

1 Kings 19:15-16, 19-21

Psalm 16

Galatians 5:13-14, 16-25

Luke 9:51-62

Grief and Loss, Part 1

We're starting something very different this morning. I usually don't preach sermon series, and I never preach a series based on a theme. But it's time for this one because communities in this area and our own chapel family have experienced tremendous loss and grief. And as a people who confess a belief in Christ, we must trust that God also speaks into these deep, dark, groaning places of our hearts.

Now here's the rub. There's already a ton of YouTube videos, books, seminars, counselors, TV shows, and self-help programs to encourage people through these valleys of despair. Most of them, though, are built on the foundations of New Age humanistic psychotherapy which are often absolutely contrary to (and in some instances even forbidden by) God for His children. It's not that these things don't do a great job of acknowledging our circumstances, convincing us of our woundedness and brokenness, demonstrating our need for consolation and understanding, steering us toward hope and healing, and demonstrating the strength we can draw on from others and even how we can capitalize on our own internal fortitude to overcome trauma and loss. But it does those things by putting us exactly where humanism wants us to be: at the absolute center of our lives—the place where we love being but also the very place where Christ is supposed to be. And even those counseling helps that are supposed to be based on a spiritual perspective need to be held up to careful scrutiny. Just remember, spiritual is not the same as biblical or Christian.

Now here's what I can promise. Over the next several weeks I will be using Scripture as the foundation for our series on grief and loss. Some of the things you will hear might not match up with other sources you've looked at. Some might even be completely opposite of what you've already been told by others. All I can do is say what God says and show you where Jesus wants to be in your circumstances and where He wants you to be in your circumstances. Some of it might feel just right, some of it might feel pretty challenging, but it will all be true; truth that comes from God, truth that will endure, and not the truth of the world.

Today I want to begin with a question we all have, and once we have the answer it may help us to make sense of our circumstances. The question is this: What happens when we die? If we know that, then grief becomes much easier to walk through.

Each of our texts today had a common thread running through them—the fact that we live, we die, and life goes on; it is a part of our created nature. Here's what I mean.

Did you know that from the first page of Genesis to the last page of Revelation, the Bible lists 3,237 people by name. And except for Enoch and Elijah, every single one of them died. The

Bible also makes general reference to over 4,000,000 more people. And except for Enoch and Elijah, every single one of them died. In fact, anthropologists who study historical population densities estimate that in the history of the world, 108.2 billion people have been born and walked this earth, and except for Enoch and Elijah, every single one of them have died. And like every other living thing in the world, it is humanity's great equalizer and common denominator. God told Adam and Eve in the Garden, **"By the sweat of your brow you will eat your food until you return to the ground, since from it you were taken; for dust you are and to dust you will return"** (Genesis 3:19). And thousands of years later, James the brother of Jesus, says, **"What is your life? You are mist that appears for little while and then vanishes"** (James 4:14).

Why is that? It's not that we're born to be exclusively mortal, but that we're conceived and born to be immortal and that our lives are lived in two distinct phases. The first phase is tangible (of stuff), temporal (of time), corporeal (of body), and temporary (of duration)—this is the 'mortal' aspect of who we are and this part of our lives is locked to the things of this earth. And like everything else, it is designed to die. Psalm 89:48 says, **"What man can live and not see death, or save himself from the power of the grave?"** Job 14:5 says, **"Man's days are determined; You have decreed the number of his months and have set limits he cannot exceed."** Ecclesiastes 8:8 says, **"No one has power over the day of his death."** And finally, Psalm 49:9 reminds us, **"Who can live on forever and not see decay?"**

What's interesting is that for a lot of people, our fear, anguish, loss, and grief is often grafted to the mortal aspect of our lives because—even for some Christians—what happens next is a mystery. No matter what the Bible says, no matter what they've learned in Sunday School, no matter the hymns they've sung, no matter the sermons they've heard, when they come face to face with the death of a loved one, it still hits them like one big question mark—"Is there some kind of life after this?"—and that uncertainty is a stressful and dreadful place to be.

When God created man, He fashioned into Adam a spark of His own image and His own likeness (Genesis 1:26); creating mankind with the intention that, from those who walk in faith and righteousness, He would present to His Son a partner, a companion, a Bride that would walk with Him into the distant reaches of eternity. And that part of Adam that was fashioned in the image and likeness of God was immortal. At death, the physical stuff of existence is laid aside and the part of us that is not physical is ushered into eternal life based on our faith in what God has held out to us. God tells Daniel, **"As for you, go your way till the end. You will rest, and then at the end of the days you will rise to receive your allotted inheritance"** (Daniel 12:13).

Now our Christian faith teaches us that everybody will pass from this life to the next phase of life; the phase that expresses our truly immortal nature. But it's a fork in the road. Those who have responded to the love of God, who have responded to the tug of the Holy Spirit, who understand and believe in the forgiveness of their sins through the sacrifice of Jesus—for those who have responded in this life, no matter how feeble, a transfer of ownership has taken place and they have been granted a citizenship in heaven (cf., Matthew 25:31-40). How feeble a faith is good enough? I can't tell you what the cut-off is or the minimum passing grade. What I do know is that Jesus says, **"A bruised reed He will not break, and a smoldering wick He will not quench"** (Matthew 12:20; cf., Isaiah 42:3). And what I do know is that their names have been

written in the Book of Life (Philippians 54:3; Revelation 20:17); a book first mentioned by Moses back in Exodus 32:32. That should fill us with comfort and hope because they are finally living the life they have been created for.

Now those who blatantly reject God, resist the tug of the Holy Spirit on their hearts, and refuse to believe in the forgiveness of their sins through Jesus—their immortal citizenship is bound to the same eternal fate and judgment as Satan and the demons who were cast out of heaven with him (Matthew 25:41-46; Revelation 20:15). This has always been God's plan. What we need to remember, though, is that He has always given us the choice of where we will spend our immortality. In fact, where we end up—whether it's heaven or hell—is not God's decision; He simply agrees to the choice we have made throughout our lives: either a life that has rejected Him or a life that acknowledges Him; and even a smoldering wick that reached out to His mercy and grace is a choice that He honors. Don't forget that.

Now there's a lot of stuff that happens when we close our eyes on this side and open our eyes on the other side—stuff between now and when our bodies are lifted up from their graves at the return of Jesus—the intermediate state between death and final glory; and we'll look at that next week. We'll look at what happens when we die. Do we become angels? Are we able to influence those we've left behind? Can we communicate with our loved ones? How are we prepared by Christ to transition from a physical, temporary world to a spiritual, eternal world? Are we in a place with all our family and friends who've gone before us? These are the questions that popular books and seminar speakers try to answer—and because they're offering a message that relies on royalties and speaker fees, they usually hold out a message that 'sells' to the needs of the consumer audience. Is their message the same as God's message? We'll find out next week.

This week we simply want to be encouraged that while the circumstances surrounding the loss of loved ones might be senseless, useless, tragic, avoidable, unwanted, or unresolved, and the cause of death can be anything from illness, accident, disease, or old age; how it impacts us emotionally is not the same as how it impacts them eternally. Two things are happening here: First, how we respond to their eternal state should be one of comfort and joy because they are in the hands of a loving God Who wanted them from the moment He breathed the breath of life into the lungs of Adam. Second, how we cope with our loss is tempered not only by knowing where they are and Who they're with, but in trusting that God recognizes our pain, our sadness, and our sense of weakness and that He does not abandon us to hopelessness. And we'll be looking at how all of that works in about two weeks.

Until next week, I want you to keep the things of heaven in view with greater clarity and reality than the things of earth. Psalm 73:24 says, **“You guide me with Your counsel, and afterward You will take me into glory. Whom have I in heaven but You? And earth has nothing I desire besides You. My flesh and my heart may fail, but God is the strength of my arm and my portion forever.”**

Foundation passes through

Heaven our home (Lazarus and the rich man); no passing back and forth; no contact with those back on earth. They are perfected. Can't come back if they wanted to and wouldn't come back if they could.