

In the Face of Tragedy Sermon Packet:

I was sitting in Dunkin Donuts Tuesday morning (meeting with John) unsuspecting that a day had begun that will never be forgotten. My cell phone rang shortly after 9:00am. It was Bev informing me that a plane had hit the World Trade Tower. She called back about half an hour later to say the other tower had been hit as well as the Pentagon. I headed home. And like the rest of the nation we watched the horrific scenes on TV. We wept for the families crushed with grief at the loss of a loved one or beset with anxiety over not knowing.

Life is not normal any more. There has been an outbreak of evil that has rocked us. Unanswered questions, confusion, and unprocessed emotions are now daily companions. Until Tuesday, I had been working on a message about connecting with God and coming to realize that He is our true heart's desire. But since the attack I have been thinking more about how we handle life's disasters and tragedies. This week's attack is a disaster of huge proportions – we've never seen so many people lose their lives in one short event. Yet we face other types of disasters. They are on a much smaller scale, affecting far fewer people, but they affect us. If it rips us up and devastates us – it is a disaster and a tragedy.

Throughout the week many thoughts raced through my mind and I would pull out a piece of paper and write questions asked and lessons learned. As I watched the aftermath unfold and listened to people tell of its impact, my mind centered on four actions that are part of coping with tragedy. These may even translate to elements of beginning to recover from tragedy.

1) Release grief –

We may not have known any of the dead or missing personally, but I found myself still experiencing a profound sense of loss. Emptiness and sickness in the pit of my stomach kept creeping up. It is the emotion of grief – the loss of something or someone that cannot be recovered. Tragedies surface all kinds of emotions within us – like anxiety, depression, and anger. But I'm thinking about grief and loss, and how we often don't handle those very well. Our trained tendency is to bury them. We stuff them down and choke them off. We try not to feel them.

Fifty years ago industrialists thought they could just bury toxic waste and it would go away. We have since learned it doesn't just go away. It leaks into the water table, contaminates crops, and kills animals. Buried grief does the same thing. Raw time doesn't heal anything on its own. Buried pain leaks into our emotional system and wreaks havoc there. It distorts our perceptions on life and it taints our relationships.

Notice what Jesus said in Matthew 5:4, *"God blesses those who mourn, for they will be comforted."*

If we were to write a side note next to that verse, it may say something like, “It’s okay to grieve.” You have to face your feelings. God tells you to feel your feelings. Feel them to the fullest extent as they well up within you. Don’t stuff, bury, deny, or discount them. Don’t put on the false image of bravery. Feel your feelings and express them.

One day, a very close friend of Jesus’ died. His name was Lazarus and he had two sisters. The three of them were special friends to Jesus. Jesus got word of Lazarus’ death, traveled to the town, and met with the devastated sisters. He grieved with them just a little bit then the three of them walked toward the gravesite. People were waiting, holding their breath, and wondering what the Son of God would do standing outside the tomb of one of his closest friends.

John 11:35 tells us what the Son of God did. The scripture says, “Jesus wept.” Those two words speak volumes about grief management. And I think people are well served by just watching Jesus weep. It might free them up to express their God-given emotions. It might give them permission to weep. Weeping is called the language of the soul. It is the cleansing river of emotional release. God’s approach says, “Let the river flow.”

People who feel their feelings and express them freely begin the journey toward wholeness. I wonder how many of you have felt free enough to grieve your losses, really. And not just tragedies like this week, but other types of losses, like more intimate ones. What about losses like childhood traumas, parts of your past that were ripped away from you, health losses, relational losses, financial losses, etc. God says to you this morning, “Look at how my son, Jesus Christ, responded to a searing loss. He wept.” So go ahead and let the cleansing rivers flow.

A Christian counselor was asked what to advise people to do when they’re dealing with loss. She said, “Of course I tell them to feel their feelings. But then I also urge people to reduce radically the pace of their lives. I urge them to review their loss, talk about it openly, think about it thoroughly, write about it reflectively, and pray through it.”

She continued, “It’s my experience that people want to run from their pain. They want to replace pain with another feeling as soon as they can. To recover from pain, you have to face it. You must stand in it and process it before it will dissipate. That’s God’s way.”

Grief is a part of life. And so the first thing you’ve got to do is release your grief, because if you don’t, feelings pile up and they will eventually explode in some form or another. If you don’t talk it out with God and others you’ll take it out on yourself or someone else.

2) Remember what is important –

Disasters have a way of clarifying values. They have a way of pointing out what matters and what really doesn’t matter. Look at the following verse.

“Real life is not measured by how much we own,” (Luke 12:15).

What is Jesus saying? Don't confuse your net worth with your personal self worth. Don't confuse your possessions with your purpose in life. Don't confuse what you're living on with what you're living for. Life doesn't consist of the stuff you have.

I saw an interview with a woman who was evacuated from the towers on 9/11. She said, “I started throwing some things in a bag. The fireman said, “No, leave it, just get out!” You see we've had clarified for us what's important. It's not possessions, its people.

Look at the wise words of Solomon...

“But as I looked at everything I had worked so hard to accomplish, it was all so meaningless. It was like chasing the wind. There was nothing really worthwhile anywhere,” (Ecclesiastes 2:11).

He is saying that when it's all said and done (when life ends) achievements don't matter. There's something more important; it's people. Relationships are more important.

Here's what I fear at this point. I fear we nod in agreement and say, “Yeah, that's right. He's right you know.” Then we still go on grabbing for more, getting busier to do more, and thinking people will always be there. I watched an interview with the CEO of a company that lost 700 of 1,000 employees. He was really broken up. He just kept saying, “I lost my family. 700 people are gone.” He wasn't crying over his business. He wasn't saying, “I've lost all those computers, that equipment, the office space...” What broke him up was the loss of people. Those are people he can no longer enjoy.

We really need to stop holding on for security to what we have or what we do. If you want security in life you need to hold on to something that can never be taken from you.

Can you lose a house? Yes! Can you lose a career? Yes. Can you lose a marriage? Yes. Can you lose your health? Yes. Will youthful beauty fade? Yes. Can you lose your relationship with God? No!

If you want real security, then build your life on what can't be taken away. Connect deeply with God – move closer and closer in your relationship with him. And invest more deeply in your relationships with others. Love God and love others. That's what Jesus says are the two greatest things in life.

Here's something else that will help in the recovery process.

3) Receive from others –

One of the great scenes from 9/11 was the rush to help in rescue and recovery efforts. What is played out before us on a large scale is to be the pattern of our lives on the smaller, daily scale as well. Take a look at the following verse.

“Share each other’s troubles and problems, and in this way obey the law of Christ,” (Galatians 6:2).

“Troubles and problems” is really one word, which means something that is too heavy to carry alone. It is a mistake to isolate yourselves when going through a crisis. You need other people. You need their perspective, you need their support, you need their encouragement, and you simply need their presence.

God says we need each other as stated in the following verse.

“Look after each other so that none of you will miss out on the special favor of God,” (Hebrews 12:15).

He’s saying that to make it through a crisis, we need not only the promises of God, but we also need the people of God. This is why I so strongly encourage being a part of a church family. I’m not just talking about being an attendee. I’m talking about being a member of a family and a partner in the ministry. When a crisis comes, if you don’t have those relationships in place, who’s going to hold you up? That’s why we stress small groups and why we pray for leaders who have a passion for this. That’s how we build relational closeness and deeper connections so we can bear one another’s burdens and help look after each other.

Some years ago, in another ministry, I received a call for help from a young couple who were experiencing a true life crisis. I knew they would need more people than me to help them through it. So I asked them if they could tell me who some of their friends were so I could contact them and let them know of the need. Now, this couple had been coming for several years, but they couldn’t think of anyone they knew at the true friendship level.

At first I began to think we had failed them. Then I realized that all through that time they had never chosen to participate in any opportunities to know and be known. They had come each Sunday but real friendships don’t build in that setting alone. Especially as a church grows and people become part of corporate worship... it takes more relaxed, intimate settings to really know others and be known by others. Eventually that couple (and I’ve seen it happen to others like them) left the church because they thought no one cared. But the real problem was that they never invested in establishing relationships. God says we need to receive from each other when we go through tragedy. We need to encourage one another.

There's also a fourth thing we need to do when facing tragedy in our lives.

4) Seek refuge in God –

Psalm 46:1 says, *“God is our refuge.”*

He is a shelter from the harsh forces of realities that are pressing in on you and wearing you down. It's like a protected environment in which you can rest and recuperate temporarily.

One of the most beautiful pictures of this is Psalm 91:4, which tells us, *“God will shield you with his wings; he will cover you with his feathers.”*

Have you ever seen little chicks dancing around, chirping, pecking, and doing chick stuff? All of the sudden, the chicks all become aware there's a predator in the area. The mother hen lifts both wings simultaneously and in just a few seconds all the baby chicks disappear under them. They hide there. They're sheltered there. The little chicks are saying to each other, “Wow, did you see the size of the teeth on that wolf?” But they're okay under the wings for a time. Eventually they have to crawl out to face the real world, but for a time there's nothing quite like being sheltered under wings.

This is what God says He is for us – sheltering wings. He provides a safe place and protection. He delights in spreading His protective wings and in folding his frightened, weary, beaten down, worn-out children under those wings. He wants you to hide there for a time. It is okay to regroup, rest, and renew your strength.

Some of you feel that when you come here on Sunday mornings. You may come in here pretty anxious or discouraged – but God provides something in this time. You walk out of here a little less anxious, a little less discouraged, and a little more peaceful and centered. Some of you are finding that in your small groups. You drag in there in the middle of the week feeling pretty worn out. Your heart is feeling really pressured. But after an hour of opening your heart and fellowshiping with family, there's a new perspective. You feel like going on instead of giving up. You're feeling that refuge that God so freely provides.

Some of you don't know what that's like and you just keep running, running, and running. But God's refuge is ready and it's available. He's swinging open the doors, saying, “Come and rest a while. Take a break from the cares and anxieties of life.”

Now to take advantage of the offered refuge, the first move is yours. It's a tough one. It goes against the grain of so many of us who lie to consider ourselves independent and self-sufficient.

These are Two Ways We Find Refuge:

- We find refuge by calling on Him.

Take a look at Psalm 91:15. “When they call on me, I will answer. I will be with them in trouble.”

Calling is admitting that unless you find a refuge and wings to crawl under, you’re alone. The first step is to move from independence to dependence on God. You’ve got to call out. Some of you need to call out today.

- We also find refuge by pouring our heart out to Him.

“The passwords that open the doors into the refuge of God are the soul-wrenching words that flow from pain-filled hearts when we finally decide to trust God,” (Psalm 62:8).

There’s a guy in the Old Testament who shows us what it means to pour out your heart. His name is Jeremiah. God called to Jeremiah when he was a young man to be the spokesperson of a nation. So Jeremiah spoke the words of God, but ran into a lot of resistance. He spoke to the priests and they said, “Get out of here.” He spoke to the people and they said, “Get lost.”

A point came when people got sick of hearing Jeremiah, so they stepped up the resistance. They beat him mercilessly and put him in stocks in the public square so everyone could laugh at him. When they let him go, Jeremiah desperately needed a refuge. So he called out to God and rehearsed his pain. He started pouring it out. Here’s some of what he said.

“O Lord, I am mocked by everyone in the city... these messages have made me a household of joke,” (Jeremiah 20:7-8).

And then he said, “I curse the day I was born! May the day of my birth not be blessed. I curse the messenger who told my father, “Good news, you have a son!” You have to be pretty blue to say, “I hate my birthday. I hate the guy who passed out cigars saying, “It’s a boy.”

He was pouring out his heart to God. And his pain-filled words were the passwords to safety, refuge, and renewal. It’s not long before he said more positive words.

“The Lord is with me. My persecutors will not prevail. I will not be forgotten. Sing to the Lord. Praise His name. He has delivered the soul of a needy one from the hand of evildoers.”

What changed? He went out again after that speaking the same words and was met with the same resistance. But he did it with renewed strength, new perspective, and a source of hope that comes from being sheltered for a time.

It’s time for some of you to pour your heart out to God. It’s time that you tell him all about the footsteps you’re hearing, the opposition you’re feeling, the pressure you’re facing, the burden you’re carrying, and the fear that’s tearing you apart.

In the Face of Tragedy Sermon Outline:

1) Release my grief –

“God blesses those who mourn, for they will be comforted,” (Matthew 5:4, NLT).

“Jesus wept,” (John 11:35, NIV).

2) Remember what is important –

“Real life is not measured by how much we own,” (Luke 12:15, NLT).

“But as I looked at everything I had worked so hard to accomplish, it was all so meaningless. It was like chasing the wind. There was nothing really worthwhile anywhere,” (Ecclesiastes 2:11, NLT).

3) Receive from others –

“Share each other’s troubles and problems, and in this way obey the law of Christ,” (Galatians 6:2, NLT).

“Look after each other so that none of you will miss out on the special favor of God,” (Hebrews 12:15, NLT).

4) Seek refuge in God –

“God is our refuge and strength, always ready to help in times of trouble,” (Psalm 46:1, NLT).

“He will shield you with his wings, he will cover you with his feathers,” (Psalm 91:4, NLT).

Two Ways We Find Refuge:

- By calling on Him

“When they call on me I will answer. I will be with them in trouble,” (Psalm 91:15, NLT).

- By pouring out your heart to Him

“Pour out your heart to Him, for God is our refuge,” (Psalm 62:8, NLT).



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