

Loved Ones
“Broken”
March 20-21, 2010

Introduction: The Confusion Surrounding Brokenness

I'd say those lyrics pretty much describe the sentiments of a lot of the people that I've been talking with lately. There are a lot of people at North Heartland who are really struggling to make sense out of all the bad things that have happened to them lately.

I've talked with some couples who are dealing with broken or messed up marriages. They don't understand why God allowed them to an abusive person or to a person who's so incompatible with them. I've talked with people who feel like God is punishing them for all their past sins. They feel like God's got it out for them. I'm aware people who are upset bitter that God allowed their kids to be born with health issues. I know of people who have been permanently injured in accidents or who have lost their parents at an early age.

The list could go on. It seems like everywhere I look, there are hurting people who are trying to make sense out of the brokenness that has entered their lives. How about the rest of you here today? How do you personally interpret all the bad things that happen in your life? It seems like a lot of people feel cursed when bad things happen to them. They believe that a good God wouldn't have allowed bad things to happen. Many people's attitude toward God during really hard times can be summed up like this:

"How can you trust a sometimes disappointing, seemingly fickle God who fails to do for you what good friends, if they could, would do?"

It's only natural for us to question God's love when we suffer severe hardship. But what if we were able to look at suffering differently? What if we began to see our brokenness as a sign of God's blessing instead of a curse? What if we believed our suffering and pain was evidence of God's love, as counterintuitive as that may seem? That's the question I want to tackle as we continue in our message series today.

Review

As you know, we are in the third week of our series called "Loved Ones". The purpose of this series is to answer the question, "What does it REALLY mean to be loved by God?" In the first two weeks, Rick explained that to be loved by God means that we are chosen and blessed by Him. Those messages are available at the bookstore or online. Today, we want to focus on this issue of brokenness. In other words, how do we reconcile our experiences of brokenness with the love of God?

As we begin today, I want to introduce you to someone who experienced a lot of suffering and brokenness in his life. I met this guy back in the fall of 1994 while I was in Chicago attending a conference. What's so unusual about our relationship is that we actually met in a movie theater at the Woodfield Mall in Schamburg, Illinois. Some of you know might know this guy. His name... Lt. Dan Taylor.

As most of you know, Lt. Dan Taylor was one of the main characters in the movie, "Forrest Gump". Lt. Dan felt he had a destiny or a vision for his life. He came from a long line of Taylor's that had served in the military and died on the battlefield. And to quote Forrest Gump in that last clip, "he had a lot to live up to."

Most of us have a vision for our lives, too. Most of us have an expectation of how life is supposed to turn out...call it a vision, a dream or a destiny. Unfortunately real life doesn't always cooperate with our hopes and dreams. Sometimes our dreams are short-circuited, as was the case with Lt. Dan.

Did you hear what he said after Forrest rescued him? "I didn't ask for you to pull me out of there". Forrest interfered with the plan. Lt. Dan was supposed to die on the battlefield with honor, like all of other servicemen in his family. When Forrest pulled Lt. Dan out of the jungle, he messed with his destiny.

Most of us don't like it when something or someone messes with our dreams. We want to see our life goals accomplished and our dreams fulfilled. We may dream of a perfect family life, or healthy, pain-free life or a six figure income. We don't expect things to come along and derail our plans. How would you respond if the one thing you had hoped for all your life was taken away from you? You don't really know how you would respond...until it happens to you. Watch.

Did you hear what he said? "You cheated me. This wasn't supposed to happen to me. What am I going to do now?" When faced with this new, unintended reality, Lt. Dan lashed out in anger and self-pity. Ever been there? Ever felt cheated? Ever felt sorry for yourself following an unexpected turn of events? I have. It's natural to react that way when our hopes and dreams are derailed.

Psychologists often refer to the reactions we experience following a traumatic event as "the stages of grief". We often cycle through feelings of denial, questioning and anger as we try to come to grips with what's happened to us. For some of us, the struggle to cope with our pain and disappointment can become extremely dark. How dark? Watch and see.

Theologians refer to times like this as "the dark night of the soul". It's a time of deep mental, emotional, and spiritual anguish. It's a time filled with confusion, fear, and uncertainty—including doubts about God. It's during times like these that depression and deep seated bitterness can set in.

When Lt. Dan came home disabled after the war, he lost sight of God's goodness and his love. When a struggle like this reaches it's apex, we feel compelled to do what Job's wife counseled him to do. "Curse God and die".

How do some of us end up like this? How do some of us become so bitter and resentful that we shake our fists at God? Why do we so often see brokenness as a curse and not blessing?

Is Brokenness a "Curse"?

I think we tend to see brokenness as a curse and not a blessing for a least two reasons:

Brokenness isn't compatible with our worldview.

I think we tend to look at brokenness as a curse because we have a WRONG understanding of what this life is meant to provide. Larry Crabb says,

"We naturally and wrongly assume we're here to experience something that God has never promised. More than perhaps ever before in history, we assume we are here for one fundamental reason: to have a good time - if not good circumstances, then at least good feelings." Larry Crabb

If we think we have been put on this earth to have a good time, we will naturally be disappointed with God when he allows severe hardships to come our way. We will feel cursed when trouble strikes because we have an incorrect view of the reason for our existence.

Brokenness is often perceived as punishment.

Some people think that all of this pain and heartache they are experiencing is just God's way of punishing for misbehaving... sort of a divine form of revenge. Unfortunately, whenever we think this way, we have failed to distinguish the difference between discipline and punishment.

For believers in Jesus, all our sin – past, present and future – has already been punished on the cross. As Christians, we will never be punished for sin. That was done once for all. Because of the sacrifice of Christ, God sees only the righteousness of Christ when He looks at us. Our sin has been nailed to the cross with Jesus, and we will never be punished for it. If we think that God is still punishing us for past sins, then we will feel cursed any time something bad happens to us.

The “Blessing” of Brokenness

We don't have to see all our pain as a curse. We have a choice. There's another way we can look at it. We can learn to see it as a blessing. What would it take for us to see our brokenness as God's blessing instead of a curse? How do we get to the point where we view our suffering and pain as evidence of God's love instead of punishment?

In order to get to a place where we see our brokenness as a sign of God's blessing and love, we've got to change our point of view. We must learn how to see hardship, suffering and pain from God's perspective instead of simply from our human point of view. One of the best passages I know to help us get God's perspective on brokenness is Hebrews 12. In Hebrews 12, we see a different picture of God and brokenness. Look at this passage with me.

My son, do not despise the Lord's discipline or give up when he corrects you. "For the Lord disciplines the one he loves and chastises every son he accepts." Endure your suffering as discipline; God is treating you as sons. For what son is there that a father does not discipline? But if you do not experience discipline, something all sons have shared in, then you are illegitimate and are not sons.

Besides, we have experienced discipline from our earthly fathers and we respected them; shall we not submit ourselves all the more to the Father of spirits and receive life? For they disciplined us for a little while as seemed good to them, but he does so for our benefit, that we may share his holiness. Now all discipline seems painful at the time, not joyful. But later it produces the fruit of peace and righteousness for those trained by it.

Hebrews 12:5-11 NET.

The first bit of advice for us from the writer of the Hebrews is this:

Don't despise brokenness, but embrace it when it comes.

Often we become bitter and refuse to accept the bad things that happen in our lives. Yet, we are called to embrace and accept hardship when it comes our way. Henri Nouwen in his book, "The Life of the Beloved" says,

"The way we are broken is as much an expression of individuality as the way we are taken and blessed. Yes, fearsome as it may sound, as the Beloved ones, we are called to claim our unique brokenness, just as we claim our unique chosenness and blessedness." Henri Nouwen

We are called to claim and embrace our suffering, not despise it. Some of you, like Lt. Dan, are angry because life hasn't turned out according to your plans. You feel cheated and you've become bitter over it. Since your life is now hard, you lash out at whoever is the closest. Maybe your anger is directed at your spouse, or your boss. Maybe you are bitter toward a friend or relative. But my guess is that some of you are furious with God. You're mad at him because he didn't give you what you wanted out of life. He let you down. My advice for you is this: it's time to deal with your anger. If you are bottling it up inside, it's time to come out with it. Obviously, the first place to go with your anger is to God. In the Old Testament book of Psalms, we often read about King David, who cried out to God in anger when injustice or suffering entered his life. If you don't feel like telling it to God, then tell it to someone who can help. Talk to a counselor or one of our Soul Care advisors about it. The main thing to remember is this: Don't despise your brokenness, but embrace it when it comes. Process it...deal with it.

The second thing we learn from this passage is this:

Brokenness is a sign of God's love.

I know this seems counterintuitive but it's true. God's love often comes in the form of suffering. But when God allows suffering, he does it to discipline us, not to punish us. God is treating us the way a good parent would treat his child. God's goal is to transform us into the image of Jesus Christ and he'll use whatever means necessary to accomplish that goal. He can use the loss of a family member or the loss of a job. He can use a separation or a divorce. And yes, He can even use a war or an earthquake to mold us and shape us into his image.

Now don't hear what I'm not saying. I'm not saying that everything bad that happens to us or in this world is God's discipline. As Rick said last week, many bad things happen simply because we live in a sin-cursed world. Not everything that happens to us is God's discipline. With that said, God uses pain to get our attention. If God didn't love us, he wouldn't discipline us. If God didn't care for us, he wouldn't let hard times come our way. But since he loves us so very much, he uses hardship and trials to break us, so that we may share in his holiness; so that we will become like your heavenly Father. What does a "sweetly broken" man or woman look like? Let me show you.

When Forrest pulled Lt. Dan from the battlefield, he didn't cheat him of his destiny; he saved his life. He gave him support. He gave him a job. He gave him a business. He helped him heal physically and spiritually. When God allows us to go through difficult times, it may feel like our lives are ruined, when in reality he's just saving us from a life of ruin.

Not long after I was married to Norma, my dream was to have the "model family". I dreamed of having four healthy, happy, well-adjusted children. I wanted my kids to grow up to be godly men and women so that they would bring glory to God, and if I was totally honest, to bring glory to me. About four kids and 15 years into

our plan, I was feeling pretty proud of my accomplishments as a parent. But soon after our second son's 15th birthday, things began to change for the worst.

During our middle son's freshman year, he began experimenting with drugs and alcohol. For the next several years, he suffered through several episodes of fierce rebellion. All my hopes and dreams of having "the perfect family" disappeared. To be honest, I always took great pride in the way we raised our kids, but during those years, I felt complete humiliation. My biggest concern during those years was "what are other people thinking of me now?" I was more concerned about my reputation being tarnished than anything else.

I'll never forget the day God began to break me. It occurred during a lengthy phone conversation with one of my son's counselors. During that conversation, the counselor asked me if I had considered what I needed to do differently as a parent. He went on to say, "this whole thing isn't just about your son...it's about you as well." Truthfully, I was shocked and appalled by what he was saying. Initially, I refused to shift the spotlight away from my son's problems and onto me. I said to our counselor, "This isn't about me. It's about my son. He's the one with all the problems!"

It wasn't long after I got off the phone that God began to work on my heart. I began to see that my son's teenage rebellion wasn't just about God breaking him. It was also about God breaking me. God was also trying to break me of all my pride and my heavy handed approach to parenting my children. As a result of that one phone call, God broke me and I've not been the same since. I was humbled, refined, and pruned by my son's rebellion and the counseling that followed. I didn't understand what God was doing at first. It was painful. It was hard, but God used it to transform my life. And in case you are wondering, my one-time rebellious son is now a successful product manager at a company near the airport and our relationship has never been better.

The third thing we can learn from Hebrews 12 is that

Brokenness produces the lasting fruit of peace and righteousness.

When we allow God to break us, something beautiful happens. We change and the fruit of that change becomes evident to everyone around us. Peace and righteousness enter our lives. We aren't the same people we once were. Have you ever noticed how different a person looks after they've been broken? The fruit of brokenness is seen in their demeanor. There's a softness about them that can be seen in their face. See if you can notice what I'm talking about.

That's the face of someone who's been "sweetly broken". That's what God's loving discipline can produce in us if we let it. If we accept and embrace our suffering and see it as a blessing, God can change us for the better. And when we begin to see that all this pain in our lives isn't punishment but rather a sign of God's love, we can find meaning and purpose in our brokenness. Let's pray.

Time of Reflection

What is your world view toward suffering? Do you expect life to be easy or hard? Do you see hard times as God's blessing or as God's punishment?

Have you despised or embraced God's discipline lately? Has a major disappointment caused you to become bitter toward God? How are you dealing with those feelings?

How is God "breaking" you at the present time? What might God be saving you from through his discipline? Do you believe that He loves you and knows what's best for you?

Closing Song, "How He Loves