

GRIEF – The Gift Nobody Wants

Part 3 of Series: NOW OR NEVER – Experiencing The Change
You've Been Waiting For

April 29th – 30th, 2023

Dr. Paul Looney

“Blessed are those who mourn, for they will be comforted.”
Matthew 5:4 (NIV)

“Praise be to the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of compassion and the God of all comfort, who comforts us in all our troubles, so that we can comfort those in any trouble with the comfort we ourselves receive from God. For just as we share abundantly in the sufferings of Christ, so also our comfort abounds through Christ.” 2 Corinthians 1:3-5 (NIV)

God comforts the troubled, and He troubles the comfortable.

We must get real in order to heal.

“My ears had heard of You but now my eyes have seen You.” Job 42:5 (NIV)

“The Lord is close to the brokenhearted and saves those who are crushed in spirit.” Psalm 34:18 (NIV)

“In order to keep me from becoming conceited, I was given a thorn in my flesh, a messenger of Satan, to torment me. Three times I pleaded with the Lord to take it away from me. But He said to me, ‘My grace is sufficient for you, for My power is made perfect in weakness.’ Therefore I will boast all the more gladly about my weaknesses, so that Christ’s power may rest on me. That is why, for Christ’s sake, I delight in weaknesses, in insults, in hardships, in persecutions, in difficulties. For when I am weak, then I am strong.” 2 Corinthians 12:7-10 (NIV)

Through grief, we find grace.

In grieving, we grow.

Through grief we are equipped to give.

By grieving, we gain God.

"Oh God, you are my God, and I long for You. My whole being desires You; in a dry, worn-out, and waterless land, my soul is thirsty for You." Psalm 63:1 (GNT)

"The body is not meant for sexual immorality, but for the Lord, and the Lord for the body." 1 Corinthians 6:13 (NIV)

How to grieve well

- 1. Feel your feelings.**
- 2. Make time to grieve.**
- 3. Reach out for support.**
- 4. Get real with God.**
- 5. Ride the waves and swim back to shore.**
- 6. Let grief help you grow.**

"...we glory in our sufferings, because we know suffering produces perseverance; perseverance, character; and character, hope." Romans 5:3,4 (NIV)

- 7. Turn your suffering into serving.**

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Pastor Kerry Shook:

Hey. I'm so glad you're here. We are in the series we're calling Now or Never. It's all about experiencing the change that you've been waiting for. We're looking at these principles of real life change. Today, we're talking about the second big principle of life change that's in God's Word, and you're in for a real treat today because Dr. Paul Looney is going to be bringing the message. Paul is a psychiatrist and MD, and he's had a private practice for years, and of course, he's also been a full-time pastor at Woodlands Church for years. Paul heads up all of our counseling ministries and our Lake council ministry, our restoration ministry, all of these amazing ministries that are making such an impact in such a powerful way. Paul is going to be talking about the gift that no one wants, but I'm telling you, it is a gift that brings us closer to God than anything else. It's a gift that can provide for you things that you never dreamed that you could experience, the peace, the joy, the love of God that we all need so much and the power to change. Give a warm welcome to our very own, Dr. Paul.

Dr. Paul Looney:

Good morning, y'all.

Audience:

Good morning.

Dr. Paul Looney:

It's great to be here. Did you ever get a gift you didn't want? Ever given something that turned out to be less than great? It's like the pastor church member brought him a pie. He was pretty excited. He liked pie, took it home, cut into it, and took a big bite. It was terrible. He invited his wife to take a taste, and she agreed the pie was awful. They tossed it. It went straight into the garbage can, but now what was he going to tell the lady? He didn't want to lie. After a little thought, he was prepared. Next Sunday, he took the pie plate back and says to her, "Thank you so much. I'm telling you a pie like that doesn't last long at our house."

Even my own family has given me gifts that I was less than thrilled with. My wife, Teri, though is a great gift giver. Sometimes, she gives me things before I know that I need or want them. Sometimes, I'm gracious about it, other times not so much, but often I find that the gift she gave me was better than what I might have picked out for myself.

This is definitely the case with the beatitudes. In them, God asks us to see as gifts things that are probably not on our Wishlist, but he says that if we receive them well, these perhaps unwanted gifts will bring us what we deeply desire; love, joy, and happiness. The beatitudes are the opening lines of Jesus' most powerful and well-known sermon, the Sermon on the Mount. They get their name from the Latin word *beatus*, which means blessed, because each of the beatitudes begins with the words, "Blessed are." Blessed means happy, fortunate, blessed, at peace, well-off. The second beatitude though, is especially confusing because it deals with the gift of grief. What? Grief is a gift? I know. Evidently, it is. Jesus tells us in that beatitude,

"Blessed are those who mourn, for they will be comforted."
Matthew 5:4 (NIV)

You could translate it happy or the sad. How confusing is that? I don't know about you, but I don't usually think of grief as a gift. Mourning does not seem to go with blessing or happiness. Even so, Jesus tells us grief is good and that we'll find comfort on the other side of loss and discover like all the beatitudes that mourning is a necessary step in our path toward a full and fulfilling life that God has for us.

For our key passage, 2 Corinthians 1:3-5, will you stand with me in honor of God's Word?

"Praise be to the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of compassion and the God of all comfort, who comforts us in all our troubles, so that we can comfort those in any trouble with the comfort we ourselves receive from God. For just as we share abundantly in the sufferings of Christ, so also our comfort abounds through Christ."
2 Corinthians 1:3-5 (NIV)

Let's pray. God, we thank you that you are a good, good father, that we can trust you to give us good gifts. God, today we ask that you open our hearts and open our minds to the message that Jesus puts forward in this beatitude. Help us to receive from you those things that might on the surface seem good, but which will lead us further down the path of life with you and allow us to connect with you and others in a deep and powerful way. We thank you for Jesus, in His name we pray. Amen. You may be seated.

We're in a series called, Now or Never, proposing that there is no time like the present to step into the good life that God has for us. Last week, we looked at

the power in admitting powerlessness. In the first beatitude, Jesus affirms that when we feel and admit our brokenness, our poverty of spirit, we can connect with him and the power to change.

I see this every Tuesday night when I lead our restoration meetings here at the church. Those who come do so because they feel a need for healing. Many of them are dealing with addictive and compulsive behaviors that are driven by pain. They result from our misguided attempts to avoid the unhealed trauma and pain from the past. Stopping the addiction is necessary but without it to numb the pain, the pain gets worse, and we have to face it. We must feel it to heal it.

Now, you may not have a crippling addiction, but let's face it, most of us would do almost anything to avoid pain, to avoid grief because pain hurts, but pain is not the enemy. It's avoiding pain that gets us into trouble. Facing pain is what grief is all about. We know grief is a normal part of life. Bad things happen to good people, and you can't play the game of life without losing and letting go. It's true we mourn when we lose someone we love, but we also grieve with the loss of a job, a friendship, a beloved pet, the loss of a home or health. We can grieve with a lost opportunity, a negative interaction, a fender bender, even a little thing can cause enormous grief and good events sometimes have negative side effects.

For instance, new parents may grieve the freedom that they've lost or the loss of time for intimacy. A new job may mean the loss of a home in our community. How well we live depends on to some degree on how good we get at grieving and letting go. In mourning, we feel our feelings and get them out because grieving helps us let go of what we can no longer have. We are free to embrace and enjoy what God has in store for us.

Let's do a little exercise. Everybody join me in taking a deep breath, deep as you can and let it out. It feels good because breathing deeply is good for our bodies and for our souls. Now, I want you to do something different. This time, exhale and release all the air from your lungs. Push it out, push, push, push. Breathe it all out. Try to get every molecule of air out of your lungs and don't breathe in until I give you a thumbs up. Okay, breathe in. Feels good, doesn't it?

Now, I have a question, which was deeper, the breath that you took when I said to take a deep breath or the one after releasing all the dead air of your lungs? If you're like most people, it was the second one. When we empty out all the old and depleted air, we naturally want to fill back up with fresh and energizing oxygen. Now, this principle is true emotionally as well as physiologically. If we take in more than we let out, our emotional tank gets filled and it loses its capacity to take in anything fresh. If we don't empty out the negative feelings, they take up space that progressively crowds out positive feelings like

gratitude, peace, joy, love. It turns out, you can't suppress negative feelings without also dampening the positive ones.

The passage we read together tells us that,

God comforts the troubled, and He troubles the comfortable.

I believe he lets us all go through things that seem so unfair, unjust and wrong, that we are compelled to wrestle with him, engaging with him, with our whole hearts, sharing with him our doubts, our fears, our frustrations, our confusion and anger.

Like a two-year-old saying no to his mommy, part of growing up in God is going toe to toe with him when he delivers, when life delivers a crushing blow that makes no sense. He wants us to be honest about our feelings and about what we want, even if we cannot have it. Rather than shutting down in the face of our pain, God wants us to open up to him, giving him our whole heart, the good, the bad, and the ugly.

We must get real in order to heal.

When we seek him with our whole heart, we will find him. In fact, true surrender comes after struggle. Even Jesus grieved in the Garden of Gethsemane. He was fully God but also human and, in his humanity, he cried out to his father, my Father, if it is possible, let this cup be taken from me. He did not want the cross and its unbearable suffering. Although it was the primary thing, he came to the planet to do, he asked his father if there was any other way to accomplish our salvation. Three times he begged for another option, but when none was offered, he surrendered. Each time that he declared his deep desire to avoid pain, Jesus added, "Nevertheless, not my will but yours be done." God wants our honesty, even if it's raw and resistant.

In the Gospels, Jesus tells a little parable about two sons. They were asked by their father to go work in the fields. The first one is quick to say, "Sure dad," but distraction or disobedience kept him from actually doing the work. The second son was like, "No way," but later he had a change of heart. He did the work in the field. Jesus lets us know that God wants us to be like that second son, clear about our feelings and desires, but willing to let him have the final word.

I think for all of us, there will be times when God seems far away, times when he doesn't seem to care or be paying attention. This was certainly true for Job. His story in the Old Testament opens us to a profound truth that is also profoundly disturbing. That is that even those who love God, and those God cherishes the most, will at times feel abused and abandoned by him.

In my early years, I didn't understand this. I grew up in a church tradition that pretty much said, if you feel far from God, it's your own fault. Sadly, that's pretty much true, pretty much what Job's friends told him after a bit. He had lost everything in one fell swoop and they were like our culture, determined to get as far as away from grief as they could. We are like that. If we're not good at it and we can't fix it, we want to shut it down. Job knew better. He knew that he did not deserve the devastation that came upon him. Losing all his possessions and all his children made no sense. Yet, he knew from experience that God was good. Even in the worst of times, he pressed in rather than pulling out. Job wrestled with God in his grief, pouring out his hurt, his anger, his confusion, going so far as to tell his friends, even if he slays me, I will serve him.

It took a while, but Job got it all out. He cleaned out the bowl of his suffering and at the end of his grieving, God showed up. It was Job's now or never moment and it changed him forever.

In Job 42:5, he summed it up by saying,

“My ears had heard of You but now my eyes have seen You.” Job 42:5 (NIV)

His encounter with God changed the way Job saw himself, his circumstances and how he saw God and his future. He was radically and beautifully transformed. Like Job, when we wrestle with mourning and grief, we ask the question why. We become desperate for answers, but as Job found, answers don't always come. Maybe this is because they wouldn't make sense to us. Like a parent explaining to a two-year-old the need for a painful surgical procedure just doesn't make sense to the child.

While God doesn't answer all our questions, he will show up. He gives us more of himself. In fact, the word we translate comfort in the second beatitude literally means to call near. Perhaps our grief is what touches God's heart and brings him close. Psalm 34, verse 18 says,

“The Lord is close to the brokenhearted and saves those who are crushed in spirit.” Psalm 34:18 (NIV)

I experienced the pain and power of grief firsthand. I was born in 1955 on Christmas Day and from the time I was seven days old, I was in church at least three times a week. The third of four children, I was a good kid. I was compliant and self-reliant. My dad was a preacher. I never wanted to cause pain or problems. Early on, God gave me a love for him, and I wanted to be his favorite son. I did everything I could think of to gain God's approval and the approval of others. I wanted to be in God's army, and I wanted to lead the charge. When I realized as a teenager that I was more attracted to guys than to girls, I was shocked and pretty much devastated. How could this happen? This

was not in the plan. I did not choose this. I did not want it. I decided I would fix it. I prayed. I fasted. I read all I could about it. I memorized scripture. I confessed. I sought healing and deliverance, but nothing worked. It all seemed so unfair.

When I'd been small, I was a sensitive kid, but ridiculed for being a crybaby. I shut it down and for many years, I did not cry at all. In fact, I was so emotionally disconnected. I couldn't even tell you what made me angry. I would talk myself out of any negative feelings. I did not grieve, but my struggle in my sexuality brought all my feelings, front and center. I couldn't avoid or ignore them anymore. I had to feel them and admit my brokenness, my pain, my frustration, and my fear. I knew I didn't choose to struggle and that I would do anything to change it. It seemed like God had made me this way and he wasn't helping. He became the target of my negative emotions and I launched on him my hurt and my frustration, my disappointment and confusion. My anger also came out and, in the process, I realized that I could be honest with God, and he wouldn't strike me with a bolt of lightning. He didn't reject or shame me. In fact, he seemed calm in the face of my distress. He didn't fix me, but he didn't ditch me either.

After a long season of grief that was terribly painful, with lots of tears, I realized I might not get my wish for change, but that I still belonged to him, and he could be trusted even if he wasn't doing what I thought a loving father should do. I was willing to do what he asked of me and willing to wait on him.

There was, to be fair, a time in medical school when I wavered. I was weary, had to struggle and considered diving into life as a gay man. Right about then though, my older brother committed suicide and his death shocked me back to reality. The loss was a wake-up call reminding me that life is short, that God's Word is true and that we will all stand before him. Eventually, grieving my brother's death, brought me back to deep places with God. My brother's rejection of me as a kid had been a key factor in my disconnecting from my emotions, from my masculinity. It fueled my self-rejection and my same sex attraction.

My brother Rick and I had never been close, so I had to grieve what we did not have as much as what we did. I realized I shut the door in relationship with him when he had rejected me, and it was so grateful that I reached out to him several times in the weeks before his death. It turns out that grieving the loss of a broken relationship can be even more difficult than letting go of a healthy and satisfying one, but by grieving and letting go, I came to acceptance of his death and acceptance of myself as God's loved son.

I wasn't the perfect man, but I realized I was perfect for God's purpose. I didn't have to fit a mold or find validation from others, my focus of wellbeing shifted.

It wasn't what I thought about myself or what others believed about me, it was his love and acceptance that truly mattered.

Well, that set me free to pursue marriage and to trust God, to use me as he saw fit. Thankfully, Teri knew of my struggles, and she still said yes to married life together. I realized; I didn't have to be attracted to all women. I just need to be attracted to one. I knew that my struggle looked different than that of many other men, but I saw that all of us must struggle and surrender to God's design for our lives and sexuality. In mourning, my sexual brokenness and my brother's death, I'd gone through all the classic stages of grief; shock, denial, anger, bargaining. I'd gone through depression and finally to a place of acceptance, but God was good. He led me beyond acceptance. He helped me find meaning in the mourning and purpose and the pain.

Like my namesake, the Apostle Paul, I found that my thorn in the flesh brought me closer to the healer.

Let's read from 2 Corinthians chapter 12 verses 7 through 10,

"In order to keep me from becoming conceited, I was given a thorn in my flesh, a messenger of Satan, to torment me. Three times I pleaded with the Lord to take it away from me. But He said to me, 'My grace is sufficient for you, for My power is made perfect in weakness.' Therefore I will boast all the more gladly about my weaknesses, so that Christ's power may rest on me. That is why, for Christ's sake, I delight in weaknesses, in insults, in hardships, in persecutions, in difficulties. For when I am weak, then I am strong." 2 Corinthians 12:7-10 (NIV)

Notice that he calls the thorn in the flesh a messenger of Satan sent to torment him. Just as God authorized Satan to attack Job, God sometimes allows us to experience bad things to accomplish his good purpose. In my own life, God has used my grief and my struggles to humble me and empower me to speak grace and truth to others. Ironically, he's used me to teach hundreds of men how to better love their wives, how to live lives of purity and integrity. Like many of those I counsel, through their struggles, I would not wish my grief or struggles on anyone, but I also would not trade them because of how God used them to grow me up, make me his and make me yield it and useful.

Grieving is not easy. It can be hard work and there will be tears, but I believe that tears moisten the soil of our hearts. Without tears, our hearts can become cold, hard, and barren. Grief and our tears can be like water to the garden of our souls to allow to grow in us those good things that God wants to produce, but grieving takes time. There's no quick fix. You can slow it down, but you can't really speed it up and everyone grieves in their own way. We need help to grieve well.

Our grief share group graduated this last week, and I was invited to join the banquet and celebrate the men and women who had leaned on one another

and God, as they walked through the process of grieving and growing. A young woman there approached me and thanked me for pushing her to attend. She had lost her husband in Covid and barely left her apartment for a year. Connecting with others through Grief Share activated her hope, gave her the courage to grow and to engage the grief in a healthy way. She found that she could both receive and give comfort through connection with others.

We, Christians, often want to skip over grief. We think we should be happy and positive all the time without having to work through the pain. We're uncomfortable with it and sometimes we say dumb things to people who are dealing with it, whether it's our own grief or someone else's, though, we must learn to be still, to let God be God. If we trust him, he will bring us to healing, even if it's his way and his time.

If you'd like to love God with your whole heart and engage life wholeheartedly, then you must learn to address negative feelings and grief and you must do it regularly. Every day brings disappointment, frustration, loss, and even in our best moments, we have to grieve the gap between who we are and who we wish to be.

For me, journaling is the best way to get it out and to process grief. It can be like digging for buried treasure. You have to dig through some dirt to get to the gold, but it's worth the time. Of course, journaling is a discipline like going to the gym. Those who need it most may resist it most. You can give God your grief. He knows how grief feels by sending his son into this dark planet. God shows his love and his willingness to feel our pain. He endured watching his own dear son, betrayed, denied, abandoned, and falsely accused. He watched as he was rejected and ridiculed, mocked and abused. He let his son experience the most intense agony of soul and body, which was made only worse by the fact that Jesus deserved not even a moment of it and both of them knew they had the power to stop it at any time. I believe heaven wept when Jesus suffered and died just as Jesus wept for Lazarus and his sisters, even though he knew there would be a resurrection.

We cannot skip over grief. Like a mother comforting her child who sees her as mean for taking him to get a painful and scary shot, God comforts us. He knows the suffering will end and is needed to inoculate us against sin and to make us strong, but he feels our pain. We can cast our cares on him because he cares for us. There are times you'll feel him comforting you in your grief, but there are times when he'll feel far away, and you have to comfort yourself by remembering all he has done and anchoring yourself in his promise and he will fulfill his promise as we look to him.

Like a child when mom is not available, sometimes we have to find comfort within ourselves or reach out for help from others. Sometimes grief connects us

with our courage and our strength, but it also connects us with a spiritual family. Just watch this.

Speaker:

When we moved to Texas, it was a good life. Just didn't have spiritual connection in it. I believed in a higher power, but I never had relationship with God. We were invited to this church, and we never made it a priority until a tragic incident happened in my life. My husband died doing an improvement in our house and he fell through the vaulted ceiling and unfortunately, we didn't even make it to the hospital and my life just turned upside down and I was left with just three kids and no one around. I was like, "How am I going to do this? How am I going to do this?"

We needed venue for the funeral services and when we reached out to Woodlands Church, they said yes right away, even though we have never attended. One of the pastors, before the funeral service, he sat me down and he asked me question, "What was Oleg like? What was our family like and everything?" I told him then that that was the first time in the last week that I felt ease in my heart that I could speak with ease, and it felt I could finally breathe in here while we were in church. That's what I liked that he planted a seed of God's unconditional love and showed me how much church has to offer. I started just, I kept going every Sunday, no matter what. I would bring the kids. Kids are taken care of, and I just kept going and listening to services and each one would speak to me about something that I needed to hear.

One of the pastors, he was like, "There's Grief Share on Tuesdays. You will still benefit from it." I was pushing back. I was like, "I don't have time for this." He was like, "Okay." Then, a few weeks later he was like, "Hey, how about Wednesday? There's a single parent?" Again, I pushed back. I'm like, "I don't know. I don't have time and I don't know if I can do it." Then, one day I picked up my kids and I remember this again, I picked up my kids from daycare and something just, I had this urge to go to church and I'm like, "Kids, you want to go to church?" They're like, "Yay, church." I turned around and I go to church. Without invitation, I know they meet at 6:30. I just show up and they accepted me like family. I joined single parents. Then, I was able to join my Grief Share on Tuesdays, which is an amazing help and I've gone through it twice, twice. The fellowship that you get, the people that support you there, it's just indescribable. I was never a person and I thought I would never be a person who would bring people to church.

Now, I go around and when I see people who do need help, I just grab them and say, "Hey, are you going to church? Come to mine." I received so much love from this church and I realized I'm a part of a family that I wasn't aware I belong to, but I do belong. Life is still hard sometimes. I can't say that "Everything's easy since I'm at church." No, life is still hard sometimes, but we

go through the hardships together. I have support here. I have people to talk to. I have people to pray for me. When I fell to the bottom, this church helped me get up and even stand up and find peace.

Dr. Paul Looney:

Wow. What a testimony. Those of you that know Ally know that she is a beautiful person with a beautiful story. She says in the beginning of the video that she had belief in a higher power, but her grief brought God down, but gave her higher power a name and gave her a family that could support her. Losing a spouse is a terrible thing and a sudden and traumatic death is even harder to bear.

Grief is complicated if there are unmet promises, unspoken words, unrealized dreams. Untimely deaths like a young person or a person in the prime of life are especially hard and some people going through this kind of trauma are forever changed for the worst. They can get stalled out in life and develop what we call PTSD, posttraumatic stress disorder. If like Ally, we process our pain, we give it to God and we get back up, he can bring us through it with PTG, posttraumatic growth. Like her, we can all find the gifts of grief.

Through grief, we find grace.

Like Ally, we can reach out to God and others to find comfort through that deep connection. Going through hard times together forges strong bonds, we can connect with and find our community.

In grieving, we grow.

We lean into our faith and fortify our conviction that God is good, even when things are bad. When he seems far away, we learn to self soothe, reminding ourselves of what we know of God and that he can bring resurrection after death.

Through grief we are equipped to give.

We can comfort others with the comfort we receive. This is part of why grief share is so powerful. Each participant receives and gives encouragement, support and compassion.

By grieving, we gain God.

Through my struggle and pain, I realized I had to let go of what I thought would be my perfect life. Through letting go, I realized that my heart belonged to

heaven and that really nothing on Earth would satisfy my deep longings completely.

My deep need and yours is to connect with God. When I was struggling, feeling disconnected and grieving, Psalm 63 verse 1 became my go-to verse. When I wanted something forbidden, I reminded myself of what Psalm 63 says,

"Oh God, you are my God, and I long for You. My whole being desires You; in a dry, worn-out, and waterless land, my soul is thirsty for You." Psalm 63:1 (GNT)

By turning the object of my desires heavenward, I found peace. I found that I could release my pain to God and find him drawing near.

We know that in heaven, he will wipe away all of our tears. The Apostle Paul affirms the change in our focus by saying in 1 Corinthians chapter 6,

"The body is not meant for sexual immorality, but for the Lord, and the Lord for the body." 1 Corinthians 6:13 (NIV)

We are made for God. Later in that chapter, he says that our bodies are the temple of the Holy Spirit. We are not our own. We belong to him. Belonging is where we find comfort in our grief.

In your times of distress, God promises, if you mourn, he will comfort you. You can find calm after a storm and find joy after your dark nights of grief.

How to grieve well

1. Feel your feelings.

What you feel you can heal. By acknowledging your dark feelings, you can step into the light.

2. Make time to grieve.

Give yourself a few minutes every day to process your pain. Process your grief. Write it down. Journaling helps you see more clearly what is there. It helps you chart your progress and remember the lessons you learn along the way. Grieving takes time. You can slow it down if you don't take time for it.

3. Reach out for support.

Take advantage of Life Groups, Counseling, Grief Share, Restoration, attend services, find ways to connect.

4. Get real with God.

Be honest with God. He knows what's in your heart already but press in through the pain. Don't pull out. Grab on to God.

5. Ride the waves and swim back to shore.

What do I mean? I mean, keep doing life even in the face of your grief. Waves of grief will come and when they knock you down, get back up. Go again. Take care of yourself and care for others.

6. Let grief help you grow.

"...we glory in our sufferings, because we know suffering produces perseverance; perseverance, character; and character, hope." Romans 5:3,4 (NIV)

Don't let yourself be a victim. God has made us be overcomers and we can grow most in our times of trial.

7. Turn your suffering into serving.

All of our leaders in Grief Share and Divorce Care, Restoration have made this choice. Serving redeems our suffering and serving brings joy. Turns what the enemy meant for evil into great good and people who serve will, like Jesus did, they're the happiest people on the planet.

Once again, grief is hard. Even if we're letting go of something bad for us, like a bad habit, a bad relationship or an addiction, we'll go through withdrawal, which is a physical manifestation of grief, but when something is obviously bad, we comfort ourselves knowing we'll be better off on the other side of letting go, but letting go of something good is more difficult.

Sometimes it seems all wrong when we have to let go of a wayward child, a dying spouse, a job, our health or even life itself. Even then, God's promise rings true. Blessed are those who mourn for they will be comforted. It may not happen on our time table, but God is faithful. He will do what he says.

Early in this series, Pastor Kerry talked about the wilderness and the promised land and that what lies between the two is the Jordan River. For me, that Jordan River may be symbolic of our grief. The word Jordan means to go down and sometimes we have to go down in order to get back up. We have to go through our grief to get from the wilderness to the promised land. If you're in a wilderness, I'm here to remind you, there's something on the other side. The life you long for may not look the way you think, but God has something for you that may be better than what you imagine.

God brings something good on the other side of something that feels very bad. Some of you have been avoiding the river if we fall together and found you're not fully loving life. By shutting down the pain, you find yourself also lacking pleasure and joy. If you choose, you can step out of denial and feel your feelings. You won't be comfortable, but it will be good.

Grief is a gift, and today could be your now or never moment. Today, you can decide to go there with God. Maybe you've been medicating the pain, turning to carbs or coke, spending or surfing the net, tequila or TikTok to avoid your bad feelings. Maybe you've thrown yourself so hard into performance and perfectionism that you've become a human doing rather than a human being.

Today, you can step off the treadmill, get still with God, and feel your feelings, reminding yourself, again, pain is not the enemy. It's avoiding it that gets us into trouble and God will go with you. He will be with you in the pain and in the mourning.

Others of you, have not avoided the pain. Instead, you've been swept along in the river of grief. You're caught up in regrets or bitterness. Perhaps you're waiting for God to scoop you up or give you back what you lost, when what you need may be to mobilize all your strength to stand up and head for dry ground. Today, may be your day to get back in the game, realizing that you lose more every day when you don't let go of what's been lost. If your hands are full of regret of what ifs and if onlys, you can choose to release them, to open your hands to receive God's gifts for you.

I know some of you have shut out God entirely deciding he must not be good to have let something so bad happen to you or one you love. Today, could be your now or never moment. You can choose to get back in the ring with God. He may not give you all the answers, but he will give you himself in a fresh way. Your wrestling draws him close, and he will comfort you after the struggle. You can rest assured there will come a day when he will right all wrongs. Grief is the gift. When the tears fall, God is there. Psalm 58 verse 8 says,

"You keep track of all my sorrows. You have collected all my tears in a bottle. You have recorded each one in your book." Psalms 56:8 (NLT)

One day, we're promised," in Revelation 21:4, "that God himself will wipe every tear from their eyes. After that, heaven will be a place of no more. There'll be no more death, no more crying, no more grief or sorrows and no more pain. The old order of things will pass away, and he will make all things new." Let's pray.

God, we need you, especially in times of grief we need you near, when we're hurting, when we're uncertain, when we don't know what's happening, we're confused and broken, beaten up by life, God. Maybe it's our own choices that have led us to grief, bad decisions. Maybe we're dealing with regrets and if

onlys. God, whatever our state, we come to. We want to open our hearts to you. We want to be honest with you and let you have the good, the bad, and the ugly that's there. God, some in this room have been hurt so badly by loss that they've determined never to love again, never to feel that pain. Maybe, maybe they've made a vow to never be vulnerable again, not to invest or care because we know if we love, we will grieve. God, today, give us a willingness to feel our feelings and to grieve. Give us grace to trust you with our pain. Give us courage to love again, to open our hearts to you and to others, knowing that if others fail us, if we fail ourselves, if we fall, you will catch us. You will restore us. You will heal us.

God, we know that everything that is surrendered to you will eventually be made right in this life or in the next. We trust you. We thank you. We love you. In Jesus' name, we pray. Amen.