

The Loss Test!

PASSING LIFE'S TOUGHEST TESTS

Job 1:9-22; Philippians 3:7-15

October 25, 2009

Wesley J. Gabel

This fall we are focusing on a series entitled, *Passing Life's Toughest Tests*. Last Sunday opened our eyes to some difficult loss as TEEN Challenge led us in worship. I spilled a lot of tears last Sunday. This week hasn't been easy for my family either. My mother's sister has been near death; and as we awaited word on her, we received news that another sister collapsed and died of a heart attack. Obviously, I've been spilling more tears.

I confess most my losses are more akin to when I sit in a barber's chair. I remember one day when my stylist pointed out a couple spots where my hair was disappearing. I mockingly asked, "What are you doing there?" She answered, "It's not me; it's you! You're aging and losing it!" I was then told about a little boy who crawled into the chair to get a cut. When asked, "*How would you like your hair cut?*", the tiny guy put his hand on his head in the spot where his Dad was bald, and said, "*Don't cut it off here, I don't want a cut like my daddy.*" Well, I don't want a cut like his daddy either, but I'm afraid I get one every time now. I actually have some fun with hair loss, but most of us experience loss that is anything but fun.

One day, an athletic sixteen year old dove off the end of her dock. When she surfaced, she no longer could move her legs or arms. The trajectory of her dive was too deep. As her head struck the bottom, a vertebra broke and sliced into her spinal cord. In that one moment, she suffered the loss of mobility, the loss of carefree living, the loss of many vocations, the loss of

independence, and the loss of dating and intimacy. She plummeted into an abyss of anger and depression. Day after day she wallowed in that loss. Those, who because of stroke or injuries find themselves in nursing homes with little chance of recovery, know in part her challenge. How does one deal with that profound, life encompassing loss. We see people like the late Christopher Reeves and Christian singer-artist Joni Erickson-Tada, who I just described, and we admire them; but how can we deal with such loss?

Some years ago, a friend's daughter took a walk. She never returned. Months later her body was found. To this day, the circumstance of her death is shrouded in mystery. The brother reacted so destructively that I found myself touring the prisons of Minnesota to visit him. The family not only lost a daughter, they also lost their son for many years.

In this world, we experience a spectrum of losses that is witnessed and discussed in the Bible. God's people wrestled with everything from hair-loss, baldness like the prophet Elisha, to the devastating loss of property, children and health, like Job suffered.

The Bible reveals more than a way to cope. It gives us direction for overcoming loss. The Apostle Paul wrote from prison, about loss. Paul wrote:

I consider everything a loss compared to the surpassing greatness of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord, for whose sake I have lost all things. I consider them rubbish, that I may gain Christ and be found in him, not having a righteousness of my own that comes from the law, but that which is through faith in Christ-- the righteousness that comes from God and is by faith. I want to know Christ and the power of his resurrection and the fellowship of sharing in his sufferings, becoming like him in his death, and so, somehow, to attain to the resurrection from the dead. (Philippians 3:8-11, NIV)

For Christ's sake, Paul lost friends, career, freedom, health and eventually his life. Being a follower of Christ cost him dearly. If you are looking at being a disciple of Christ because you

think it will make your life easy, you might think again. Following Christ brought Paul trouble. He suffered so much personal loss, yet he focused on one thing: the gain of Christ. He declared all these losses rubbish in comparison to the surpassing greatness of knowing Christ. Knowing Christ was the surpassing greatness, the one great pearl worth everything he possessed, worth more than any loss. Paul envisioned his situation like losing a million dollars to gain a trillion. Paul gained in Christ salvation from judgment, companionship with God, a new character, provision, protection, and life itself. Nothing compares!

Paul found Jesus to be a pearl worthy of everything he once possessed, and he received incredible strength to overcome every trial. For you and me, knowing Christ is such a gain. With Christ, the greatest tragedies and losses have purpose and bring redemption.

When we invite Christ to release us of our guilt and take charge of our life as our Savior and Lord, when we put our faith in Christ and his promise to us, we don't need to fear abandonment or judgment. Those are no longer possible for us. We are being raised by Christ.

I watched Jesus touch a woman who was haunted for many years by a terrible loss she suffered as a child. She was afraid to remember. Whenever she remembered, feelings of anger and guilt overwhelmed her. One day, we invited Jesus to help her remember and to show her where Jesus was when the loss occurred. As the images returned, she found Jesus at the scene. She said Christ entered the scene with her. Realizing her loss was a shared experience, she found anger and guilt losing much of its power over her. She began to heal.

Do you remember how the Apostle Paul was known as Rabbi Saul and was responsible for persecuting Christ's followers? On his way to persecute believers in Damascus, Saul was blinded by a light and heard the voice of Jesus. Do you remember what Jesus said? "Saul, Saul, why are

you persecuting my followers?” No! “Saul, Saul, why are you persecuting me?” Why did Jesus say that? I know as a parent and spouse that however people treat my family they truly treat me. Jesus identifies even closer with us. He is our constant companion. Everything we suffer, he suffers. Nothing happens to Jesus without a redemptive purpose. If Jesus is there, then you can be certain there is something redemptive and significant to unfold. The cross reminds us of that truth. The day of Jesus’ suffering and death is Good Friday! Good Friday, redemption!

So what do we with loss? First, we put our trust in Jesus. Second, we call on him.

When Job lost his family and his own health, Job threw open his arms to God, like a toddler to a parent. He directed his complaint to God until he heard God respond, “*Trust me!*” Job was called to the faith of Jesus. Job was called to trust the love and wisdom of God. When Job did, he found God exalting him. Remember God exalted Jesus above all exactly because Jesus responded to loss by trusting God and obeying.

Jesus didn’t just mysteriously trust and obey; he also called out to our heavenly Father in prayer. According to Hebrews 5 Jesus called out with loud cries and tears. Jesus experienced our emotions and knew right what to do: cry out to God.

When we suffer loss, cry out to God. Have you read the Psalms? So many of them are cries to God that can express your emotion. When David cried to God, when Job cried out to God, when Jesus cried out to God, they all expected an answer. Jesus told his followers to go to God in his name. Jesus will then respond to your cries in order to bring glory to God and reveal his love.

With Christ as your Savior and Lord, you have him present with you and also at the right hand of God who decides what will be. When you continually lift your arms to him, praying until

there is an answer from heaven, your loss will become a laurel and your tragedy will become a triumph. Christ will act on your behalf.

There is one more aspect to the surpassing greatness of knowing Christ. A study released by the California Department of Mental Health reveals that people who isolate themselves from others are two to three times more likely to suffer an early death... even if they take care of themselves by exercising, not smoking and so on? Additionally, an isolated person is more likely to contract terminal cancer. We human beings were designed to live in community, to have people share our journeys in life. God designed you and me to be raised in families and then redeemed in church families, which met from house to house in small groups. God led people into these groups not just to help people cope, but to help people grow in Christ.

You may believe, be devout, and pursue Christ as the great pearl, you may throw open your arms to God, but if your heartache, struggles, and prayers are not shared with other believers, you may resist the Christ you call upon. You need more than just a large group of people to join you in worship. You need believers who are growing in Christ and are part of your daily life. In that way, you walk with Christ's power and gifts that match every need.

I told you I toured Minnesota prisons following a young man whose sister disappeared and died mysteriously. During many conversations and letters, I saw that young man move from anger and loss to hope and purpose in Christ. God was not wasting his loss or his own destructive choices. Before my very eyes, he unfolded as a new creation of Christ.

In this life there is trouble. We will suffer losses. However, with Christ and his people we bring redemption to the world and victory to people. Christ calls us to work through loss as victors, people who overcome. Our victory comes as we trust Christ, call upon Christ, and come

together because of Christ. Then loss will become laurels, and tragedies will become trophies.