

The Church and Sorrow: Loving the Despairing
[Passion 29; part of Judas series]

Scripture Reading: Job 6:1-17

This little series on sorrow was prompted by our study of the end of the life of Judas. If you imagine Judas heading out of Jerusalem on his way to his end, there are many words that we could use to describe him in that moment. We've talked about some of them. But for our purposes as we start this morning, the one word I'd like us to consider is the word "alone." He was despairing alone.

Our desire should be that no one around us who is sorrowing; no one who is despairing; would have to walk that journey alone. Jesus promises "I will never leave you nor forsake you." So no follower of Jesus is ever actually alone. But don't we want to be a little reflection of Jesus, and be there for those in sorrow and despair?

That's our desire, but it's not easy, and we sometimes shy away. We don't know what to say or do. This morning I hope God might spark in us fresh courage to love those who are despairing. Of course some here are the despairing ones who need the love, and I hope there will be some encouragement for you this morning as well. So this message focuses on getting involved in the lives of those who are already experiencing sorrow upon sorrow or deep despair. Next Sunday we'll talk more generally about how our every-day involvement in the lives of one another can help keep us from spiraling in sorrow or despair.

We just read from Job 6. Job is an intriguing example, since he had friends who were with him in his despair: they were just more of a problem than a help! READ Job 6:14

There are several possible ways to translate this verse, so if you're looking at another translation it might not sound quite like what I just read. But no matter how it is translated, the two parts of the verse give us two main ideas:

First, despairing people should not be left alone - they need friends, and they need friends who are kind.

Then the second phrase indicates that the danger in despair is that we will forsake the fear of the Almighty. This is very important to understand, and we'll return to it next Sunday. Remember

that the fear of God is big, biblical thinking about God. Write this down: when we are despairing, the greatest danger is that we'll stop thinking correctly about God.

When we are despairing, or sorrowing, our minds can seem like our greatest enemies. They run to thoughts we didn't want to have; they process the same thoughts over and over again; our mind can misperceive things, or believe false things, or just misinterpret things. And so despairing people need kind friends who help us keep thinking correctly about God.

The two ideas there really form the outline for the message this Sunday and next Sunday. This Sunday I want to focus on the friends who care for those in sorrow or despair. Next Sunday I want to focus on the renewing of our minds, the daily need for right thinking, and the role we can play in helping one another with that.

So, for this morning: despairing people need kind friends - they should not be left alone. We could even use the word "caregiver." We often think of caregivers for the elderly, people with terminal diseases, or people with serious disabilities. But many times family and friends end up being like caregivers for people who are deeply sorrowing or despairing.

And it's not easy. Even secular literature agrees that depressed people are often not very pleasant company.

And it can seem like nothing we say or do helps them. They may seem very passive and uninterested or skeptical about anything we say. Despairing people rarely say "Oh, thank you so much for taking the time to be with me! Thank you so much for sharing truth and helping me adjust my thinking! That was great!"

Being a friend for a despairing person can be hard, and not rewarding in the short-term. But God tells us that it is immensely valuable: despairing people need kind friends.

Now, why is it important for a despairing person to have kind friends? Practically, what difference can we really make?

I'm going to share a bunch of practical thoughts about the value of loving the despairing. And I hope that through this you'll feel courage and even excitement about it.

First of all, there are many experts in society: psychologists, psychiatrists, counselors - who consult, have an appointment, and then move on. But in a church family, as we care for one another, we have the opportunity to keep at it, day after day, for the long term.

Isn't that exactly what God told us we need? He said "Don't forsake getting together, but encourage each other daily." (Hebrews 3:13; 10:25) Can we put that in simple modern English: God said, "Get together for daily encouragement." That's what we need in our sorrows, and that's what can happen as we love each other in the church.

Don't underestimate the importance of just being there for someone. You might tell someone "I'm here; I'm going to walk through this with you; I love you no matter what." And they might not really respond to that - they might be too despairing to be able to respond. Yet it still makes a difference. God tells us that despairing people need kind friends, so stick with it. Your presence reminds them that Jesus is always with them; reminds them that they're part of the family of Christ and their family is their for them. Be there.

As you stick with them, you really form a kind of partnership with that person. You and them together for a team, and they really need some people on their team in this.

As a teammate, you're going to stick with them through ups and downs. Winning streaks and losing streaks. You know there isn't a quick easy fix. You know God has placed them and you on a journey together, for His glory. It may be a hard path, but you're going to stick with them.

As their teammate, you can encourage them that there is a goal. This team matters, their life matters in God's plans and purposes. Even in the midst of deep sorrow and despair their life has purpose. As their teammate, you can remind them of that.

You can also provide a boost for their hope. Ed Welch, *Depression: Looking Up from the Stubborn Darkness*. He points out that when we're really low and feeling without hope ourselves, we can actually "ride on someone else's hope." When you don't feel like you have any faith or perseverance left, it's almost as if your kite can catch an updraft from someone else's faith or perseverance. One person who went through a period of depression said that one of the things that helped the most was "a friend who let me borrow her faith. My faith was so weak, but I always knew that she was confident of God's presence and love."

Your teammates. And even though you might not be as low as they are right now, you still need the same things: faith, love, hope, perseverance. So as God works in your heart about those things, you share that with them, and it can be like fresh wind in their sails.

As a matter of fact, simply sharing some of what God is doing in your heart is one of the simplest things you can do to encourage a person who is really low. You might be trying to think of things to say to help them, and it seems like nothing is helping. Maybe just share how the Lord is helping your faith, your hope, your perseverance, your joy.

As their teammate, you can also help them see things they might not be able to see themselves. More than anything else, you might be able to help them catch some glimpses of the glory of God. In depression our thinking often shrinks down to just us. And we need kind friends to pick up our eyes again to the big awesome character of God, and His fantastic purposes, and even our role in God's purposes.

You may be able to help, not just with grand views of the majesty of God, but also little practical daily steps. One of the basic characteristics of depression is that you stop feeling like doing anything, and if you follow those feelings and you stop doing things that were a regular part of your life before. And one part of recovery involves getting back to doing some of those things again. But you don't feel like it, so a teammate can help. Getting some structure, some routine, some simple to-do list and tasks. A teammate can help.

And of all the things you could resume doing, maybe nothing is more important than getting back to loving and serving others, even when you don't feel like it. A teammate can help a depressed person start to take little practical steps of loving service for others.

You can also read Scripture to your sorrowing friend. Sometimes we know we need God's Word, but we feel like we just can't do it. Our thinking is so foggy or our hearts so heavy that we can't do it. So if you are teaming up with a despairing person, choose a few verses and see if they might let you read. Keep it short and simple, but keep at it.

The Psalms can be especially helpful. When we can't figure out how to voice our heartaches to God, God Himself has given us the Psalms to help us find words that we couldn't find on our own. Welch's book has a couple of really helpful chapters on how to use the Psalms (chapters 6, 8).

In the hospital I sometimes see a family member sitting on the edge of the bed with a patient, holding the spoon, trying to get them to take bites. The patient is nauseous, has no appetite, wants no food. But the food is necessary if the patient will get better, so there is the family member, kindly, patiently, but persistently waiting with the spoon, ready to try to put in a bite. Sometimes that's just what we need spiritually. We need someone to gently, patiently force-feed us with really small bites of God's truth.

Sometimes we also need someone else who won't let us give up hope. In depression there is a tendency to want to kill hope. Our hopes have been disappointed, and we feel like we should never put our hopes in anything again. But that also means we can't enjoy anything now, because what if we lose that? It's too risky. So if we decide hope is too risky, we are left with an empty life. And as followers of Jesus, God calls us to both present enjoyment and future hope. So you need a teammate who won't let you give up hope. They speak up with the voice of God's truth, and plead with you to continue to look to God in hope.

Now sometimes a teammate is going to have to be confrontational. We see that here in Job 6:14, with the caution about forsaking the fear of the Almighty. Wrong thinking can lead us to despair, and we need the renewing of our mind. Sometimes we get stuck in mental mayhem or what I've heard called "stinking thinking."

We really need other people to speak truth into our stinking thinking. As much as we hate to be corrected, we need a teammate to say: "I don't think you're seeing that clearly. That isn't completely true."

We'll talk about this much more next week, but for now we're just noting that sorrowing and despairing people do need to have their wrong thinking confronted. But that should happen through kind friends, who have been faithful and loving teammates on this journey.

TRANSITION: So I've just been talking about the great value of a teammate, a kind friend who comes alongside a sorrowing or despairing person.

Now, I hope that as we talk about this, it might be sparking some courage in some of you, and maybe also giving you a simple sense of direction in knowing how to help.

So let's talk about those things a little bit more, starting with that idea of direction.

Suppose someone in church comes to you and expresses sorrow upon sorrow. They are low and despairing. They don't see much reason to keep going. Even if you're willing to help, where do you start, what direction do you go with him or her?

I hope from that we've seen this morning, you can see that you start first by just trying to be there. You join the despairing person on her path - not that you join her in her despair - but you come alongside her and you begin a long walk together doing the things that we've described this morning.

That means that you start into the situation with a real carefulness about jumping to any quick conclusions about what is wrong with her. We like quick conclusions, and we like quick answers. But that can get us in trouble, and it's rarely helpful for people struggling with deep despair. Simple Proverb, Proverbs 18:13 *He who gives an answer before he hears, it is folly and shame to him.* Quickly jumping to conclusions is not a virtue.

Especially with despairing people, it's better to be very careful about dogmatic explanations for why they are despairing. The one answer that explains it all. Better to start with the mindset that this is a long path, and I'm going to be with you, and we're going to patiently seek the Lord together.

Think of a football coach whose team loses the first five games of the season. And he's determined that he knows what the problem is - it's the pace of the offense. They've got to get the line of scrimmage quicker, get that ball snapped, keep the defense off balanced, get a flow and rhythm. And so every day in practice, that's what they're working on. That's all the players hear about. This is what's wrong. And finally his assistant coaches talk to him and they say, "Coach, would you be willing to consider some other things that might be wrong? Maybe there is more than one factor here, more than one thing we could improve?"

Something similar is true when you are teaming with someone who is deeply despairing. Be willing to look into all of the possibilities.

Let's look into physical factors. Something as simple as a serious vitamin deficiency can really affect a person's mood and energy level.

How about cultural factors: how is the world around you pressuring you to live a certain way, or schedule your life a certain way, or live up to certain expectations?

How about relationship factors: what are the big changes and challenges in your relationships over the past months or year?

How about spiritual factors. What has been going on in your heart before the Lord? How have you been staying close to Jesus? How have you been obeying or not obeying Him?

We are multi-faceted human beings: so we want to look at all of our lives. We want more than one plan of attack for depression.

So we don't just want to say: it's some sin I committed. And if I'll just find that sin and confess it I'll be all better. OK, look for sin. That's good. But that shouldn't be your only plan of attack.

Or, we could say, "Just get medication. And antidepressant will help you feel better." Well, there might be a reason to do that at some point, but don't make that your only plan of attack.

Or we could say, "I just need to learn how to deal with grief. That's my problem." Well, good - let's work on how you've handled the big losses in your life. But let's also look at physical possibilities; and let's also look at your spiritual factors.

Let's let God do whatever He wants to do in our hearts through this time of struggle.

And what's so exciting is that depression is always an opportunity to grow very deep roots in our relationship with God. Ed Welch says: "depression always directs our attention to the most important matters of human life." Who am I? Who is God? What is God doing? What does God say about me? Who am I going to trust?

And so even depression can end up giving us significant hope. Suffering produces endurance, endurance character, and character, hope (Romans 5:3-4). If it is through depression that God really helps us see how we need to draw close to Him, and how we need the renewing of our minds, and how we need the body of Christ - those are sweet blessings. The dry desert can become a well-watered plain. The mourning can be turned into joy.

So if you're helping a sorrowing person, patiently and humbly join them on that journey, and don't jump to a quick conclusion about what is wrong. Be willing to patiently look into every possibility, let God do whatever He wants.

So for those of you are caring for a sorrowing person, I said there are two things I hope will happen this morning. First, I hope you'll feel some sense of direction, as we've just been talking about. Second, I hope you might begin to feel some of your fears and uncertainties lessening a little bit.

I hope you might start to say: "With the Lord's help, I can do that. I can stick with somebody. I can listen. I can stay in touch. I can read Scripture. I can share what God's doing in my life. I can pray."

I know that our thinking can become very fearful when we're helping the despairing.

We might have the fear that they will take their own life. That fear can really paralyze us from actually helping someone. We panic and just push them off to someone else. But if someone is talking like that, about not wanting to live, you do need to take them seriously. Ask questions. Get a couple of other people involved right away, so you're not the only one who knows. Stay in really close contact with them. But you don't have to panic. It's actually not that uncommon for people to say "I just don't feel like living any longer." If you panic, you can actually kind of run away and abandon the person. So definitely get some help so you're not alone, but jump in to that person's life right then and there. Take courage that God can use you.

We might have the fear that if it's something medical, then it's way out of our league. Again, that's just not true. Because remember, we want to look into every possibility. So you may well want to encourage them to go see a doctor, and go with them if you can. There are many physical factors that affect our minds and emotions. But that doesn't mean you're shut out of the process. If they are taking psychiatric medications, that doesn't mean you don't have a role. They still need teammates just like you. The medical tools might help how they feel, but they can't actually give hope. You still need to be there as a voice of truth and hope, even as they look into the physical things that might help.

We might have the fear that there is spiritual warfare going on, and once again we might think we're out of our league. But that's not true. First of all, there is spiritual warfare going on all the time, in your life, and your daily fight for truth and obedience is spiritual warfare. So you know about spiritual warfare - you live in it all the time as Satan throws his fiery darts at you. And even if it's especially severe in someone's life, what is the most important weapon we have in spiritual warfare? It's truth. Satan is the father of lies, the word of God is the sword of the Spirit. When you bring truth into a situation, you are bringing the most powerful spiritual weapon of all. Next week we'll talk more about the kind of lies Satan sows that lead us toward despair.

So I hope you'll feel a sense of encouragement that as a child of God, with the compassion of Christ, with the Spirit in you, and armed with His truth, you can make a difference. Even in the life of someone who is deeply despairing. God can use you.

Elijah

I want us to finish up this morning with a reminder from the story of Elijah. TURN TO I Kings 19. I know this will be a familiar passage for some of you, but I think we might find fresh wisdom here in the light of our current study. For some of you this story will be new, and hopefully exciting to see.

Here we get a glimpse into God's own ministry to a despairing person. That person is Elijah, who was at this point alone with no one else to care for Him. He was ready to die. And God directly cared for him. So let's just watch and learn from what God did.

READ I Kings 19:1-4

So this story begins with some very intense circumstances. Elijah has someone promising to kill him. So there is real danger to his life.

And often our despair involves some real circumstances in our lives that are really difficult. We're not just imagining our trouble: there is real trouble.

But then Elijah gets alone: v. 3 he left his servant behind. Maybe his motive was good, but usually we tend to isolate ourselves when we are despairing.

And then we get a glimpse into what he is thinking in verse 4: First, "It is enough." I'm done. I can't take it any more. Very familiar words for anyone in despair.

Then, Yahweh, take my life, for I am not better than my fathers. I'm no spiritual giant. I'm no superstar prophet. Maybe this is similar to the common refrain: "No one will miss me anyways."

He had genuinely troubling circumstances, but as his mind interpreted those things, he quickly got off track. This is what we do: we experience genuinely hard things, but then we start to think incorrectly about those things, and it leads us toward despair.

The good news here is that Elijah is being honest with God. And that's really awesome: this kind of honesty is faith. He's bringing his despair to God, even though he's not thinking clearly about it.

Now, what does God do?

READ I Kings 19:5-9

Note that before God says anything to him, God lets him sleep and God gets him food. Sometimes sleep and a good meal can affect our mood a lot more than we want to admit. Sometimes we need to help a despairing person start to restore some order to his schedule, his eating, and his sleeping. God prescribes some physical answers so that Elijah will have the strength for some spiritual answers.

Remember, we go after depression with a multi-faceted attack.

Then God starts to help Elijah think through his wrong thinking. Verse 9, "What are you doing here Elijah?" Explain to me what you are thinking.

Please do this - if you're trying to help a despairing person, you'll have to listen to find out what they are actually thinking. God knows, but he still wants Elijah to have to think it through and verbalize his thoughts.

READ I Kings 19:10 There is a lot of truth in what Elijah said. But there's also some lie - there is a false conclusion he's reached: I'm the only one left. That's a very common conclusion in depression: I'm the only one.

We also see the suggestion that God has failed him, God isn't caring for him. God is just letting Israel fall apart. That's stinking thinking about God.

We don't have time to read the whole rest of the passage - I hope you'll do that on your own. But the first thing God does is give Elijah a little display of his majesty. When we are despairing, things like sleep and food might be a good start, but there is nothing we need more than the majesty of God to grab our attention again.

Then after the display of His majesty, God sent Elijah on a mission. See in verse 15: Go. When we're despairing, we need other people to help us get busy again serving the Lord and loving others. We need to get going.

Then God told Elijah, in verse 18, you're not the only one left. 7,000 will still be loyal to me.

Finally God gave Elijah help: see the end of the last verse in the chapter: *Then he [Elisha] arose and followed Elijah and ministered to him.*

God sent Elijah a teammate to be with him on the path, to minister to him.

So you see what God did:

sleep, food

confront and correct his thinking

show him God's majesty

get him to work serving the Lord

give him a teammate to minister to him on this path

That last point is just what this message has called each of us to be willing to do. When God brings a despairing person across your path, will you be willing to do just what verse 21 describes? Willing to go follow that person on their path, join them on their journey - though not in their despair - and minister to them.

What a sweet, sweet way to serve our beloved Jesus, who keeps on ministering to us just like this.

Let me mention a couple of resources in conclusion. There are many many Christian resources on depression and grief and despair. But I'm recommending two in particular:

The book by David Murray called *Christians Get Depressed Too*. It's a wonderful brief overview of the theme. Then there are the corresponding videos, just released on line in the last few months. You can get to those from headhearhand.org.

Then today I'm recommending the book by Ed Welch called *Depression: Looking Up from the Stubborn Darkness*. I cannot recommend this enough. This is a big thorough book, but it's not written like a big book. For the first half of the book he writes in short chapters. He uses short sentences. Simple ideas. He writes as someone who has both the medical, psychological, and spiritual background from helping countless people in depression. He knows what they can handle. And he writes in a wonderfully helpful way. This is not a technical manual for pastors to

understand depression. This is written for teammates - for you to take and read small portions to your friend who is in despair.

But I know that some of you won't be able to read a book like this. It's just too much, too overwhelming, too hard. No time, no money, whatever. So I'm going to start making a series of brief, unprofessional videos working through this book. And I'm doing it for you - for those of you who are sorrowing and despairing; and for those of you who want to help those who are sorrowing and despairing.

I'm going to start making very simple videos - no fancy lighting or editing or audio, I don't have time to do all that. Just simple. They'll be posted online, but privately. If you want to watch them, you'll need to get on an email list and each time a video is posted I'll send you an email with the link to watch it.

There is a sign-up sheet on the information table in the lobby. Just get your email address on there, do it today, because Lord willing I will start sending those out this week.

Pastor Eric - halloween tracts