

FIVE FORKS BRETHREN IN CHRIST CHURCH

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SCRIPTURE: Revelation 21:4; John 11

DATE: 2018-09-30

Place: Auditorium

SUBJECT: Grief/Loss

Series: Our Weakness – God's Strength

THEME: God Heals our Grief

SERMON: "Finding Hope in the midst of Grief"

Introduction

I vividly remember the day Silas died. It was a Sunday afternoon about 3:00. Pastor Shaun received a call from one of the youth – a girl. She sobbed, "I think my brother is dead. We need you." As quickly as we could, Shaun and I jumped in the car and headed to the Bland's house. Hoping we had miss understood Sophie's phone call.

We arrived to a scene of ambulances, cars and a few visibly distraught people outside. Without saying hardly anything, we understood our worst fears were realized. Silas had been playing basketball in the driveway and the basketball hoop somehow broke loose and fell on him. Sophie, the sister who had called came running out of the house and just grabbed Shaun and held on, sobbing.

We made our way into the house where more family was gathered. There were no words to say. There was nothing that could bring comfort. Just tears, disbelief, questions, pain, sorrow, deep grief over a tragic incident in the life of one of our families. I don't know when I have felt as helpless as a pastor – because I had no answers. We sat for several hours. Hardly saying anything. Just hugging, crying, grieving over the pain we were so close to.

Sometimes grief is sudden and shocking. Other times grief is long and seemingly endless. A father related this story.

My 4-month-old daughter and I took a trip to the library. She babbled softly as I browsed through the books. As we walked, I heard an older man say gruffly, "Tell that kid to shut up, or I will." Angrily, I responded, "I am very sorry for whatever in your life caused you to be so

disturbed by a happy baby, but I will not tell my baby to shut up, and I will not let you do so either."

I braced myself, expecting an outburst from him. Instead, he looked down, took a deep breath, and said softly, "I apologize." Then he looked up at me with tears in his eyes, and we remained silent. Finally, he looked at my daughter. She smiled at him and happily kicked her arms and legs. He wiped his eyes and said slowly, "My son died when he was 2-months-old."

I moved to sit in the chair next to him. He went on to explain that his son died from SIDS over 50 years ago. He described how his anger grew, leading to a failed marriage and isolation. I asked him to tell me about his son. As he did so, he smiled back and forth with my daughter. Eventually, he asked to hold her. As he held her, his shoulders relaxed, and he briefly laid his cheek on her head. He returned her to me with a heartfelt "Thank you," and he quickly left.

For a month we have been talking about times in our lives when we are weak.

Depression, temptation, shame, loneliness. We have been learning that God in his love and grace enters into those times with us and becomes our strength. When **we are weak, God is strong.** (series graphic)

And perhaps this source of strength is most needed at the tragic death of a loved one. The circumstances are as varied as the number of people in the world, but the weakness is the same – grief or loss.

Grief is experienced in many types of loss, not just physical death. And I believe the experience of God's strength is needed whatever the circumstances of the loss – moving away from friends or out of a house you have lived in most of your life. It can be the loss of a job, the breakup of a relationship, a devastating financial crisis, a severe illness. In all these and more we experience grief and it leaves us weak, tired, confused, angry, disoriented and lethargic – even physically ill.

Doctors at Johns Hopkins Hospital have identified a medical condition they call "**Broken Heart**

Syndrome.” It occurs in people who experience tragic or shocking life events – a death, a car accident, an armed robbery and even a fierce argument. They say this syndrome has all the symptoms and signs of a classic heart attack – chest pain, fluid on the lungs, shortness of breath, abnormal EKG, abnormal blood work – but - no blockages of the arteries.

They conclude, the emotional pain the person experiences literally **stuns the heart**. Even the same regions of the **brain** are activated by emotional pain like grief or rejection, in the same way that physical pain affects the brain.

So when the Bible talks about the anguish of the broken-hearted, it's describing real hurt and real pain. I remember asking my father what he was feeling when my mother died from cancer. He said, “Ray, it is like someone is taking hold of your heart and tearing in half.” Wow what a vivid picture of the pain of grief. No wonder it leaves us weak.

In times like this, what does our Christian faith have to say about what we are experiencing? We say, “God is good.” And yet we face tragedies and loss and the grief that accompanies.

Today we are in John 11 and see Jesus dealing with the death of a dear friend. – A personal tragedy.

In the midst of grief and loss our hearts naturally ask questions:

If God really is good:

Does God know about this situation and understand how I feel?

Does he care about it?

Is he really in control? Can he do anything about it?

John 11 helps us answer these questions with just two words

John 11:35 Jesus wept.

Let’s wrestle with the questions.

Does God Know and Understand? (When I am grieving.)

The account makes it clear that:

God Knows What Will Happen

I will begin to read at verse 1.

Jn 11:1 A man named Lazarus was sick. He was from Bethany, the village of Mary and her sister Martha. ³ So the sisters sent word to Jesus, “Lord, the one you love is sick.”

⁴ When he heard this, Jesus said, “This sickness will not end in death.”⁵ Jesus loved Martha and her sister and Lazarus.

Does Jesus know what will happen? Yes he does.

11:11 He told his disciples, “Our friend Lazarus has fallen asleep; but I am going there to wake him up.”

Jesus knows what is going to happen. After he arrives at Mary and Martha’s he says to Martha:

11:23 “Your brother will rise again.”

John is making it clear that God, knows what is going to happen.

“The events of life do not take God by surprise even though they may exasperate us.”

People exasperate us particularly when we think they can and should do something but they just don’t. We would tell our children to do their chores, like feed the chickens or the dog, before they went to school in the morning. But so often, they would find some reason to not get it done. So exasperating and annoying. Sometimes the way God seems to answer or not answer our pleas for help can be just as exasperating. Look how exasperated Martha and Mary are with Jesus.

11:21 Martha said to Jesus, “Lord, if you had been here, my brother would not have died.

11:32 When Mary reached the place where Jesus was and saw him, she fell at his feet and said, “Lord, if you had been here, my brother would not have died.”

These are amazing statements that Mary and Martha make to Jesus because they contain at the same time:

Amazing Faith and Great Blame

Lord, if you were here, you could have saved our brother. I believe you are able – **faith** - but:

“Lord, where were you?” – blame.

This story gives us insight as to how we can go to God in the midst of grief and express our hearts. I believe God wants us to be real with him. To question Him is not to say we don't trust Him. Even today we can say the same thing.

When that disease came – Lord, where were you?

When I lost my job – Lord, where were you?

A few years ago, early in the morning, I was in the office and heard the sirens going – they came and turned in Five Forks Road. I immediately thought of people going to work and knew that it was the time of some of Darlyss's co-workers were going to work.

I found out that just up the road here, a young single mother of a ten year old girl went off the road, the vehicle flipped and she was killed. She had just begun taking care of her mother who recently found out she had cancer.

I met the parents a few days later when they came to grieve at the spot where the accident happened.

I wanted to say – “Lord, You could have prevented this – Where were you?”

There is no immediate answer in the text, but we do know God is not surprised when tragedy hits and we do need to know that for our faith as we begin to make sense of what is going on.

But then why does Jesus cry? He cries because:

B. God (also) Knows What Has Happened

At the death of a friend – Jesus weeps. Anyone's death is a disruption of God's good plan for us. It will require the death of God's Son to make this right.

In the meantime, God's people will experience hard things. Sometimes Satan will have his day and it is distressing enough to Jesus that he weeps.

God doesn't just know what will happen, He knows what has happened. Does he understand how we are feeling and grieving? Yes!

“God experiences (in Jesus) the harsh realities of life in this world.”

When you watch a sad movie – even several times – does it make you cry each time? Even when you know what will happen – the pain of the story is bad enough that it brings tears to your eyes each time. In the same way, God feels our hurt when bad things have happened and it brings tears to His eyes.

So in one sense:

“I have permission to weep.” (when life hurts).

Christians should feel death more keenly because we know this is not the way it should be. Death is awful. It is miserable. It is part of the curse. We should feel that. There are no quick ready answers. This is horrible.

I believe we should admit it and not try to explain it away. We have permission to weep because Jesus wept. We don't have to try and be strong in the face of death. Weeping – because we know how it feels and how horrible it is, is part of the healing process. Allow yourself and others to do the same. Weeping is not a sign of a lack of faith – it is an understanding of what has happened.

But I also: **“have permission to dry my tears.”**

Because I know what will happen – God will win in the end. This story of life has a happy ending. As believers, we do not need to fear death because we have a hope for the future.

Does God know? Yes – Jesus Wept. Does he understand? Yes – Jesus wept.

Does God Care?

Does God really care when we are going through a tragedy? How do we know when someone cares about our pain? Often it is because they cry with us. When Jesus came to Lazarus' tomb he wept.

11:36 The Jews said, “See how he loved him!”

He didn't just have watery eyes. It was more of his body racked with sorrow. I remember well, the funeral of my mother. As I saw her body lying in the casket. I was overcome with grief and sobbed visibly. It was because I cared so much for my mother.

Does Jesus care?

Jesus wept

When people weep with us. Often being quiet – not saying anything – just weeping we feel their care for our pain. We wept with the Bland family.

Jesus cared enough about Mary and Martha's pain that he wept. And even more than that – he cared enough about the pain of death to go to **the cross**, so the stronghold of sin and death could be broken.

As we consider grief – our own and the grief others may be experiencing:

Look at the cross. Jesus cared enough to shed more than tears. Jesus cared enough to shed his blood. But in the moment – when we ask the question:

Does Jesus care?

Jesus wept

If God knows, if he cares,

Is God in Control?

Is God really in control when tragedy strikes?

The scripture answers this question in a way that we don't always like. Because we learn that God wins, but not always right away. For a while it looks like he is losing.

When we talk about not liking God's timing – think of how it must have bothered Martha and Mary when Jesus waited instead of coming to help right away.

One time when I was getting ready to make hay and the rain was coming, I had asked someone to come and help. They said they would but they seemed to dawdle – and the hay got wet. Oh how it bothered me.

But put yourself in the place of Mary and Martha and it appears that Jesus is dawdling.

11:6 When he heard that Lazarus was sick, he stayed where he was two more days.

11:17 On his arrival, Jesus found that Lazarus had already been in the tomb for four days.

Jesus had tarried – why didn't he get there earlier?

Because Jesus' timing was **by design**.

You see, a few days earlier he had told a parable of a rich man and a poor man.

In the parable, the rich man ignores the needs of the poor man. Then in the afterlife, the poor man ends up in heaven, and the rich man ends up in Hades. The rich man asks Abraham to send the poor man back to his family to warn them.

Abraham replies: "If they do not believe Moses and the prophets – they will not believe even if someone should rise from the dead."

Do you know the name of the poor man in the parable?

Lazarus

Now we have an actual event - someone rising from the dead. His name just happens to be: Lazarus. I think Jesus framed his parable deliberately for this event.

We would expect that after such a great miracle everyone would have come to believe that Jesus is the Christ. But look at verse 53.

11:53 So from that day on they plotted to take his life.

Imagine the disciples thinking – what else can we do? And in a few days **they** will see the One who performed a miracle of raising Lazarus – dying on a cross. How do they make sense of it? Even the onlookers at the cross said: "We saw him save others, can he save himself?" But he doesn't. He stays on the cross and dies.

It is not until 3 days later that Jesus rises from the dead and God's victory is now apparent. But for now:

When we or someone we love is dealing with grief, we can find strength by trusting that God will win, but it may take some time. Maybe even longer than our lifetime but:

"Victory will surely come"

In the book of Revelation, for a while it looks like evil is winning as the saints of God are being slaughtered. But the conclusion is clear. God will win and make everything right.

Revelation 21:1-4 Then I saw a new heaven and a new earth, for the old heaven and the old earth had disappeared.

“God’s home is now among his people! He will live with them. ⁴ He will wipe every tear from their eyes, and there will be no more death or sorrow or crying or pain. All these things are gone forever.”

But for now, we must wait.

Grief in the life of a Christian, feels as if God is not in control, as if he doesn’t rule, or as if he is late. So to help us remember that God rules – even in the face of tragedy, he has put tears on the face of Jesus. (Mother – dark tunnel with light at the end – **it will not be the same but it can be good again.**)

We can see the tears as a lens that helps us see that God is in control, and in time he will make everything right. He will wipe away every tear from our eyes. But for now: **We must wait.**

When you wrestle with grief in your life – look closely at the tears on Jesus face and believe: Jesus understands. Jesus cares. Jesus is in control.

He is at work in your situation. He has power, even over death itself.

Believe and trust him and his timing, and be comforted.

One more question. Are we on our own? Paul says, “Definitely not.” He writes about:

Grief in the community.

I Corinthians 12:12, 26 The human body has many parts, but the many parts make up one whole body. So it is with the body of Christ.

26 If one part suffers, all the parts suffer with it.

1. Jewish people have a special way of coming together to help people deal with pain, loss, and grief.

They call it **shiva** (which means seven, or sits of seven). When there is a death, the

closest family members come together: the father and mother, brothers and sisters, sons and daughters, and spouses. They come together and sit. But they don't sit alone: all **their** friends and family come and sit with them. They sit until the healing begins. They sit because they want you to know you're not alone in your sorrow.

They sit together for seven days. On the seventh day—everyone in the community comes, and they walk with them around the block. The message is, “We know you hurt, and we hurt with you, but you can heal over. You can begin to live again.”

2. **Jess Hinds** recently lost her father to a painful battle with bone cancer. Following his death, she was bothered by the messages of most sympathy cards she received. She said:

“Many of the cards tried their best to talk me out of the grieving process. Some personal notes simply tried to distract me. One person asked, “Are you applying to grad school?” Another, “How's your teaching going?”

Hinds wanted people to just say, “I'm sorry.” She wanted to slowly move through a process of sorrow and sadness; she wasn't ready to be cheered up yet.

She said, “We can learn from the elephants. Elephants are known to grieve in groups. They loop trunks together and support the bereaved. Like elephants, we should remain connected and open to the mourners' and their sorrow, for some time. We can be present but not say much except perhaps, “I am so sorry.”

3. Rick and Kay Warren (from Saddleback Church), their son Matthew committed suicide at the age of 27 after a long struggle with mental illness. About a year after his death, Kay Warren posted this advice on her Facebook page:

“The truest friends and “helpers” are those who wait for the griever to emerge from the darkness that swallowed them alive, without growing impatient. They don't pressure their friend to be the old familiar person they're used to; they're willing to accept that things are different, and embrace the now-scarred one they love, and are confident that their compassionate, non-demanding presence is the surest expression of God's mercy to their suffering friend. They're

ok with messy and slow and few answers ... and they never say "Move on."

Grief – so hard to carry. But made more bearable when friends are with us – being strong when we can't be.

A short while ago, a woman in the congregation experienced the tragic death of her cousin. She is one of the great prayer warriors among us. She always prays for many of us. When I heard the news and contacted her saying I was praying for her, she replied, "Please do, because I cannot pray right now." God's strength is most often realized in the fellowship of the body of Christ.

I hope you have noticed a **common thread** in this whole series, of how God is our strength when we are weak. His strength is often made real through the **community of His Church**. We really are members of one body. We really do have a responsibility for each other. I believe that as we learn to lay aside our individualism and independence we can learn to be strong for one another. We can do better at being a genuine, safe, caring community.

I want to share an understanding of community from Winnie the Pooh.

"Piglet?" said Pooh.

"Yes Pooh?"

"Do you ever have days when everything feels... Not Very Okay At All? And sometimes you don't even know why you feel Not Very Okay At All, you just know that you do."

Piglet nodded his head sagely. "Oh yes," said Piglet. "I definitely have those days." "Really?" said Pooh in surprise. "I would never have thought that. You always seem so happy and like you have got everything in life all sorted out."

"Ah," said Piglet. "Well here's the thing. There are two things that you need to know, Pooh. The first thing is that even those pigs, and bears, and people, who seem to have got everything in life all sorted out... they probably haven't. Actually, everyone has days when they feel Not Very Okay At All. Some people are just better at hiding it than others.

"And the second thing you need to know... is that it's okay to feel Not Very Okay At All. It can be quite normal, in fact. And all you need to do, on those days when you feel Not Very

Okay At All, is come and find me, and tell me. Don't ever feel like you have to hide the fact you're feeling Not Very Okay At All. Always come and tell me. Because I will always be there."

PRAY