

Why Your Life Sucks
Everything Happens for a Reason
January 12, 2014

PRELUDE – O The Deep, Deep Love
Worship – Our God’s Alive / Beautiful Things

Video Bumper – Rainiest Day of Summer

Feature – “Waiting on the World to Change” / Offering
Drama – “Check Mates”

Good morning everyone.

As Shannon said we are beginning a new series today: *Why Your Life Sucks ... and what you can do about it*. Before we get into it, I want to give you a little bit of background.

First of all, the reason I decided to do this series is that, for most people, the first month of the New Year is usually a bit of a letdown. In fact, I read the other day about a team of researchers in Britain who claim to have discovered that the first Monday in January is the most depressing day of the entire year. They actually have a name for it. They call it “Blue Monday.”

I don’t know how accurate their conclusion is but I do know that most people tend to feel at least a little bit blah after the holidays.

- For some of us, it’s because we’ve spent too much or eaten too much. We’ve gotten away from helpful disciplines in our lives. And now we see that whatever mountains were in front of us before are now even taller. To get to where we want to be mentally, emotionally, physically, spiritually, relationally, financially, professionally, etc, is going to be a harder climb than ever.
- For some of us, the “blah” is because we’ve had such a great time with family and friends ... and now it’s back to the real world. It’s back to the daily grind which, for those of us who live in Kansas City, includes cold, snow, ice, long nights, short days and yet another unhappy ending for the Chiefs.

No matter how we get the “blahs”, it’s very easy for that feeling to spiral down into a general attitude of “how bad my life sucks” ... which, in reality, may or may not be true, because ...

Whether or not a person’s life really does “suck” has a lot to do with perspective.

In fact, saying that something – anything – “sucks” is *all about* perspective, and I think sometimes our perspective is a little bit off.

I’ve said this before on several occasions: I think the word “sucks” is drastically overused in our culture. Personally, I think there are only a few types of situations which truly fit the somewhat – how shall I put it? – “off-color nature” of the term. For a lot of people, myself included, saying that something “sucks” is almost like cussing or swearing. I even debated using it as the series title because it’s not a word I use very often and I certainly wouldn’t – and didn’t – encourage my kids to use it.

Defining the Term

However, since I don’t get to make the rules ... and this is where our culture is these days ... let’s talk for a bit about how the word is typically used in our cultural understanding. And I want to do this so you’ll understand the kinds of situations which I am addressing (and which I am *not* addressing) in this particular series.

I see three predominant ways in which people use the term.

1. It's used to describe inconveniences or minor disappointments.

I'm sure you've heard of the phrase "first world problems." It's a way of describing frustrations and complaints that are experienced only by privileged individuals in wealthy countries like ours. Those are the kinds of things that fall into this category.

For example, "it really has sucked that it's been icy and snowy pretty much every Sunday for the past month." And "it sure did suck the way the Chiefs fell apart in the second half two weeks ago."

But the truth is, the snow and cold, for most of us, is just an inconvenience. The Chiefs losing – in the overall scheme of disappointments that can happen in a person's life – is relatively minor (unless, of course, you play for the Chiefs and you lose your job over it!)

2. Another way people use the word is to describe difficult but transitory circumstances.

Things that happen in this category have a much greater impact on life than the first category but they're predominantly temporary in nature. Things can and often do change for the better at some point.

For example ...

Losing your job; having bronchitis; working hard and failing (or not getting the result you deserve); gaining 10 extra pounds from Thanksgiving to New Years; bankruptcy; being forced to move for some reason; addictions, interpersonal conflict.

All those things are hard when they happen but they are not necessarily, by definition, permanent. You can recover from bronchitis. You can get out of bankruptcy. You can overcome an addiction.

3. The final way the word is used (at least as I see it) is to describe tragic or life-altering events and situations.

Things that happen in this category are really bad because there's no "do-over" and they leave a permanent scar on our lives. Things might get better but there's no going back to exactly the way it was. You either figure out a new normal going forward or you roll over and die, literally or figuratively.

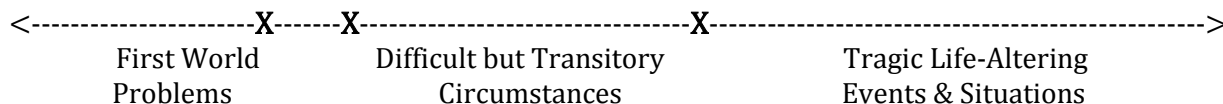
I'm talking about things like ...

- The death of someone you love or even just death in general.
- Going through a divorce, especially if you're a kid and your parents are splitting up.
- Being disabled whether partially or fully.
- Suffering a major betrayal of some kind like infidelity or even identity theft.
- Being arrested and going to jail whether justly or unjustly.

Those kinds of things truly do "suck" and I have no problem in describing them in that way. In fact, many of you have heard me say on more than one occasion that I really think *death sucks*. I've done so many funerals and I think one of these days I'm going to get over this, but I don't. It still pisses me off. I don't use that phrase very often but there are certain things worth getting pissed off over and death is one of them. It is so destructive – I hate it. I hate what happens to families – even when it's time - it's just terrible. It's not the way God planned it.

Now, with those categories defined, it might be helpful to put them on what might be called "the continuum of suckage" ...

... which would look like this



And pretty much everything you don't like about your life right now falls somewhere on that line.

So, what I want for us to do for next minute or so is to stop and think about that. What I want you to do, especially if you came here this morning thinking "man, my life really sucks right now," is to look at that diagram and figure out where your life right now falls on that spectrum and mentally mark that spot. Maybe you would put several marks to represent different situations. In fact, those three marks you see on the screen represent three situations in *my life* right now.

I'll be quiet and you think about how you would mark that scale for your life.

<Quiet for 60 seconds>

Got it mapped out? Good. Let's pray before we move on.

Father God, all of us in this room are experiencing some level of difficulty with our lives today.

- Some of us are fortunate to have only first world problems.
- Some of us have been and are being crushed by tragic life-altering events and situations.
- Most of us are somewhere closer to the middle. Things are challenging, things are hard, but they're not necessarily permanent.

What I ask for the rest of this message is that you would begin to reveal to each of us *why* we are where we are and how we should deal with it. Thanks for loving us and caring about us and being with us in the middle of our trials and demonstrating that so clearly in your Son, Jesus of Nazareth.

In his name we pray. Amen.

Now, as I said a few minutes ago, I wanted to go through all of that – to define the term – so that I can make it clear what I am (and what I am not) talking about in this series. And what I am *not* talking about in this series is the first category.

- "It's too cold."
- "The Chiefs lost."
- "I can't decide if I should remodel or sell my house" (which is my leftmost mark on the scale).

If life sucks for you because of those kinds of things, if you're all amped over those inconveniences and disappointments ... get over it. Seriously. Take a trip to the third world and see how the majority of the world's population lives. Or Google it and watch some videos online and get some perspective about your life.

And then get on your knees and thank God that you were born into the top five percent of the world economically, socially, politically, educationally, medically and a dozen other ways.

And then, quite frankly, shut up about it. Quit whining. Quit complaining. And maybe even stop using the word "sucks" to describe your first-world problems. It trivializes the things that really do suck in this world and in your life.

And just so you'll know, I'm saying that to me, too, because I whine and complain about how "sucky" a lot of *my* first-world problems just like everybody else.

Two Main Causes

But, let's move on. Let's talk about why your life sucks – at least, the part of it that falls into categories two and three. Let's talk about why you and I sometimes experience “difficult but transitory circumstances” as well as “tragic or life-altering events and situations.” And we can do that because *everything really does happen for a reason*.

But I don't mean that in the way that most people think of that phrase. When most people hear “everything happens for a reason” (especially in a religious setting) they interpret it to mean “that happened because God must have wanted it to turn out like that.”

- God must have had some reason for letting me go bankrupt.
- God must have chosen for me to bear the cross of a wayward child.
- God must have ordained it for my spouse to leave me.
- God must have wanted another angel in Heaven. (That one makes me want to throw up whenever I hear it).

Now, I certainly don't want to minimize the sovereignty of God. God chooses many things about our lives over which we have no control. And sometimes, on rare occasions, for reasons we can never know this side of eternity, God *does* choose for us to go through things that are difficult or tragic. But that is far more often the *exception* than the rule.

Let me say that again.

God choosing for us to go through things that are difficult or tragic is far more often the *exception* than the rule.

Most likely, God didn't divinely ordain that you should lose your job. God didn't decree that you should somehow for some reason experience financial calamity. God didn't even decide that you should gain 10 pounds over the holidays. And, despite what some of the players may think, God didn't chose for the Colts to beat the Chiefs just so they could lose to the Patriots last night!

When I say “everything happens for a reason” with respect to categories two and three, I mean something quite different from what we might call the Divine Prerogative. Actually, I mean *two* things because far more often than not there are two main causes for the suckage in our lives.

#1. Sometimes your life (and mine) sucks because of what we did or did not do.

We've not taken the initiative like we should have. Instead, we've been “waiting on the world to change” as the song put it. Or, as the drama illustrated, we've done what we know we should not do. We've made foolish and sometimes even sinful decisions. Bottom line, our life sucks because of *us*. *We're* responsible.

And it's worked that way since the beginning of biblical history. In the book of Genesis, Moses says that when God created the first man and the first woman he gave them one rule: “don't eat the fruit off of that one tree over there. You can have anything else you want in this garden, but not that.”

So, what did they do? They ate the fruit of off that one tree. And they were thrown out of the garden. They were thrown out of paradise. Life for them began to suck. You can read all about it.

And even though the woman tried to blame the serpent who tempted her and the man tried to blame the woman because she told him how yummy the fruit was, truth was it was their own choice.

Now, whether you believe that story is literal or whether you believe it is meant to be an allegory of the human condition, the point is the same. We choose foolishly and sinfully and there is a consequence – life sucks, if not immediately, then eventually ... which is why the Apostle Paul echoed Moses centuries later when he wrote:

Don't be misled—you cannot mock the justice of God.

In other words, God has designed the world to work a certain way and you can't get around it. And here's the system:

You will always harvest what you plant.

Therefore ...

Those who live only to satisfy their own sinful nature will harvest decay and death from that sinful nature. But those who live to please the Spirit will harvest everlasting life from the Spirit. Galatians 6:7-8 (NLT)

... which is a bit of a misleading translation because, really, the word Paul uses there in Greek is "aionios" which literally means "the kind of life God himself lives" – not the eternal life that comes from faith in Christ. What Paul's talking about in this passage is how your life will go in the here and now.

So let's not get tired of doing what is good. At just the right time we will reap a harvest of blessing if we don't give up. Galatians 6:9 (NLT)

In other words, do the right things and do the wise things and your life probably won't suck so much.

Now, some of you are listening to this and I know what you're thinking. You're thinking, "Really? You're doing a whole sermon about this? You've spent all this energy just to tell us that we're responsible for some of the suckage in our lives? Seriously, Rick, we understand cause and effect. We get it."

I'm sure you do. But what I've observed in many, many people (and also in myself) is that we have an uncanny ability to apply cause and effect to everyone *except for ourselves*. In other words, we have 20/20 dead-eye vision when analyzing why *other people* are going thru difficult and even tragic circumstances. "Well, it's obvious why his marriage sucks. He treated her like crap so she ran around on him. What did he expect?" Cause and effect.

But, when it comes to our own situation? "Oh, I just don't know why I'm not losing weight. I work out four times a week. I also stop for a McFlurry on the way home but that shouldn't matter, should it?" Even though we may understand cause and effect, a lot of times we either can't see it or don't want to see it working *in our own lives*.

There's a fascinating story about this lack of self-awareness recorded in the Gospel of John. Jesus had been on an incredibly successful run of ministry. Everywhere He had gone, large crowds of people had come to see him and many of those folks became convinced that He was the Messiah.

But, at one point, somehow Jesus picked up on something that was going to derail the lives of those new believers. It was going to stunt their growth and lead them to experience far less than God desired for them in this life. To use the terminology of this series, life was going to suck for them if they didn't get a grip on this.

So, John tells us ...

Jesus said to the people who believed in him, "You are truly my disciples if you remain faithful to my teachings. And you will know the truth, and the truth will set you free." John 8:31-32 (NLT)

Simple enough, right? Living with a true and accurate perception of God, others and self will always produce great freedom – especially when you compare it to the alternative, which is *living in deception or living with a false perception of reality*.

This teaching is kind of like the “you reap what you sow” teaching. Everybody gets it. You don’t really need to make a big deal of it. However, the people who heard Jesus say this – believers – *were offended*. They did not like the fact that Jesus was implying that somehow they might not have a full grasp on truth; that they might be living with at least some degree of self-deception in their lives.

But their response actually made Jesus’ point for him (and made them look really, really dumb).

“We are descendants of Abraham,” they said. “We have never been slaves to anyone. What do you mean, ‘You will be set free?’” John 8:33 (NLT)

Now, how could these people say such a thing? Had they never read the Old Testament and the stories of captivity of their nation? Had they never eaten the Passover, which celebrated and remembered God rescuing them from their slavery in Egypt?

Even worse, had they not seen the Roman soldiers proudly marching through their streets carrying banners decorated with the image of Caesar? These people were under Roman occupation as Jesus spoke!¹ And they hated it. In many ways, their life sucked because of it.

What’s amazing is how Jesus responded to them. He didn’t say anything close to what I just said. He didn’t point out what should have been obvious to them. I’ll show you what He said in just a minute but, first, let’s summarize what we’ve seen so far and talk about some of the implications.

I’ve said so far there are two main causes behind a sucky life and one of them is *ourselves* and the choices we’ve made; the things we’ve done and the things we’ve not done. And if that’s where you are in your life, and if it’s going to get better going forward, it’s going to require two things of you.

First of all, open yourself to the truth.

If you’ve *not done* what you *should have done* or if you’ve *done* what you *should not have done* and now your life sucks, stop acting like it’s some great mystery why you are where you are. Stop acting like you’re the victim of some unseen or unknowable force. Stop telling yourself that “everything happens for a reason” meaning *God* because the reason is *you*. You’re the victim of your own foolish and sinful actions.

Now, as we’ve just seen, this is very very hard to do so I want show you a little prayer you can pray that will help you.

It’s from Psalm 139:23-24 and it goes like this:

*Search me, God, and know my heart. Test me and know my concerns. See if there is any offensive way in me. Lead me in the everlasting way.
Psalm 139:23-24 (HCSB)*

What a great prayer. “God, show me what I am not seeing about myself that offends you, is not wise and keeps me from experiencing the life you want me to experience.” That’s a prayer of real humility. And that’s a prayer God will answer in your life.

Then once you begin to see the truth ...

Take ownership and begin to change what you can.

For example, if your health is bad and you also eat poorly, sleep poorly and never get any exercise you need to own that at least part of the reason for your health is your behavior. And you need to start controlling what you put in your mouth, what time you go to bed and you need to start walking up and down your street for 10 minutes a day. Unless you’re bedridden you can do that. You have some control – use it.

If you're always getting into conflicts with people and you also have a sharp tongue, you need to own that at least part of the reason for all the relational distress in your life is your mouth. And you need to start thinking before you open it or start walking away until you can speak in a civil manner. That's something you can control in your life. Take control. Be responsible.

And we could come up with example after example of this all day long. It's pretty simple. It's pretty obvious.

Now, if this was a self-help course and I was a motivational speaker, we would be done this morning. But this isn't and I'm not (although I do hope you're at least a little bit motivated by what we've talked about so far), so we're not done. And that's a good thing because there's one huge problem with everything I just said. It's the other reason why your life sometimes sucks. It's the reason why motivation alone so often isn't enough.

This problem that I'm talking about is revealed in that response Jesus gave to those new believers who couldn't or wouldn't see the truth about themselves. Remember, they insisted they had never been slaves yet they were currently under the dominion of Rome and more than likely, Roman soldiers were standing there in the crowd just in case people got incited by what Jesus was saying and wanted to have some kind of an uprising. That's how they worked in those days.

But Jesus did not point that out to them. He didn't try to prove their slavery through their immediate circumstance or looking back through their history.

Instead ...

*Jesus replied, "I tell you the truth, everyone who sins is a slave of sin." John 8:34
(NLT)*

... which meant that every person listening to Jesus that day, every person hearing his words today, was a sinner. Every person who was in that situation was a slave to sin because every person was a sinner. Every person listening then and today had fallen short of God's original intention for their lives, which is what the definition of sin is.

It was almost like Jesus was saying, "I'm not going to point out to you these soldiers standing here because, even though it should be obvious, you have much bigger problems than them. You have a much greater enemy than the Romans. Your slavery exceeds far beyond whatever the Romans have done to you, or anyone else in your history. Your own sinful nature enslaves you. You're a victim of the curse of sin that has overtaken this whole world."

And that's why, friends, even though we have the best intentions and the best plans and we give it our best and we're highly motivated, sometimes things *don't* change. Things *don't* work out. Everything happens for a reason – and not because God made it happen. Sometimes, the reason why you and I experience "difficult but transitory circumstances" as well as "tragic or life-altering events and situations" ... sometimes, the reason why life sucks is because of the fact that ...

#2. We still live in a sin-cursed world where things don't go as they should. And things never will go as they should.

That decision made by Eve and then Adam to disregard God's instruction had far-ranging consequences, far beyond what they ever imagined. Sin and its curse (which is death and all forms of death) began to propagate throughout the world and throughout history.

And again, whether you believe that story is literal or allegorical, it's still true. Every time we or someone else acts foolishly or disobediently to God, the curse continues to spread to others and, in fact, to all of creation.

That's why Paul wrote ...

All creation has been groaning as in the pains of childbirth right up to the present time. And we believers also groan, even though we have the Holy Spirit within us as a foretaste of future glory, for we long for our bodies to be released from sin and suffering.
Romans 8:22-23 (NLT)

We long to be in a place where life doesn't suck because of the foolishness and sinful failings of others; where life doesn't suck because of the disease and death that curses this world. And the Bible tells us that there will be a day when that world will come. There will come a day when those who believe in Jesus will be released from this curse; a day when this whole world will be released because of what he did on the cross and in his resurrection.

The Apostle John wrote about that day in the book of Revelation, he said:

I saw a new heaven and a new earth, for the first heaven and the first earth had passed away, and there was no longer any sea. I saw the Holy City, the new Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God, prepared as a bride beautifully dressed for her husband.

And I heard a loud voice from the throne saying, "Look! God's dwelling place is now among the people, and he will dwell with them. They will be his people, and God himself will be with them and be their God. He will wipe every tear from their eyes. There will be no more death or mourning or crying or pain, for the old order of things has passed away."

He who was seated on the throne said, "I am making everything new!" Then he said, "Write this down, for these words are trustworthy and true. It is done. I am the Alpha and the Omega, the Beginning and the End. To the thirsty I will give water without cost from the spring of the water of life."
Revelation 21:1-6 (NIV)

And I know some of you are thinking, "that's really nice, Rick, but what are you saying here? Are you saying it's not worth even trying? That we just have to wait for pie-in-the-sky in the sweet-bye-and-bye?"

No, that's not at all what I'm saying. What I'm saying is, if your life sucks because of what you've done or what you've not done, stop making excuses. Change it if you can. But what you cannot change ... the tragic life-altering events and situations that have happened to you ... don't give up hope that one day, all of those things can be redeemed. All of the pain and suffering and injustice will be made right in your life if you've accepted Christ as your savior. He promises.

And we'll talk about that a bit more next week but for now, our band is going to close us with a song that's actually a prayer for those who have been worn down by the struggle. Whether you're looking at all the things you've done in your life or haven't done, and you go, "you're right, my life sucks because of me, but it's such a heavy burden. Is there any redemption? Is there any hope?" Or, maybe you're going, "all these things have happened to me – category three – and I didn't ask for them. I'm crushed by it. Is there any hope?" If that's where you are, I want to invite you to make this song your prayer, between you and God.

Feature – Worn

We've done this song three times (great all three times, BTW), and I have this impression (and this doesn't happen very often) that for some of you, that is your life. You are so worn by the things you've done or the things that have been done to you. You're a victim and a victimizer both. And you have tried to solve this yourself. You've just refused to turn to God. You just refuse to receive what Jesus is offering you. And today I just want to say, look, there are no magic words, your life will change if you turn to Jesus and say, "You are my savior. I can't do it myself. I believe you died for me. I believe you rose again. I believe you're going to make all things new, starting with me." Some of you just need to say that today. I just think some of you need to know that today.

CLOSING COMMENTS

A couple of more things and then we're gone.

Some of you are here for the first time today because you were invited by a friend or a family member, and we're so glad you're here. I want to make something real clear to you because, we're at the beginning of this season where lots of people are going to be joining us for the first time. We really want to help people get connected around here because, as good as it is to sit here for an hour, what really begins to change your life is when you get to know other people and get connected into a family of faith. So, next weekend we're doing something called Next Orientation:

1. "Next Orientation" – is a one hour thing you can go to next weekend. We'll tell you what your next steps are here at NHCC – here's what we do, here's why we do it, and here's what you could do next if you want to get further involved. This will happen next Sunday.

Also, for some of you who are a little further along down the road from that we have this other thing we're starting called:

2. "Starting Point" – is an 8 week Sunday AM class designed for people just starting out in faith or who have been a way for a long time. The class is based on some of the basic things about Christianity – what is the message of Christianity, how to apply it to your life, and how you can grow. This class starts in two weeks, from 9:30-10:30am.

Sign up for both in the program, at the welcome center or on the website.

For some of you who are a little further down the road, you need to know we have our Small Group Rally today in the Commons. There are lots of great groups to check out. For example:

- Men's group (33 The Series).
- Parables of Jesus

4. Stay informed ... sign up for Pastor's blog on our website (www.northheartland.org, then click on "Media" tab, then drop down to "Pastor's blog".)

Also available via phone ...

Why would I think this is important? Well, here's the deal - we just went through a holiday season and things change as far as the schedule around here, and even though we announced some of the changes and put the information in the program, some people showed up at the wrong time, or didn't show up at all, or got confused. But ... if you sign up for this you will get a weekly email letting you know about the coming weekend service and any special things you need to know. I won't spam you. I won't send you five things a week. This will keep you in the loop of what's going on here. (If you already get this via your City account this is the same thing).

Endnotes

ⁱ Great observation from <http://sothl.com/2011/10/30/reformation-day-sermon-john-831-36/>