

Your Theology Is Unfinished

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[0 : 00] Thanks everybody. So again, my name is Anthony. I get to serve as one of the pastors here. It's a joy to be here. We're in the middle of a series on the book of Lamentations. We are in the season of Lent, which is this 47-day countdown to Easter where we celebrate the resurrection of Jesus. And at Lamentations, we've just been discussing, you know, sad and hard things like lament, then the things that wouldn't make us lament. But before we continue on in that, I want to say a couple things. So number one, this may be hard to believe, but I used to be an insufferable know-it-all. To which someone in the crowd is like, used to be, and used to be an insufferable know-it-all. Now, when I was 12, I had my salvation experience and I started to be homeschooled in a fundamentalist, independent King James Version, early Baptist say that five times fast, homeschooling curriculum. And it trained me how to be an insufferable know-it-all. It trained me how to be certain about the things that I believed. And honestly,

I had many reasons to have this sort of happen to me as if it's not fully my responsibility. Like from early on, I was part of like a private Lutheran school and they were really good about training you in the Bible. And then I had the independent fundamental Baptist King James Version, only Baptist son, homeschooling curriculum that strains you like this is what you believe and everything else is wrong. And so by the time I got to college, as an 18 year old, I went to this, you know, still relatively conservative private Christian college. And I knew it all. I had all the answers. I was certain and that I was not wrong and I had nothing to be taught. Now, fortunately, I had professors who said, Anthony, that's wrong. And very patiently over the next four years sort of helped me and forced me into a form, a gentle form of deconstruction, of unlearning that certainty.

But it's still that bent within me. It's still that bent towards sort of an ungenerous, inhospitable approach to truth that I've got it. And let me do you the favor of telling you what the truth is. Aren't I so generous? Now, as we talked about a few weeks ago, the solution to being an insufferable know-it-all is not a sort of squishy form of moderate centrism, which says it refuses to take a stand for anything. It refuses to make anybody uncomfortable. It's not that. It's not that particularly when it comes to seeing the image of God in everybody, when it comes to defending the image of God in everybody. It's not that when it comes to loving your neighbor as yourself.

As Rabbi Hadlail, who was a near contemporary of Jesus, said, that which is hateful to you do not do to another. That is the entire Torah and the rest of it is interpretation. So you don't flip from insufferable know-it-all to a sort of squishy, I don't know what I believe, and there's really not anything worth defending. You don't flip to that. Nor is it a form of nihilism or despair or agnosticism that says that nothing can be known. Because that too can also turn into a form of insufferable know-nothing. Well, you believe that, but really you can't believe anything. Well, you think that, but really nothing can be believed, nothing can be thought. That's not really much of an answer either. Rather, I think we can have both conviction and humility. An ability to pour forward some amount of like, I think this might be true, as well as the humility to say, I may be wrong. And as I grow older, there is a smaller and smaller and smaller amount of things that I'm pretty sure are true.

[4 : 04] And a hopefully growing within me, a more generous spirit that says, I may be wrong. And I think we need to normalize being wrong in public, being corrected, and learning and growing. The thing that has been labeled deconstruction, though it's had lots of labels over lots of centuries, the idea that you come to faith and then you realize that maybe aspects of that faith were childish or abusive or toxic or wrong. That should be the normal experience of all of us. Learning is what we should be about. It's what Jesus called his followers to be. Disciples, the Greek word mathetes, to be learners, students, scholars, studiers, learners. And the only way that you can learn is if you're also willing to unlearn. But I also think that in order for that to happen, we need to normalize that there are beliefs that we may not know how to bring into conversation with each other that may not

be easily reconciled. I have been your pastor for about three years now, and I've got an observation for you, and I'll say for us, for us as a community. It's a generalization, so this may not be true of all and every single one of you, but I'd say many of you have sort of explained this feeling to me, and I've observed this in many of us. And this observation is that you have maybe de- and reconstructed your faith. You, thank God, have gotten rid of toxic beliefs that held you down, that were lies, that were destructive to you. And you've exchanged them, again, thank God, for a more beautiful gospel. You've exchanged them for a theology that is life-giving and not life-sucking.

You've exchanged it for a theology that is not repugnant to others. It is not hateful. It is not eventual. It is not violent. It does not seek to ruin others' lives. It does not ruin your own life.

Your theology, you've deconstructed or reconstructed a theology that is top shelf. It is well-reasoned stuff, and your relationship with God sucks.

You've got to reason out. You've exchanged the good stuff, the bad stuff for the good stuff. You've exchanged the toxic stuff for the life-giving stuff. But God still feels so distant. Maybe more distant than ever. Perhaps you haven't felt God's presence in your life in a real long time. Maybe prayer and worship seems dry and pointless. You're not sure if you believe in this thing called the Holy Spirit or spiritual gifts. You're not sure if the thing that we just did a few minutes ago was just some form of musical emotional manipulation. You're not sure if prayer is anything more than just a form of meditation and words bouncing off a ceiling. You're not sure about any of that. The theology is great.

Love people, love God, simple, top-notch, but you've got a dry-as-dust relationship with God to show for it. Now please, at the end of the night, don't twist my words. I love theology. I've got a \$60,000 degree to show for that love. I've got a bookshelf full of books to show that love. I've got a page full of like TikTok and YouTube videos explaining that love of theology. Theology talking truthfully about God is important. I think getting rid of toxic theology is necessary and good and literally will save lives.

[7 : 54] But I think sometimes that need for precision and certainty and perfection can also squeeze the very life out of our souls. This morning our learning cohort talked about contemplation, a contemplative life with God. And when I was in college and I was unraveling all of the toxic things that had been handed down to me. I fortunately had a professor, several professors, who introduced me to sort of mystical or contemplative forms of experiencing God. And it saved my faith.

It saved my faith because I was going down this fully intellectual path from one form of insufferable, know-it-all theology to a whole new form of insufferable, know-it-all theology. And what saved my faith was the willingness to experience God in sort of ineffable ways, ways beyond words.

Experience God in ways that did not fit within my very tidy, perfect, beautiful gospel theology, to experience God simply as presence.

Now what does any of this have to do with the book of Lamentations? Well, Lamentations is this book I'm deeply, deeply grateful for because it's sort of this microcosm, this miniature version of what most of the Bible is, which is all of these overlapping almost, well not almost, I'll just say it, contradictory points of view about God, all in conversation with each other. You can imagine a tragedy, some event.

For some of us, we're old enough to remember 9-11, some of us are not. For all of us are old enough to remember COVID and the pandemic, and perhaps losses in our lives and our community and our workplaces and our families. You can imagine some sort of tragedy, and then people getting together, having some sort of like sharing circle. And imagine the sort of facilitator of the sharing circle saying, tell your story, tell us what you experienced. The facilitator gives this rule, you're not here to fix each other, you're not here to fix each other's theology, you're not here to correct each other.

All you're here to do is to tell your story. That's what's happening in the book of Lamentations. The book of Lamentations is this poetic response to the destruction of Jerusalem and the temple by the Babylonians in 586 BCE. If for us, it would be as if this city, all of its monuments and landmarks were leveled, burned down, and torn apart piece by piece. Every landmark of your faith in theology, this church, the church you grew up at, the church of your family, the church maybe you go to in the morning, maybe the place that you go to meditate or practice yoga or whatever, all of those torn down. Imagine a tragedy of that scope and scale. And then you begin to sit around in a circle and to share, this is what I experienced. This is how I feel. This is my shaking my fist at God.

[11 : 08] That is the book of Lamentations. And as you look at this book, you see all of these stories, all of these narratives, all of these responses to utter tragedy, overlapping and looping over each other. And sometimes they're resonant and they're high, they harmonize, and sometimes they don't.

Lamentations 3, which we're looking at specifically tonight, is a great example of that because it is the one place in the book where we see a glimmer, a glimpse, a just bare peekaboo point light of hope in the book. But it's surrounded by despair. It's surrounded by ugly, vicious language about God and what God has done.

I'll give some examples. This is Lamentations chapter 3. It's the middle chapter of these five chapters. And it's sort of an amplification of what has happened before. Each chapter so far has been an acrostic.

It's used the 22 letters of the Hebrew alphabet to make its points. This one, instead of one verse per letter, it's three verses per letter. And it is the staccato of anger towards God.

It says, I am the man, Lamentations 3, verse 1. I am the man who has seen affliction by the rod of the Lord's wrath. God has driven me away and God has made me walk in darkness rather than light. Indeed, he has turned his hand against me again and again all day long. God has made my skin and my flesh grow old.

[12 : 50] God has broken my bones. God has besieged me and surrounded me with bitterness and hardship. God has made me dwell in darkness like those long dead. God has walled me in so that I cannot escape. He has weighed me down with chains. Even when I call out or cry for help, he shuts out my prayer. God has barred my way with blocks of stone. He has made my paths crooked. It is ugly, hard, vicious stuff, making claims of God that I would not claim. That I, as your pastor, if I were to, like, form a beautiful, nice little sermon for you, I would not come up here and say, like, hey, listen to my story about God.

He has barred my way. And yet we find in the pages of scripture someone's anger, someone's despair, someone's hopelessness, someone's vicious words about the divine. And I find this so helpful helpful because I don't know about you, but I at least grew up in spaces where there were really certain words that we are allowed to use about God. God is good all the time. And all the time God is good. That's right. He is risen. That's right. Holy, holy. What's the third word?

Holy. That's right. It just keeps going. All these proper, polite words that we use about God. You know, God is love. God is patient. God is kind. All these things. And I believe those things. I will come up here week after week and I will tell you those things. But where we went too far, where preachers, pastors, the Christian culture went too far, is they said, but you're not allowed to say the other stuff. And I've talked to many of you where you have found yourself in these hard places. You have found yourselves in places of despair, where places where you don't understand and where you want to spit curses at God, but you hold yourself back for fear. And here's the book of Lamentations saying, I'm going to spell it out.

Literally, letter by letter, I'm going to tell you how I feel about God and making theological claims about what God has done. Now, I'll tell you, these are theological claims I disagree with. I don't believe that God bars our way with blocks of stones. I don't believe that God makes us dwell in darkness like those long dead. I don't believe that God makes our skin and flesh grow old. I don't believe those things. I believe that God is for us, not against us. That if God is on our side, no one can be against us. I believe that there is nothing that can separate us from the love of God. And I can tell you that all day long, but that doesn't change our actual day-to-day experience when we feel like God has hemmed us in. So we read this, and then we get to the center of the chapter.

I remember my affliction and my wandering, verse 19, the bitterness and the gall. I remember them and my soul is downcast within 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. I say to myself, the Lord is my portion, therefore I will wait for him. The Lord is good to those whose hope is in him. To the one who seeks him, it is good to wait quietly for the salvation of the Lord. It is good for the man to bear the yoke while he is young.

[16 : 32] Verse 31, for no one is cast off by the Lord forever. Though he brings grief, he will show compassion. So great is his unfailing love. And in the center verse of the center chapter of this book, for God does not willingly bring affliction or grief to anyone.

So here, in the chaos of this chapter, we've got utter despair. We've got theological claim on top of theological claim. God has cursed me and hurt me and hemmed me in and put me among the

dead.

God has blocked my prayers. He has made crooked my path. And then right next to it, God does not willingly bring affliction to anyone. Great is his faithfulness. His mercies are new every morning. It's conflicted. And that, I think, is so much like our own theological journeys, where on one day we want to heap our anger upon the Lord. We want to pray curses to God. We want to make claims about how upset God has made us. How could you? Why did you do this? Why did you let this happen? And then we come to church on Sunday and we hear the pastor say, great is God's faithfulness.

Great is God's mercy. God means good for you, not harm. Yeah. You're right, you're right, pastor. That sounds good. That sounds great. Amen. Hallelujah. And then the next day, but geez, God, you could do a lot better with those new mercies. I tell you what.

[18:03] I'm grateful for this book because it grants us permission to be unfinished. It grants us permission to be messy, even contradictory in our faith. It grants us permission to be uncertain and, dare I say, even blasphemous.

But our blasphemy will not keep us away from God. Our blasphemy doesn't even keep us out of the pages of Scripture. Because here is someone whose theological claims will be contradicted in later pages.

The book of James, in God, there is no darkness, no shadow, but only light. God does not tempt anyone. God does not bring destruction. We see all these claims in other pages of Scripture.

But thank God that those later editors and the pilers of this collection, this library of books, didn't go back and say, like, ah, yeah, let's get rid of Lamentations.

They didn't know what they were talking about. Let's get rid of those older books. They were still in process and uncertain, and we don't need that. We just need the certainty. No, that's not what we have. That's not the library that was passed down to us through the generations.

[19:12] Rather, we have a library, a collection of books, a book even like Lamentations, that says, even your uncertainty, even your unfinishedness of your theology, it's okay. We will sing your songs. We will recite your poems for generations anyway.

This book grants us the permission to be unfinished and uncertain and even to say things that may not be perfectly true about God, because we are human and God is God, and there is some space and distance between those two things.

And it's okay if our language does not perfectly line up every single time. Now, I do think it's fascinating that the center verse of the center chapter of this book is God does not willingly bring affliction or grief to anyone, and that is a promise to hold on to. It is a piece of hope to have.

But that's not the conclusion of the book. This verse is surrounded by all the arguments why this verse may not make perfect sense. This verse does not get the final word.

There is a word of hope, but hope is not the final word. Which also means that in our own communities, in our own conversations, how we approach someone who is in the midst of a hard time, in the midst of an episode of depression, in the midst of despair or grief, our job is not necessarily to be like, hey, let me be your theological fixer.

[20:37] Our job is not to be like, yeah, but let me give the last word and make sure that word is super puffy and upbeat. No, rather we get a word of hope, yes, but a word of hope swimming in a sea of uncertainty.

And I think that should affect the way that we approach those conversations. You're in the midst of a hard time. You're ready to curse God. You're ready to describe God as one who has abandoned you and left you.

Okay. So be it. Hope does not get the final word in this particular book.

It's present. The truth is spoken. But it also lets others speak. What wisdom could we glean if we simply let others speak?

For every person who has left the church angry, upset, who has walked away from a relationship with God without hope, what if my job is not to be the one who chases after?

[21:54] But let me tell you all the reasons you're wrong. But simply let them tell their story. Simply let them share their hurt and their pain and their trauma and their despair.

Again, don't twist my words. Yes, I believe that there are true things about God that we can't say. But I don't think it's always our job to say them all the time.

And this book shows me how not to. My conclusion is pretty simple. Is that I would rather, as your pastor, as your hopefully friend, as someone hopefully that you can trust, and imitating my own relationship with God as I attempt to imitate others who I trust, my invitation and my challenge is that I'd rather you speak angrily and accurately about your feelings towards God or the church or whatever than pretend like those feelings don't exist.

When we hem those feelings in, anger, sadness, despair, depression, whatever it is, when we try to hem those in, all we're doing is that we are short-circuiting our ability to feel other emotions as well. When we try to be less sad and less angry than we actually are, and we try to push that down, we're also squishing down our ability to experience joy and happiness and ecstasy.

[23 : 36] And I think maybe part of the reason why, or I think there's a couple reasons, why our theology is so great and our relationship with God sucks is because now we feel like we've got this, like, good, beautiful gospel, this well-packaged theology.

We love the right people. We include the right people. We say the right things. And we maybe feel like, and this is just a guess, I don't know for certain, but maybe we feel like we don't have permission to be upset anymore.

We got it all figured out. We don't need to be upset at God anymore. And I wonder if there's still some, like, some anger that we need to let out, some sadness, some grief.

For those of us who did grow up in a church that did not fully affirm our identities, for those of us who did grow up in a form of fundamentalism that tried to squish us into a very tight, tight, tiny box, maybe there's some grief about all those years that feel wasted.

And we need to express that. Maybe there's some anger or some sadness or some despair about what's going on in the world right now that we feel like we don't have the right.

[24 : 47] Well, it's not my problem. It's someone else's. It's not my life. It's somebody else's life. And we do feel like we don't have the right to express our despair or our sadness. And I wonder if that's preventing us from experiencing the full spectrum of our emotions, the good and the bad.

And what it might look like for us to give each other permission to say, hey, you're pissed off? Be pissed off. Let it out.

Tell me why. And I am not going to try to fix you right now. To give each other permission to be like, you're sad about what happened in your previous years?

You're sad about what happened, about what you're letting go of? Tell me. It's okay. And would that perhaps open us up to new experiences of joy that we have not allowed ourselves to have?

The final challenge is, related to all of this, is the idea of we don't need toxic positivity or spiritual bypassing to fix our problems.

[25 : 56] Toxic positivity is this idea of always bringing, like trying to bright side things, even when things are hard. Well, let me tell you why that's such a good thing that you got in a car accident. No. No, thank you.

Don't need that. Oh, you got sick? Well, let me tell you why it's so good that you got sick. And all the things that God, all the blessings that God did bring out of that. Like, I didn't ask for that. No.

Spiritual bypassing is using spiritual language, religious language, as a way to try to make things okay that aren't okay.

Oh, God has a plan. God's going to bring so much good out of that. Even if that were true, that's not necessarily what someone is asking for in that moment. Now, I'm not saying we need to keep our head in a cloud of despair, but you can't lead somebody out of that despair by force.

And you're not going to do it by trying to toxically, positively, spiritually bypass their way back into joy. What you can do is you can meet them in that cloud and sit with them there and say, yeah, you're right, this sucks.

And that ministry of presence is what's going to make that cloud finally dissipate. Now, these are hard things. These are not the sermons I love to give. I'd rather tell you about all the reasons why God is great and God is good, probably all the time.

[27 : 14] But not all of us feel that way all the time, and none of us could possibly feel all that way all the time because life happens. And if we're not able to have these sorts of conversations, if we're not able to be this sort of honest with each other, if we're not able to sit in an uncomfortable book like Lamentations, which makes some really ugly claims about God, then we hamper our ability to experience the rest of the goodness.

So I'd rather you speak angrily and accurately of your feelings than pretend they don't exist. And then for the love of God, let's all stop trying to bright side our way into hope. Because hope is not found in the bright siding of despair. Hope is found in the midst of despair and being with others who together we can find a way out.