts with the letter of an alphabet. So verse 1 of chapter 1 starts with Aleph, verse 2 starts with Bet, and so on, etc. Chapter 3 uses three verses per letter of the alphabet.

And then chapter 5 doesn't follow quite that same pattern, but it too is also 22 verses of poetry. So the same number of letters. So you've got five poems, all intricately put together, all expressing despair, sadness, anger, hopelessness, questioning God in the writings of the Israelites and the Jews.

[9 : 53] In Judaism, it's read on the 9th of Av, or Tisha B'Av, which is a holiday that remembers the destruction of the first temple and the second temple, and other catastrophes, including the Holocaust.

And so on the 9th of Av, the book of Lamentations is read aloud in the community as a remembrance of all of these atrocities that have happened in the Jewish community. And in the Christian faith, when lament is allowed, it's also read during Lent or during Holy Week as a remembrance of the crucifixion of Jesus. And so why are we reading Lamentations now? Well, in short, we live in times worthy of lament. It's a season of Lent, these 40-some days that lead up to Easter, and Lent is this time where we remember our mortality, that death comes for us all. It's a time where we remember our need for salvation, contrary to maybe some caricatures of so-called liberal or progressive Christians. It's not that we don't believe in sin.

[11 : 01] It's that we recognize that it's not just individuals who need saving, it's the entire world and the systems within it. And so we lament that. Lent, we remember our mortality, we remember a world that needs saving, and we remember that the story is not finished yet.

That even though, yes, we declare the resurrection on Sundays, even though we remember that God is remaking the world and bringing God's kingdom here, we also recognize that the story is not done, that God's work is not complete.

And so oftentimes the only thing available for us to do is to lament the fact that that work is not done. I could give you a long list, and I actually wrote one down, but I'm sort of questioning the wisdom of even saying it out loud.

The long list of all the things worthy of lament in our era. 371 anti-LGBTQ bills proposed this year, some of which are passing in states around our country, many of which particularly targeting gay marriage and trans communities, rising hate crimes against Jews and AAPI communities, continued anti-black racism, and what seems to be the turning tide of white supremacy winning in our culture. We could name all of the things that Jocelyn prayed in our prayer for the world, all of the things going on in our world, where it seems like evil and darkness seems to be triumphant.

[12 : 36] And so you name those things, and then we sometimes just don't know what to do about it. And I see this like particularly on social media, then sometimes there's conversations in IRL as well, of like we see this rising tide of hate, of bigotry, and the response is, what do I do?

What do I do? What do I do that makes a difference? And yes, I believe in the power of activism and organizing that is necessary. And there are also times where the only thing we can do is to lament, is to name what is happening and the evil that it is.

And I think it's important that that naming happens, because we need to develop our emotional vocabulary. Vocabulary makes a huge difference in what we're able to see in the world.

I think I've used this example here at the table before, but I'll use it again because it always manages to blow my own mind, which is that for many, many millennia, people did not perceive the color blue.

The color blue just did not exist in people's perceptions. And the way that we know that is that you go back and study like old documents, languages, things from before the time of Jesus, you will see that most cultures, many cultures at least, did not have a word for the color blue.

[14 : 07] And we can also do modern day observations, like sociological observations, on different cultures who maybe also haven't developed the color blue, or they have a limited color vocabulary.

And then you quiz them or test them on like what colors they can and cannot see. And because they do not have a word for the color blue, it's like it doesn't exist. They call it just, they call it green, or they call it in the case of Homer, he called the sea wine dark.

Like nobody describes the sea as like the color of wine, but they didn't have a word for the color blue. You might see the word blue in your Hebrew Bibles and English translations, but the ancient Hebrew does not have a word for blue.

It's just interpreters are like filling that information in for us. So our vocabulary actually influences what we're able to perceive. If you give people more vocabulary for more colors, they're actually able to differentiate between different colors.

This happens not only with colors, but also with our emotions. Brene Brown says that most people, if you quiz them to like on their emotional vocabulary, they're able to name three emotions.

[15:13] Happy, sad, and pissed off. It's about it. And like if you watch people drive, that's about what all you'll see too, right? People like bob into the music, crying.

I see people crying in their car surprisingly often, or, you know, flipping me off for whatever reason. Maybe that's a me issue, not a them issue. But like emotional vocabulary is this important thing, because if you're not able to name your emotions, you either never get or you lose your ability to feel those emotions.

It's actually a very important thing for like Emily and I's parenting of our two kids, that like we develop an emotional vocabulary for them, so that they know how to express themselves. So you can show our emotional vocabulary book.

It's a Star Wars searcher feelings book. You know, Chewbacca's frustrated. Luke is lonely. Of course, C-3PO is anxious.

This is unlike, this is hilarious because it's Star Wars and it's awesome, but it also is important work to do, so that our children know more than just like happy, sad, pissed off, but also like all the things like, oh, I feel frustrated by that.

[16:20] I feel scared or anxious about that. I think as a faith community, we too need to develop our emotional vocabulary. What does it mean for us to lament?

And specifically to see lamenting as a form of bearing witness, to speak the truth about what is happening in the world. Wanting to erase trans people isn't just like a difference between like me and somebody else on a different side of the spectrum.

It's a form of hatred. We name that. We bear witness to it, and therefore we can lament it. Refusing to reshape our society, to rid ourselves of racialized capitalism, isn't just an avoidable reality thanks to history.

It's changeable. And to refuse to change is something worthy of lament. We can bear witness to it. Our world is burning one degree, one so-called once-in-a-generation weather event at a time, and so we bear witness to it.

We lament it. We put vocabulary and words to it, so that we can be sensitized and alive to what is happening in our world. Now, of course, we don't stay stuck in lament, but if we don't lament, we will be stuck.

[17:39] All right? Are you with me? All right. We don't stay stuck in our lament, but if we don't lament, we will be stuck. If we are not able to put words to our emotions, to our rage, to our anger, to our doubt, to our sadness, to our despair, if we are not able to put words to those feelings, then whatever work that we're trying to do to change things is going to be incomplete.

It'll be an incomplete work because it'll come from a facade of feelings that we have instead of the actual feelings that we have. And this is work that, of course, needs to happen on a communal level.

How do we, as a community, bear witness to what is wrong in the world, to the evil that we see, to the things that are falling apart? How do we bear witness to that?

And it's also individual work. It's work that we have to be able to do one-on-one or around a table where we are able to bring our full selves, bear our whole emotions, and be able to receive them back as well.

And it's that receiving them back as well that can be so awfully challenging. I think either one can be challenging. I struggle. I am a person who struggles to let people know how I truly feel.

[18:56] I think I've told this story before too, but I'll tell it again. One of my most early foundational memories was as a six-year-old boy standing at my grandma's grave and being yelled at by my biological mom, do not cry, you're embarrassing me.

And that's a way of forming our emotional vocab. It was a way of forming my inability to be able to say what's actually happening, to bear witness to my own soul.

And that all happens to all of us, maybe not quite in such dramatic events, but it's a overall blanket, I think, that can be laid on top of us to put out the fires of our rage or our despair or our doubt or our sadness, lest those fires grow too big and might tear something down.

And so as a community, we bear witness to our lament. We let our rage or our sadness or our doubt, we let it shine through.

And I know that we can do that because I see it in Scripture. You read the Psalms, you read Lamentations, you read Job, you read about Jesus weeping over a dead friend or despairing over his own crucifixion or banging on a cross and being able to say, my God, my God, why have you forsaken me?

[20 : 18] If God can do that, I think he might be inviting us to do it as well. So, an invitation and a challenge. An invitation is how can you be more honest with your feelings?

And this is not, you know, an easy work. This is not going to be like, you know, come back next week and tell us how it went. This is a life's work. But it is an invitation to be more honest with your feelings.

I want you to know, as one of your pastors, that this is a faith community where your doubts and your skepticism and your rage and your sadness are welcome.

They belong here because it's part of you and you belong here. And so, ask yourself, where are you holding yourself back?

What parts of you have had a blanket laid on top of them lest they grow too wild? And figure out the stories, the narratives that you have been told, the scripts that you have been handed about your feelings, your emotions, even the tough ones, and begin to question those scripts.

[21 : 31] So, how can you be more honest with your feelings and specifically with whom? That's the tough part. You know, your feelings, your emotions, the bigness of them are not necessarily for everyone.

Not everyone deserves all of you. But certainly somebody does. Certainly there is somebody who is able to welcome you.

And the challenge is that question in reverse of who considers you that safe person to share their tough emotions with. There's sort of like an Instagram theology or sociology or psychology out there that's like, you know, if somebody's like, you know, bumming you out, just feel free to shut them out of your lives.

And I'm like, I mean, I suppose, but if we all do that to everyone, then we're all stuck. Right? And so like, yes, I understand the sentiment of like, you know, if there are people who are just only pouring in negative energy into your life, maybe they're not the best friend that you could have or the best partner that you could have.

I understand that. But if we all do that all the time, then we're all screwed. And so you need to ask yourself, like, who can I be honest with? And then who considers me a safe person?

[22 : 44] Am I a safe person for someone to share their tough emotions with? Or do I have my own, this is the challenging question, do I have my own predictable patterns of trying to fix somebody or shame somebody or bright side somebody out of their tough feelings?

When in fact, all they're asking for is just like presence and a listening ear. So how can you be more honest with your feelings and with whom? Who considers you a safe person to share their tough emotions with?

And then my last challenge is to, you know, this, these five weeks that we're in the book of Lamentations to maybe make, make a habit of reading a chapter a day. Because it's tough reading. And I think sometimes we stay away from those tough parts of scripture because we don't know what to do with them. And, you know, I know enough of you and enough of your stories.

If you're on a little bit of like a break with God, I've got good news about the book of Lamentations. God does not speak in that book. There is no quote of thus saith the Lord in Lamentations.

[23 : 50] It is a book solely about the human experience with pain and heartache. And so my invitation and my challenge is to go into, go to the book of Lamentations and to sit with that.

And if you feel at home with it, then both you're welcome and I'm sorry. And if you feel yourself sort of pushing back against it, then why?

Why is that so hard for you, for me, for us to sit in the ashes and lament? Amen. Amen.