

Genesis 18:1-14

Psalm 15

Colossians 1:21-29

Luke 10:38-42

Grief and Loss (Part 4)

“God Will Make a Way”

I can't remember the last time I've been to a medical appointment where they fail to ask, “On a scale of 1 to 10, what's your pain level today?” I hate that question! And I tell them I hate that question. It's so arbitrary. I'll say things like, “Well, my ankle's a little bit stiff but the rest of me is fine, so 95% of me feels great.” “Well, on a scale of 1 to 10, how does your ankle feel?” “It doesn't matter how it feels because the chores need to get done anyway.” “We need to mark something down.” “But I'm not here for an ankle appointment, so it's a stupid question.” “Give me a number.” “Okay, make it a 1.” And then they give me the look that says, “Well, if you don't hurt, then why are you here?”

It seems like the main focus of medical care is to help people achieve a pain-free life. We don't like pain. We don't like to hurt. And we do everything in our power to mask it and make it go away as quickly as possible—cutting it, freezing it, injecting it, medicating it, radiating it, burning it, replacing it—all so that we can get on with our pain-free lives. But pain, both its presence and its degree, serves a purpose. It lets us know that there's a weakness, an injury, an infection, a degeneration.

The problem with this idea of a pain-free physical life is that has crossed over into every other part of our culture to the point where any little inconvenience becomes an overwhelming challenge until we do everything in our power to make it less irritating, to the point where today we can click a few buttons on an app and have our groceries delivered to our homes (and even put away in our refrigerators!) so that we don't have to experience the inconveniences of shopping. And this mindset has been shaping our culture for well over 30 years now.

I remember a conference I went to in 1990 in the San Francisco Bay Area on the state of children and families—very liberal and progressive about how caregivers needed to do everything they could to make life as nurturing and caring as possible, even to the point of making it a law as to what kinds of things we use to surface our playgrounds so that children don't get brush burns or bruises if they fall off a swing (which then went into all kinds of discussions about what kind of safety features a swing seat should have!). Finally, one old lady—a gaunt, weathered Jewish psycho-therapist who survived a Nazi concentration camp—said, “When Johnny falls down the first thing we want to do is rush over, pick him up, brush him off, cover him with kisses, and give him candy and cookies to take his mind off of his brush burn; to steer him away from his pain. But maybe Johnny needs to experience his pain and see

where his pain takes him. He needs to discover how to cope, manage, and overcome his pain.” She was the only one who made sense and she was the only one who got booed off the stage.

Well, here’s something we don’t think of very often: Christianity is a faith that recognizes and guarantees our suffering, hardship, and grief. Otherwise, there wouldn’t be the need for a Savior, the hope of a Comforter, or even the anticipation of heaven.

James 1:2, **“My brethren, count it all joy when you fall into various trials, knowing that the testing of your faith produces patience.”**

2 Thessalonians 1:4, **“We ourselves boast of you among the churches of God for your patience and faith in all your persecutions and tribulations that you endure,...that you may be counted worthy of the kingdom of God, for which you also suffer.”**

1 Peter 4:12, **“Beloved, do not think it strange concerning the fiery trial which is to try you, as though some strange thing happened to you; but rejoice to the extent that you partake of Christ’s sufferings.”**

What we can see here is that a lot of things happen to us that we don’t like or ask for: calamities, accidents, attacks, loss, emergencies. What we also see here is that these painful things happen to everyone. But I think they’re often more ‘intense’ for Christians because the enemy, Satan, would use these circumstances to pull reactions and emotions out of us that he can manipulate to not only impair our Christian testimony, but to make us flat out reject the work of Christ. In other words, “Jesus, if you can’t fix this and make it go away, then I don’t need you in my life anymore!” Like Martha in the kitchen when Jesus was spending time with Mary and Lazarus—she was so ‘distracted’ by the stuff in her life (“roiled up”) that she not only wanted to exchange being in the company of Christ with her stuff, she wanted to drag others in there with her! And that kind of thing can happen with any of our emotions.

Our circumstances, good or bad, create responses. Our responses feed into our emotions. Our emotions fuel our hearts (and the people around us) with things that either point to our love of Christ or things that show our growing reluctance for Christ. As you can imagine, allowing our emotions to drive a wedge between us and Jesus isn’t the answer; not now, not for eternity. So how do we surrender our emotions to the Lord so that the things we go through help our walk of faith. Now if you noticed, I didn’t say remove our emotions; God gave them to us because we’re created in His image and He has emotions; Jesus has emotions; the Holy Spirit has emotions. Our job is to see to it, though, that they are relinquished to His authority rather than to Satan’s manipulations. For example, Paul says in Ephesians 4:6, **“Be angry, and do not sin.”** That means our emotions are valid, but they can either be doors for God to walk through or tools for Satan to take advantage of.

I think the key to this is found in 1 Corinthians 10:12-13, **“Therefore let him who thinks he stands take heed lest he fall. No temptation has overtaken you except such as is common to man; but God is faithful, who will not allow you to be tempted beyond what you are able, but with the temptation will also make the way of escape, that you may be able to bear it.”** I want to take just a few minutes to unpack this, and next week we’ll take our final sermon in this series to learn about workable, practical examples of how this works.

The first thing, however, is to correct a fallacy. A lot of people look at this verse and focus exclusively on the word 'temptation' and think "God will help me with the temptation of alcohol or porn, or spending, or lust." That's not really the correct English translation for this verse and I'll show you in just a moment how that works. What I want us to do, however, is look carefully at verse 12, **"Therefore let him who thinks he stands take heed lest he fall."** A lot of people caught up in the circumstance of loss, the reaction of despair, and the emotion of grief receive lots of kind words from well-meaning folks that end up going in the direction of, "Hang in there, it'll make sense someday, you've got this, you're stronger than you think." And then they sweeten it by adding, "And if you need anything, just call."

That does two things: (1) It puts you in the position of trusting in your own resources, and (2), when it's not enough, it encourages you to rely on another human arm. There's nothing wrong with a good arsenal of coping tools, and there's nothing wrong with support from good friends and loved ones. The caution, however, is that any attempt to work through grief in human strength will always end in a spiritual fall, and in this context, a spiritual fall is that place where Satan is given a legal point of access. That brings us to verse 13, **"No temptation has overtaken you except such as is common to man."**

What was I saying about temptation? That it's not a fully accurate English translation of this verse. It literally means a putting to the test, an experience, a provocation, or an adversity—something that shows us what we're made of in that it can either draw us to God or deflect us toward Satan, and that's the temptation. So, let's reread this: **"No adversity has overtaken you except such as is common to man."** If you remember the first sermon in this series, I said that in the whole history of the world, the earth has been host to over 108 billion people and every single one of them has died (except for Enoch and Elijah), leaving behind mothers, fathers, spouses, loved ones, and friends who have also died. Over 108 billion! The adversity is grief from loss; a grief the enemy loves to get his fingers into. But it's an adversity that everyone experiences. They each have their own way of facing it, but it's common to everybody.

The next part of this verse reads (exchanging temptation with adversity), **"But God is faithful, who will not allow you to suffer adversity beyond what you are able."** Now the interesting thing here is that Paul is asking us to take stock of our ability. But the word 'able' in this verse comes from the Greek word that gives us our English word 'dynamite'. What we need to understand here, though, is that any strength or ability we have is that which comes from Christ—His ability at work in us. Paul records a conversation he had with Jesus in 2 Corinthians 12:9. Jesus said, **"My grace is sufficient for you, for My strength is made perfect in weakness."** Christ is all powerful; and if Christ is in you and you allow Him to shoulder your grief, He can carry it for as long as you need because He is not only able; He is your ability!

Last part of the verse: **"But with the adversity will also make the way of escape, that you may be able to bear it."** Look at this—God in His faithfulness will offer you THE way escape, not A way of escape (you've probably noticed by now that all those books and seminars and psychics that point to all kinds of coping tools, hope, and resources except Christ). Hear this: with every

circumstance we encounter, the provision of Christ to walk through it is held out to us because Jesus is **“the way”** (John 14:6). A job loss, an accident, a house fire, a death, a school failure, a financial ruin; with every circumstance, adversity, and temptation, simultaneously with that event comes the fellowship of Christ’s strength and grace. And if you want to push it even further, God holds out His grace before the circumstance even happens! John Wesley called it “prevenient grace,” or the grace that proceeds or goes ahead of our actions (1 John 4:19).

Can you imagine? No matter what we face, no matter what circumstances attempt to rip us apart, no matter what kind of testing or adversity, no matter what Satan takes advantage of to cause us to question the faithfulness of Christ, God’s grace is at that intersection even before we get there, holding out the compassion and strength of Jesus to lift what we are unable to bear. That is incredible comfort. That points us to incredible hope.

The circumstances don’t go away, but it’s no longer our crushing burden to carry. How does the 23rd Psalm put it? **“Yea, though I walk through valley of the shadow of death, Your rod and your staff, they comfort me.”** The valley, the adversity, the temptation, doesn’t go away, but Christ, God’s rod of authority and staff of compassion, go ahead of you **“that you may be able to bear it.”**

Next week, our last week, we’ll make this very practical with easy ways of putting this into practice so that you can see that Jesus, the “way of escape”, is right beside you and has been there all along.