

Growing through Pain

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[0 : 0 0] A subject like this, and some of the other subjects we're dealing with, I think a church that takes pain seriously, and looks at the potential for growth of that pain, is a church that's up to date in terms of what is needed.

And any of you who teach or preach will know that if you know what you're going to do in the next 20 minutes, or 40 minutes, or hour, or week, or whatever, you should be able to summarize it in one sentence.

So let me give you the one sentence summary, then you can go home and talk about the whole thing. The one sentence summary is that one of the ways to understand our own pain, and to understand the pain of others, is to look through the grid of loss and hope.

So one of the ways to understand our pain, and one of the ways to understand other people's pain, it's only one of the ways, not the only way, is to look through the grid of loss and hope. So on the table in front of you, I think most of you have got these, there's a gold handbag, which gives you the sort of gist of what I'm going to say tonight, and that you don't have to mad at you, right?

It's already written down for you. But I want to start by showing you a painting, and what I want you to do, just for a couple of minutes around your table, I know some people don't like small groups, every time somebody says, we're going to have small group discussion, there's a group that boo, and a group that applaud, so you can never win that.

[1 : 2 6] So my apologies to those of you who don't like small group discussion, or are sitting at a table with somebody you don't like, or are sitting at a table that you prefer not to discuss things with, I apologize in advance, but now we're going to do small group work, okay?

So I'm going to show you a painting, and I would like you to look at the painting, and tell the people at your table what you see. Okay, we're going to come back to that picture a little bit later.

Let me tell you a couple of stories, and talk about grief. In 1995, after four heart attacks, my father became a cardiac cripple, and passed away.

So there was loss in that experience. My mother is 92, and she's in fairly advanced dementia now. So a recent incident, those of you who live with dementia understand this, a recent incident for me is sitting in a restaurant with my wife on my right, my mother in front of me, my sister beside my mother.

So you get the picture. My wife's here. My mother's there. My sister's there. And there's a quiet pause in the lunch. And my mother turns to my sister and says, in this tone, Rod's dead, right?

[2 : 4 7] And I was sort of a little bit startled. You kind of checked your pulse. And Susan said, what? Like, Rod's in heaven, right? And she said, well, who's that in front of you?

I don't know. Now, any of you who've been through dementia, not yourselves, but other people that you've walked through with, either a spouse or a family member, you will know that the loss of a parent that dies is a different kind of loss than a parent who's living, but both of them are losses.

And we could actually have a very interesting debate tonight, a very interesting debate, about which loss is more painful. Because you could argue, I could argue, that my loss of my father in his death, in some respects, not all, so be careful in using this, but in some respects, was an easier loss for me than to sit in front of my mother, who doesn't know who I am.

Because the constant reminder of the loss with her is really challenging for me, and her trying to figure out who I am. Now, pain, in its various ways, can be understood through that kind of grip.

There's the obvious grief that comes through a death, but there's all kinds of other ways that grief enters into our lives. So grief, if you want to define it very simply, is the normal experience of loss.

[4 : 20] Those of you in the room that have struggled with infertility, we've battled infertility for the first 10 years of our marriage. The last 30 years, we haven't battled it, and really don't like the Abraham and Sarah story, for reasons that are obvious.

But struggling with infertility is another kind of loss. The normal experience of loss. Mourning something you've never had.

So now there's like mourning my father who died, and then there's mourning my mother who's alive, and then there's mourning the biological child we never had. We adopted a child that has multiple disabilities and multiple challenges.

There's a huge loss in that. And the normal experience of grief is just the simple experience of something or someone was taken away from us.

Now, if you think of those three examples in my own life, my mother, my father, my daughter, I have lost in all three of those. My father's, and I say this sensitively, particularly if you've lost a spouse or a family member recently, my father's loss was more easy to cope with for me than my mother's loss currently.

[5 : 35] The biggest loss has been the loss of not having a biological child and then having a child with multiple challenges and multiple disabilities. Because on a regular basis, probably weekly, we're reminded of what we don't have, even though we do have.

And you see, loss, when you frame it that way, you actually come to understand that there's a lot of things in life, some of them real, some of them wished for, some of them hoped for, some of them actual, some of them an expression through death, some of them an expression through life, where you actually have loss in your life.

Now, loss is normal. We'll talk about this tonight in some detail. Loss is normal, but it can be debilitating. And I'm sure if we went around each table and said, like, have any of you experienced a loss that moved from normal loss into something that was debilitating, and then it can be actually pathology.

It can be very unhealthy. And some of us never get over the loss of something or someone. Some of you know someone who was fired from a job, and they've never recovered.

It's actually completely overcome their life, and they're dealing with all kinds of mental health issues, relational issues, physical issues. They've never got over losing a job. So losing someone or losing something can go from normal to debilitating and to pathological.

[6 : 59] The loss isn't always a loss of something positive. Some of you have lost a parent that you have problems with. The parent's now passed away, but you've got a lot of problems with that parent.

In fact, if you were forced to choose, you know, we're not supposed to choose which child we like best, or we're not supposed to choose which parent we like best, but some of us, the parent that we have the biggest problem with is the one that's passed away, but there's still a weird loss.

It just feels strange to us that that person's no longer here. So it's not always a loss of something positive. And the other thing is, of course, the loss is very personal. What is a loss to me may be very different than what is a loss to you.

And in our pastoral ministry with each other and our care for each other amongst our friends and our families, it seems to me we need to remember that my experience of loss is based on my own history and my own experience.

Your experience of loss is based on your history. So some of you have lost a spouse to death or lost a spouse to dementia. You talk to some other people and they go, oh yeah, like my life's really, it's gone really well since then.

[8 : 08] And you think, oh, my life hasn't gone that well at all. It's been really, really hard for me. Or we've talked to some people who have children with disabilities and they go, oh, they're so lovely, aren't they?

It's so amazing having a child with disabilities. That's not my experience. The expression of disability with our daughter has been really difficult for us and really challenging for us. So the loss is of a different quality, which means when it comes to loss, I need to hear you and you need to hear me to really minister carefully and to really understand what's going on.

Now, when we think of grief and loss, most of us think primarily and first and foremost about death. Somebody's actually passed away. But there are little deaths as well. And if you look at the list on the page there in front of you, just a number of things I've listed there that actually are a form of loss.

It could be a job change. It could be leaving home. It could be graduation. It could be leaving hospital. It could be moving. It could be changing churches. It could be a loss of friends or colleagues or retirement or health or dreams.

Any number of these things can actually be an experience of loss. So let me illustrate this by introducing you to three women I know, all three of whom are widows. None of them live in this area.

[9 : 21] You won't know any of these people. The one widow, her husband, a very close friend of mine, died when he was 40 in a brain tumor.

She goes to the grave every single day. Every single day. Spends a lot of time there. And tells her other children, I can't wait to leave here to see your daddy again.

That's the one widow. The second widow, also a friend of mine, and her husband was a friend of mine, he dropped out of a heart attack in his factory. And I was called to win because I was the pastor of their church.

And I went in. I expected to see him there and wasn't quite sure what state he'd be in. And so I walked into the office and he was there. And she was in the office as well.

And she was laughing and telling stories and talking to his boss. His boss was brokenhearted. But she was like elated. And it was quite a while after the funeral, which I did, when she told me, I'm actually, I'm kind of glad he went because we didn't have a great marriage.

[10 : 27] And so her experience of being a widow was completely different. I was more brokenhearted seeing him lying on the floor dead than she was and she was married to him. And the boss was more brokenhearted. So when not really tuning in and listening carefully, you could go, oh, here's two widows.

They're exactly the same. Another friend of mine, a Christian in a leadership role, was being physically abused on a regular basis by her Christian husband.

And was going through the quiet experience of losing what she thought a husband should be, particularly a Christian husband. And so he continued to abuse her physically. And it happened over and over and over and over again.

And she couldn't handle it anymore. And one night she prayed with great intensity, more than she ever had before. Lord, please address this issue. And she woke up in the morning and he was dead in the bed beside her.

Now don't take that as a, you know, a seminar you should give, okay? That has interesting implications. And I, when I see my wife praying at night, sometimes I get a little concerned about what this may mean.

[11 : 33] I'm checking my pulse a lot these days. But there's three different experiences of what it meant to be a widow. But they're totally different senses of loss.

One, the first one, has lost her life. She didn't just lose her partner. She actually lost her life. And she ceased to function as a parent anymore. And she told her other two children she didn't want to be here for them.

Because her husband had gone. Like, a horrific family situation. The second one, really wasn't happy in her marriage and was actually glad that he died and could actually talk about it while he's lying there.

The third one, prayed and quietly said to me, I believe the audience in my prayer, even though I would never offer this to anyone else as a piece of advice. So very, very different experiences.

So here's what I'd like you to do just for a few moments. I'd like you to think of a loss that you've experienced recently. It doesn't have to be something big and dramatic and, you know, sort of catastrophic.

[12 : 32] It could be, but probably not appropriate. A group like this to share that tonight. But a loss that you've experienced recently, why was that a loss to you? So it's not enough to say, well, you know, my children moved away, so that's a loss.

No, tell us why your children moving away is a loss. Some of you might say, my children moving back in is a loss for me. Some of the children here, or some of those who are adults may have different views on that.

But I'd like you to think of a loss. Why is it significant for you? Maybe have one or two people just around the table talk about why that loss has significance for you.

So a little bit of your story to give the backdrop to that. And in these kind of groups, if, you know, you don't feel like doing that, you can put your head down, and because this is a church, everyone will think you're praying.

So you'll be perfectly fine. Okay? So mumble at your table for a few moments. Now I want to move out of that sort of introductory sort of laying the groundwork to talk about a number of ways that we can care for those experiencing loss, both caring for others who are experiencing loss, as well as our response to ourselves who are experiencing loss.

[13 : 48] So we're going to start by talking about some skills that we need, and then we're going to move into talking about some of the biblical understanding that we need, and then we're going to talk about that great theological truth of hope in more detail.

So let's start with some skills that we need when we're dealing with somebody who has experienced loss of some sort of revenue. First of all, we need to create the right atmosphere in order for people to talk about their sense of loss.

One of the things that's hard about loss is the culture is moving so quickly, and everything's happening so fast, nobody has time to sit and reflect on the losses they've experienced.

Moving on, or getting on with your life, is really what the culture is about in many ways. So even a death, I have a very close friend whose husband died just a little while ago.

Two days after he died, her brother-in-law came into the house and said, are you thinking of selling now? Two days after he died, and she'd been in that house for over 40 years.

[14 : 51] Like the last thing that you want to do two days after your spouse dies and was in the house that you've been living in for over 40 days is to sell the house. Like who's thinking about that?

The funeral hadn't even happened yet. But it's like, get on with your life. You know, we've got to be quick, we've got to move. The first thing we need to do, it seems to me, is we need to create the right atmosphere. And part of creating the right atmosphere is three things.

We need the kinds of skills, first of all, where we recognize that grief and loss is an experience to be understood, not a problem to be solved. So when we talk about loss, we're not talking about something like the flu or chicken pox or some kind of gastrointestinal problem that needs to be solved.

Grief is of a different quality of pain. And what we need in our grief and in our loss, whatever that grief and loss may be, we need to recognize that this is not something we're trying to solve, but actually something we're trying to understand.

So when I talk to people like me who have a parent who's in dementia, one of the things that I don't find helpful is people saying like, don't you wish the Lord would take me?

[16 : 04] It's like, I need you to be like, just listen a little bit more. Like this is not, oh, she said this funny thing across the table. Like, I wish the Lord would take me. Like if you actually sat down quietly with me, I'm torn.

Remember Paul in Philippians 1, you know, for me to live is Christ to die is gain. Sometimes I feel that on behalf of my mother. I feel like for her to stay here is good, for her to leave is good. I'm not quite sure, and it's not a third option.

Right? Right? So, what I want is an atmosphere not where you think, oh, it sounds like Rod has a problem with his mother and dementia. We need a solution to this. You know, have you taken her to a chiropractor?

Or what about herbal medicine? We like, you know, the people that have all these solutions. It's not a problem to be solved. Just try to understand. And often in understanding, we provide the best ministry to be.

Secondly, thinking and willing matter, but so do feelings. We are created, it seems to be, from a psyche standpoint with three aspects to us.

[17 : 07] We have a cognitive ability, i.e. we can think. We have a volitional ability, we can choose. And we have an emotive ability, we can feel. And a lot of the experience of loss is not the rational, right?

It's not the logical, rational side. It's actually the emotion. I was raised in, born in Ireland, but raised a lot of my early childhood in Toronto.

And I still remember, I know you're not supposed to say the T word outside, my apologies for that. But I remember in Toronto playing road hockey outside and breaking my first road hockey stick.

I was devastated. My parents said, we'll buy you another one. Missing the point of the laws.

Some of you have, you know, teenagers at home, and she just broke up with a boyfriend. And you're going, there's lots of fish in the sea. Well, first of all, we're not talking about fish, right?

[18 : 10] So I don't know where that comes from. But we recognize that telling her there's more fish in the sea is an attempt to come at this with a very rational, logical argument when what she's feeling is the pain of the laws.

And to tune into that and just be aware of that is one of the most powerful things in order to care for other people, that we show that understanding of what they're feeling. Thirdly, another attending skill is be aware of the history of losses impacting the present laws.

Some of us have a loss today that is so painful because we've had so many losses over and over and over and over again. Some of the women in this room, some of the couples in this room may have gone through miscarriages.

The first miscarriage is a massive loss. But if you've had three or four miscarriages, the fourth one is brutal. Those of you who struggle with infertility as we have, month after month after month after month after month that constant reminder that you're not having a biological child, it's brutal.

It's a brutal experience because the history of losses actually makes the current loss that much worse. So part of what we need to listen for, it seems to me, in how we understand other people is creating an atmosphere where they can open up.

[19 : 29] We're not trying to solve it. We're listening to what they're thinking, listening to what they're deciding, listening to what they're feeling, but also listening to the history of their losses because often people that want a history of losses have more difficulty than those who have less.

But we also need a second kind of skill. We need influencing skills. We need to speak wisdom into other people's lives and we need others to speak wisdom into our lives.

So when we are in loss, or if you know people who are in loss, or you yourself are in loss, three of the things we need are presence, connection, and communication.

Presence, connection, and communication. How many times have you heard the phrase, I didn't want to bother you? I didn't want to phone you because I didn't want to bother you. I knew you'd be hearing from lots of people.

And I've been in the experience, because of some of the circumstances in our life, I've been in the experience where I've had dozens of people say, we didn't want to call you because we didn't want to bother you, but the majority of people who didn't want to bother me and didn't want to call me were in fact the people that didn't want to bother me and didn't want to call me.

[20 : 33] Thinking about all those other people who didn't think they wanted to bother me and so didn't call me. Right? Those of you trying to write that down, that's what I'm saying. So there's a dynamic there with communication and connection where we need to get over our own insecurities, our own fears, and just connect.

And have that kind of influence in the lives of other people. I've had a number of friends commit suicide. Some of you may have had that experience as well. What do you say to a family member who's lost a family member to suicide?

What do you say? And a lot of family members have had a suicide in the family. People don't know what to say and as a result they say nothing. And what we need to do is speak into the circumstances, be connected there, and if you don't know what to say, ask them what would be best.

So if I'm experiencing a loss and you're over there saying, I don't want to phone you, I don't want to email you, I don't want to tweet you because I don't want to bother you, and I'm saying, no, no, connect. I don't know what to say if I connect with you.

Ask me. Like say to me, what would be the most helpful thing for you in these circumstances? Just ask. And I probably have an answer to that. Like it would be great if we went out for coffee once every couple of weeks and just talked.

[21 : 45] It would be great if we had a meal once a month and maybe not talked about the circumstance. I will help you with that sometimes if you ask me what it is that could be helpful in terms of that sort of influence.

Secondly, and this one for those of us who are Christians and particularly evangelical Christians, listen rather than moralize or answer the why question. Because we have a fairly complicated parental situation with our daughter, I'm not planning to tell that story tonight so that we know the story, but we have a fairly complex relationship with our daughter.

Sometimes when we tell the story and we talk about the experiences we've had, you can just see that people are absolutely overwhelmed. And if they're Christian, nine times out of ten, they come out with this line, I'm sure the reason they talk, I'm sure the reason they talk, and then they fill it in from there.

And it's like, I'm trying to figure out what God's doing in this situation and now you've just heard the story and you've got to figure it out already. Like, it's taken me 30 years to figure out what God's doing and I just shared it with you and you've got the answer.

Well, no, you don't have the answer. We've got to be really careful not to moralize and answer the why question because often when we do that, we're climbing up on the throne and we're casting a judgment before the day where judgment will be cast.

[23 : 05] Right? We don't need to climb up on the throne and say definitively why this has happened. We often don't know that. I had a friend, a fairly close friend actually, who lost his son to cancer at 18 and he was planning to go to the mission field, really godly young guy and wanted to serve God with his life and he just got cancer very suddenly, died very quickly and her pastor came to visit his mom, the mom of his child and said, you know, I've been praying about this and I think the reason that the Lord took your son was because he knew he wasn't going to turn out well later on and he was depriving, he was taking away from you this situation where it would be really heartbreaking for you.

Like, I don't get homicidal very often, but you can't be serious. You call yourself a pastor and think about what happened in life. See, once we start climbing up on the throne and making pronouncements about why things happen, we slowly realize that we don't belong there.

The throne is not ours to access, right? God has his way, God has his will, God has his providence, God has his sovereignty. We can't access all of that now.

And I don't know what your Christian life is like, but I have trouble accessing some of this for myself. I sure can't access it for you that definitively. And those of you who've read Harold Kushner's little book, *Why Do Bad Things Happen to Good People* When His Son Died of Premature Ageing, well, Kushner tells the story in that book of this mother who had lost a child, the child had passed away, and the rabbi came and shared it with the mother and said to the mother, like, you know, I'm sure the reason that God took Jimmy was because you're strong enough to handle this.

And her response to it was, I wish I was weaker and Johnny would still be alive. So even the notion, and we do it, it's always all mean, right? Like, even the notion, like, God knew you were strong enough to handle this is subtly to say, actually, if I was weaker, that person would still be here.

[25 : 05] And it's a theology, actually, and it's very interesting about how God works. And how God's providence works. So we need to stay away from the moral conclusions. Lastly, on this influencing skills, we need to move through some of the stages that happen in this area.

There's many books written on stages. You've done a brief session here. I'm sure you've talked about some of those. But I like these four. They're just simple. They're not overly psychological. And they mirror what a lot of people's experiences. The shock stage, I just can't believe it.

And that stage sometimes goes on for a long time. Or somebody's died or you've suffered a significant loss. And you're just still in shock. You just go, you wake up in the morning and think, I can't believe she's done it. I just can't believe it.

Then there's a move to the reality stage of this is what happened. And if you've ever dealt with somebody in loss, they tell you the story over and over again. You come and talk to me about parenting. I'll tell you tons of loss stories about parenting.

Tons of them. I'll repeat them over and over and over again because the reality of it is part of the old loss experience for me. Then there's a reaction. Here's how I am feeling. And sometimes the feeling after a loss comes out quite a bit later.

[26 : 17] People are confused by that. Funerals actually are poorly timed in Western culture. They're way too soon. Most people are in the shock stage. They don't know what they're feeling. And then we say, oh, she looks really good.

You know, the husband that died 40, they've been together 40 years and he's died. She seems really quite happy. She wasn't crying. And it's like, we're going to assess that three days after he died. Too soon. We need to wait and see what feelings come.

And then lastly, the stage of recovery where I'm moving on. And if we recognize that it's not a problem to be solved, and if we recognize that we need to be present and involved with people in loss, it seems to me we won't rush and speak over stages.

We'll allow this thing to evolve as it can. Now we've sold, Dietrich Bonhoeffer says that we sold confession to our Catholic friends and we kept the therapeutic office as Protestants.

So I'm going to get you to confess around your table for a moment. Okay? Just briefly, those of you who like to make sermons around the table, this is not your chance. Which of those six skills is your biggest problem?

[27 : 21] So I'd like you to go around the table really quickly. Of those six skills that we looked at there, three under attending, three under influencing, which one do you think is your weakest area? So just go around the table and be honest with your neighbors of which one you think you struggle with the most.

one of the things that for those of us who take Scripture seriously and believe in the authority of Scripture, one of the things that Scripture does, among many other things, is provides a framework that allows us to understand the humanity of living life.

So it's not just, it's amongst its many other things, it actually allows us to think about a human experience and provide a framework for that.

So when we take the topic of loss and we take the topic of grief in its biggest manifestation, the big deaths and the little deaths, one of the things that becomes clear in Scripture is that there is a normalcy to mourning and to grieving and to loss.

Now this is an interesting subject in libel, of course, because it's Middle Eastern and it's Eastern in its orientation. So the way people mourn the East is very different than the way people mourn the West. So we could bring a cultural critique to this.

[28 : 43] But it seems to me that when we understand the normalcy of grief and mourning and loss and understand how biblical characters experience loss and even understand God's experience of loss, it gives us a perspective on this that is permission-giving.

That there's a sense in which our own loss makes sense in light of that framework. So if I was to push you right now, I'm not going to, but if I was to push you right now and say, is my experience of loss with my mother in the restaurant, like that moment of her saying, isn't Rod dead, that moment of, this is so sad that she's in that state on one hand, and it's really disorienting.

Like, I've known her for 65 years, and she's known me for 65 years, so why doesn't she know who I am? And all my neurotransmitters in my head are not oriented around sitting in front of my mother, and she doesn't know who I am.

Like, there's nothing in my brain that works that way. Like, if I'm in front of my mother, of course she knows who I am, right? So the sense of loss is huge. But is this a sin to be confessed, or is it a human experience to be acknowledged?

And I find the, the, the sort of tenor of scripture around some of these things, just the human experience that people have to be very powerful in this way. So some of you have done Lectio Divina in various forms.

[30 : 09] This is what I'll simply call a modified Lectio Divina. I want to read a number of passages, and then I'm going to stop, and just again at your table get a few of you to say which one of these passages really hits you in terms of your own experience of loss, or maybe hits you in terms of you helping somebody else in their experience of loss, okay?

So just as I read through these, see which one jumps out for you, and then I'll give you a couple minutes just to share with your neighbor. So start with Jacob's experience when the brothers came back and said that Joseph was dead, even though we know later in the story he wasn't dead in Genesis 37.

Then Jacob tore his clothes, put on sackcloth, and mourned for his son many days. All his sons and daughters came to comfort him, but he refused to be comforted.

No, he said, I will continue to mourn until I join my son in the grave. So his father wept for him. After the death of Moses, recorded in Deuteronomy 34, the Israelites wept for Moses in the plains of Moab 30 days.

Then the period of mourning for Moses was ended. When Jesus heard that John the Baptist had died, Matthew 14 and 13, now when Jesus heard this, he withdrew from there and hoped to a deserted place by himself.

[31 : 43] In response to the death of Lazarus, John 11, 35, Jesus began to weep. In response to her infertility through Samuel 1, Hannah, who was deeply distressed, prayed to the Lord and wept bitterly.

When the child was born of Bathsheba and had been conceived with David, 2 Samuel 12, David therefore pleaded with God for the child. David fasted and went in and lay all night on the ground.

The elders of his house stood beside him, urging him to rise to the ground, but he would not, nor did he eat food with them. Jesus in the Garden of Gethsemane, Matthew 26, I am deeply grieved, even to death.

Remain here and stay awake with me. My Father, if it's possible, let this cup pass from me, yet not what I want, but what you want. The triune God in Genesis 6 in response to the sin of those he had created.

And the Lord was soaring that he made humankind in the earth and it grieved him to his heart. So the Lord said, I will blot out from the earth the human beings I have created, people together with animals and creeping things and birds of the air, for I am soaring that I have made them.

[33 : 17] And then Jesus described coming near Jerusalem in Luke 19, and he came near and saw the city. He wept over it, saying, If you, even you, as only recognized on this day the things that make for peace, but now they are hidden from your eyes.

So which passage jumps out for you as you think of either your ministry to others and their loss or your own loss in your life experience? Chat with your table a little bit about that.

It would be interesting to do a poll in the room. We're not going to do this, but it would be interesting to do a poll in the room for all of us to say what we think the biggest problem in the world is.

You know, you can think of all the obvious answers, but what, if I was to ask you, what do you think the biggest problem in the world is, what would you say? What would be your top three, your top five, your top ten?

If you were to ask me what I think the biggest problem in the world is, my answer would be despair. I think that's the biggest problem in the world. It's camouflaged in different ways, but it shows up in all kinds of areas.

[34 : 33] I like watching the entertainment industry to see it's a great pulse and parameter of the world. And some of you will know the 28 Club. And the 28 Club are entertainers and musicians who've decided when they're 28, that's enough.

They party hard, they play really well, they make lots of money, they're famous, and they kill themselves. Amy Winehouse being a prominent example of that, Kurt Cobain, a lot of people in this room who don't know all these names, but some of you will.

And so despair, I think, is probably one of the biggest problems in the room. And if you exegete or try to explain the problems in the world, one of the ways to describe the problems in the world seems to me from a Christian perspective is to say, if despair is the biggest problem in the world, then where does that show up?

And so I think that shows up in all kinds of places. It shows up in institutions, it shows up in organizations, it shows up in families, it shows up in systems, it shows up in denominations, it shows up in all sorts of ways, and it also shows up in individuals' lives.

But then, if despair is the biggest problem and it shows up in those places, what's the antidote? What's the Christian response to that? And it seems to me the Christian response to that is hope.

[35 : 46] Now, hope does not play well in contemporary culture. All of you know in this group, the last verse in 1 Corinthians 13, you know, faith, hope, and love, but the greatest of these is love. And amongst the evangelical group of Christians, faith and love get a lot of emphasis, right?

Like, we talk a lot about faith, we talk a lot about love. I'd like to suggest to you that hope is in the center of those two and maybe the most foundational. Because hope raises questions about what you're leaning into to give you support for the future.

What are you putting your weight in to keep you propped up? What do you actually find is the most secure thing to get you through?

And once you start raising questions around what do you lean on, what do you put your hope in, then all of a sudden the secular answers in the world come flashing in, right?

Homes, houses, cars, consumer goods, all kinds of things. These are the things that will get us through life. Be attuned to marketing and to advertising. A lot of the promises in marketing and advertising is this is hope for you.

[36 : 55] This will get you through. This will bring confidence in your life. And so if hope, that kind of confident expectation in the unseen, that confident expectation moving forward, if that's the antithesis to despair, then when we talk about pain, it seems to me our understanding of pain needs to get us eventually to hope.

So as you think of your losses, I think of my losses, and some of us in this room have a lot of losses, where does hope fit into our losses?

Now there is a form of Christian triumphalism that's still alive and well, and it goes something like this. Oh, you're having problems? But you have Jesus. Everything is great. And some of us look at that and think, you haven't been to my house.

You haven't met my family. You don't know my story. Like to say that because I have Jesus and I have hope, all my problems are gone is a form of triumphalism that is not true to the human condition.

Right? We have, most of us recognize that. So how does hope fit into pain? Does hope negate pain? Does hope wipe it out? Is hope kind of the big pretend?

[38 : 08] Okay, so you've got an awful life, you've got terrible things going on, but you have hope. Let's smile. Is that what hope is? And you need sort of an extroverted personality and a big smile and high cheekbones to make it happen?

What is hope? Well, I think we get one answer to this in 1 Thessalonians 4.13. Paul, in the context of death and grief and dying, says, we do not want you to be uninformed, brothers and sisters, about those who have died, so that you may not grieve as others who have no hope.

Now, notice here, the distinction between people who have hope and people who don't have hope is not that one group grieves and the other group doesn't.

Maybe this is too personal for some of you, and my apologies if it is, but the place I get the most angry these days is Christian funerals. Everybody's so happy and so excited and so pleased and it's all so wonderful, and in the process we're forgetting the fact.

This is awful. The Bible calls it the last enemy. Like, this is not pleasant, and funerals are slowly slipping away these days as a celebration of life, right?

[39 : 19] They're not wrong, they're not bad, but what are we saying when we say that grief is not allowed, that we all need to be happy, we all need to celebrate? Part of what we're saying is, if you have hope, there's no grief, and if you have grief, there's no hope.

This passage would argue exactly the opposite. Hope in grief is not either or, it's both and. You have a quality of hope in grief that is different than those who are in grief and don't have hope.

So it's the quality of the grief that's different. So you can still have tears running down your face with the loss. You can still be in anguish with the loss and have hope all at the same time.

So part of what we need to understand, it seems to me, is that Western either-or thing, which many of us in the evangelical world have now baptized into our way of approaching spirituality, that we're either in pain and struggling, or everything's wonderful because we have hope.

This is not the biblical argument. We can be wonderful, or we can be awful, and hope can be present or absent. It's not about the circumstances, it's the hope in them which takes the quality of the pain that we're in.

[40 : 33] Then if I go to Psalm 62, listen to the language of the psalmist here. Find rest, O my soul, in God alone. My hope comes from Him.

He alone is my rock and my salvation. He is my fortress. I will not be shaken. Remember when I talked about where you can put your weight? I think as we live life, I think part of life is leaning into things hoping, hoping that they'll prop us up.

And then they collapse. And we'll go, oh yeah, I can't rely on that. So those of you who've had financial bankruptcy, and you used to be fairly well off, and then you went to nothing, and you realized, you know, you weren't seeing it, but you realized it was true.

My hope is built, I don't know what I think of us. Right? Like you knew that. Or those of you who put your complete hope in being married, and then you got married and thought, ooh, this isn't all it's cracked up to be.

Right? It's not exactly what I thought it would be. And I can't lean into it. It's not going to hold me. I can't be not shaken in that. Some of us thought it was with children.

[41 : 39] You know, we put all our hope in having wonderful children, and then our children haven't turned out well. And we're experiencing deep loss with that. Maybe they've wandered far from God, they've wandered far from us. We experienced that deep loss, and we thought that if we had hope in having good children, everything would be fine.

Now our children aren't fine. And we've lost hope or experiencing despair in our parenting. Some of you are older. You have older children. And they have children. And you're brokenhearted with what's happening there.

You sense loss in that. What does this passage say? Rock, salvation, fortress, not be shaken. Recognize the only one who can prop me up as I lean on my way in is called alone.

And I don't say this cynically, or without passable care, but it seems to be part of being is a constant renewal of the reminder that our hope is built on nothing less.

It's a reminder of that constantly. And therein, we make hope. So then when you come to Romans 5 and 5, it starts to make sense, doesn't it? Hope does not disappoint us. Because God's love has been poured out into our hearts through the Holy Spirit who has been given to us.

[42 : 46] So biblical hope doesn't disappoint. And I think, you know, when Philip Yancey wrote the book Disappointment with God, and it was fairly fashionable to frame life that way, and a lot of us are disappointed with God about marriage, about work, about money, about economics, about children, about parents, about the church, and we're disappointed, we're disappointed.

This hope does not disappoint us. This hope stands the test. And when it stands the test, it doesn't have the same quality of disappointment. Now, the question then becomes, is hope about the past in knowing what Christ has done and knowing how the triangle of God has worked to this point?

Is hope about the future that I have a confident expectation? Or is hope really a way to live today? Lovely quote from Walter Bruggemann in his little book, Hope Within History, he says this, Hope reminds us that the way things are and all the extrapolations from that is precarious and in jeopardy.

Hope reminds us not to absolutize the present, not to take it too seriously, not to treat it too honorably, because it will not last.

And to me, there's great wisdom in that understanding of hope, that hope, actually, if you're afraid of it negatively, hope is to not absolutize the present, to not look at the present moment and say that's life in all its manifestation.

[44 : 14] It is not. And we can't drop that on people. The person you're doing pastoral care with now, you don't want to go up to them tomorrow and say, I've got this great quote from this guy Bruggemann and just drop it on them.

It doesn't, these kind of things don't take that way. But it seems to me to dwell on that and to recognize that when we have hope, we're not absolutizing the wonderful things that are going on at the moment, we're not absolutizing the terrible things that are going on at the moment, because you know what?

This moment will not last. And there's something about the hope of the Christian that not just puts the future in perspective, but actually puts the present in perspective in light of the future.

So psychology and the social sciences have given us a lot of understanding of why we are the way we are today based on our history. It seems to me what hope does is that's the opposite of the social sciences.

The social sciences say, oh, you're like this today? That's probably because of some of these historical things. What hope says is because of that, that which is out here, you understand today in light of that.

[45 : 15] It's the back to the future theology, that there's a sense in which what's going on there actually influences now because it puts today in perspective. Now I bring you back to the picture.

It's 1885, and George Frederick Watts is a Victorian painter. George Frederick Watts was named George Frederick because his parents liked Handel, George Frederick Handel, so they named him through those letters.

And when Watts painted in the late 1800s, one of the things that he argued in his artistic presentations was I don't paint things, I don't paint people, I don't paint landscapes.

What I paint is I paint ideas. That's what I paint. I paint ideas. So when this painting came out in 1885, it generated a lot of controversy because of its title.

And this painting is called Home. Home. Now most of you, when you looked at this painting, you probably saw the kind of muted colors.

[46 : 27] You know, those of you with artistic sensibilities, you'll notice all of the colors of this in unit. So in some ways you would think despair, right? I mean, it looks like a despairing picture.

And this earth here doesn't look alive and vital. It looks kind of heavy and oppressive, the kind of brown, copper color. And then here's this woman, it appears to be a woman, sort of all bent over.

And you know, we have that little phrase, you know, the weight of the world under shoulders. It looks like the earth should be up here on her shoulders, right? She's bent over. She looks like she's really, really struggling with things.

And she's actually hunched. It's not just carrying the weight of the world on the shoulders. You look at her neck here at her head, it's all bent over like this. And she's got a blindfold on her. And you think, like, what an incredible painting of despair, an incredible painting of pain that's overwhelming her.

But then when you look more closely, unfortunately you can't see it from here, but right up here, this is a smaller slide, there's one little star right there. You come up after, you probably will see it.

[47 : 35] There's one little star. And so Watts painted one little star up in the sky. And then this is a lyre, a musical instrument. And all the strings are broken in this lyre.

When you look at it with high resolution, you'll see all the strings are broken. But there's one string that's not broken. And she's bending her ear to listen to the music on the one string.

Now, when you think of the way this could be constructed, and I go back to what I said about Christian triumphalism earlier, like, if some of the Christian triumphalists were to paint a picture on hope, it would be like bright and vibrant and red and orange and yellow and green and indigo and violet, and it would be so extravagant because it's hopeful, right?

And then the despairing type, you know, you've got some friends like this, not in your church, your previous church, but you've got some friends like this that's like, oh, you know, life's so terrible and it's so despairing and there's no hope.

And they paint sort of black, maybe they just have this, you know, they just have the outline here, kind of black, kind of a bit smudged and all the rest of it. But this is biblical hope because have you noticed that the contrast of all these things that I pointed out here with the fact she's listening to the music on the one string, that's often how life goes, isn't it?

[48 : 55] Many of us in this room and many people we care for and minister to are people who are in this state. They're down, they're depressed, they're depressed about the world and the state of the world, the state the world is in.

They're really upset that the lyre is broken, metaphorically. There's no music to listen to. No one's dancing anymore. It's really despairing. But when you actually see this one string, the vibrancy of hope comes because of the presence of pain.

Let me say that again. The vibrancy of hope comes because of the presence of pain. You actually can't see the hope well unless you see the despair.

You can't see the hope clearly unless you actually come to grips with how deep the pain is. And it seems to me the contrast in Watts' painting of this dark, morbid, heavy, muted colors with this one ear bent to the music is where a lot of people live.

The lyre's broken but there's still one string and they're still bending long to the music. And those of you who have a kingdom theology, which I trust all of us do, those of you who have a kingdom theology, we pray, your kingdom come, your will be done on earth as it is in heaven.

[50 : 09] Seems to me this is a great image of the kingdom. When the kingdom comes fully, the lyre will be together again and all the strings will be playing. And I say that metaphorically as well as literally.

All the strings will be playing when the kingdom comes. Right now there's only one string playing. Not a lot of music to listen to, metaphorically. But with the contrast of despair, the hope becomes that much right.

Now, what I'd like you to do is just, again, most of you want to speak around your table just for a very short period of time because I want to leave some time for questions and answers and additions.

What does that picture do for you in your life? Okay, as you think of your life right now, particularly around loss and the danger of despair coming out of loss, or maybe it's people you're dealing with or people you're ministering to right now have loss.

Maybe you've experienced loss yourself recently. When you look at that picture and that contrast of those various factors, what does it do to you and in you? And some of this might be thought, some of it might be feeling.

[51 : 14] But share at your table a little bit about that. So I'd like to leave a little bit of time for comments or questions.

The only thing that I will be fairly fastidious on is those of you have a tendency in these kind of sessions to give long speeches. So if you're one of those people, you know who's at your table, so you know who tends to do that kind of thing.

If you give a long speech, I may say something like, let's close in prayer or something like that. Be prepared for that. But let's do that. And just, I'm a terrible self-marketer, but I've written five books which are on that table there, so if you're interested, feel free.

The change there is not a reverse tie if you take money but if you put a \$20 bill there, you can take some money with you as well. So questions, comments, additions, tell me more.

I'm sorry. Thank you. Yes, Beth? On the first side, you should attending skills so that the right answer is created.

[52 : 26] Your second point there is thinking and willing to remember what someone thinks. Is that for the comfort and comfort person to know that the grieving person is thinking and willing to remember what someone thinks?

Is this important, James? Yes. Okay, so I repeat the question. So the question is on the issue of thinking, willing, and feeling. What's the point of that?

What was I trying to say there? I think often what happens in loss is we're not thinking in a deeply rational way. In fact, some would argue that that's part of what loss is.

We're so overcome by emotion we're not thinking rationally. But a lot of our intervention is very rational and logical. And I think as Christians we often do that. Somebody's hurting and we bring in a short course in systematic theology and the person's like, that's not where I'm at.

That's not what I'm feeling right now. So I think we need to respond to feelings with feelings and careful emotions that way. And then I think it makes people feel more comfortable that somebody understands.

[53 : 37] You know, I'm sure I used the example of my mother tonight. Some of us have had maryll issues. Some of us have had issues with kids. When you talk to somebody else's experience, you're often not sharing solutions. You're often just sharing experiences.

Like, it's really awful. Like, I'm sure when I told the thing about my mother saying I was dead, a number of people were like, oh, been there. Like, I don't know if any of you saw Jan Arden last week at CBC News talking about her mother.

And I just watched that and thought, she gets it. You know, no solutions, no hands, but she gets it and understands it. So in that sense, the emotion is what we're connecting with.

Yes? The title is Growing Soap. And I have a question. Does growing soap propose suffering?

More into pain equals suffering. Well, I mean, I think there's a sense in which if we go to Romans 5, part of that list of things is you can't get to character unless you've been through suffering at home.

[54 : 43] And that list that goes in Romans 5 argument there, that if you want to get to the town of character, you pretty well have to go through the village of suffering. It's why no infant is ever described as a person of character because they haven't gone through to suffering.

A lot of the old people in the room for purposes tonight is 66 and above. The older people in the room, one of the reasons many of them were described as people of character is because they've experienced a lot of suffering.

And I think that's where the growth comes. And it's Paul's notion in 2nd Corinthians that as the outward person perishes, the inner person is renewed day by day.

So it's like through the pain, through the struggle, I'm often more fit to have character and maturity in your community. So people have happy lives with nothing going wrong.

It's a tougher role to get to character. It's not possible, but it is a tougher role to get to character. So your mathematical performance is pretty good. Yeah. Yes.

[55 : 44] Yes. Yes. Yes.

Yes.

Yes. to raise Lazarus and help to do it. He still has stopped. And he doesn't acknowledge the truth of the people.

And he's been able to do it all the time. Yeah, it's a great comment. On the passage in John 11, 35, the whole experience of Lazarus' death, that Jesus crying, knowing what he was about to do, didn't cancel out his emotion, his feeling.

And I think this gets into a big theological issue. Does the triune of God actually experience emotion? And sometimes the way we present the triune of God, you get the sense he just thinks deep thoughts all the time and doesn't have emotion.

[57 : 03] I find Genesis 6, that passage we looked at, completely overwracking. Like he was grieved and he made people. His heart was filled with pain. He was in sorrow.

And so much so that he killed birds. I'm like, what do you sense of him? That's an emotion that, with all due respect, seems a little out of control to me, right?

But that is part of the God there. There is emotion there. I think sometimes even we talk about not quenching the Holy Spirit. We put that in a very cognitive way. And I think there is a deep pain.

Jesus is weeping over Jerusalem. Like, some of us are concerned about Vancouver, concerned about urbanization, but imagine weeping over the city, knowing what was to come. And of course, the Gardening Assembly, I think it's another classic example.

His anguish in the garden, and his grief in the garden, the disciples abandoning him, and his experience of the Father. And he knows what's coming, but is still in pain.

[58 : 02] So, and to me, that's really helpful for us as Christians. Knowing the right stuff doesn't get rid of emotion. You can know this is all true. You can know that person's going to be with the Lord, or is going to be with the Lord, or whatever it is.

But it still hurts. It's still painful. So, yeah, you raise a really important point there. And I think that's why God feels as well as things. And who else?

Yes. I'd just like to remind you about this. When my mother died, which was a few siblings, my priest-adventure, and he said to me, and very, very dear, a friend of mine, a great spiritual, a great believer, said to me, walk with Jesus, my dear.

And it was those two things that were said to me that at the time were comforting. But it was the first one, great, well, and we find him in the grief, and we find him in the grief.

Yeah, great question. Yeah, when her father died, the priest said to her, grieve well, and somebody else said, walk with Jesus, and we'll let him hear him.

[59 : 28] I mean, because I think we often see grief as a problem to be solved rather than an experience we understood, as soon as somebody dies, we're like, move on. Like, that's, we're all into the doing.

But to really grieve well means, first of all, you need to recognize this is going to take time. I mean, most of the clinical work would suggest if you lose a parent, you lose a spouse, you lose a child, the grief process is going to be two years.

And by two years, what they mean is, it'll be two years before that does not still become the center of your life. So, if that person's lost, and again, keep in mind all the losses that could occur, not just death, but in the early stages, that loss is at the center of your life, and everything relates to that loss.

Over a period of time, it starts to move. It's always part of your life, but it starts to move to the edge. Like, my father's gone 22 years. I'm over the grief journey, but it's still part of my story.

My father did pass away, so that's part of my journey. So, to grieve well, I think first of all, it means give it, accept that it's a norm, and it's okay. It's not like, oh, like she went four weeks ago, so I need to get on with it.

[60 : 39] That's not grieving. So, I need to acknowledge it. I also need to give it the space and time it needs. And to me, it's a little bit like letting steam come out of a kettle.

Like, you don't direct the steam. You just let it emerge. Let it come out. And grief has all these contradictory feelings. Sometimes you're sad, sometimes you're angry, sometimes you're irritable, sometimes you're depressed, and you go through all those cycles over and over and over again, whatever the loss is.

So, to just acknowledge, yeah, that is part of it. I'm really irritable. Fatigue is one of the biggest qualities of grief. People get exhausted in my life, but they say things like, well, you know, it was hard, I'm really, really tired, but I'm going to go to bed early tonight.

No, it's not that kind of tiredness. It's the deep weirdness that happens. So, if you allow that stuff to happen, rather than orchestra in an over a period of time, then the grief is decided to describe as good.

And that little phrase we use sometimes, good grief. If you take the tone out of that and just say it normally, good grief is a good thing to do. And the other thing it does, I think, to go back to what I said about tone, I think when we lose things and when things go away from us, this is kind of the dark night of the soul kinds of spirituality, but when we lose something that is deeply significant, we are forced to turn our eyes onto Jesus again and say, this is where my hope comes from.

[62 : 06] And I can't, my whole life is not completely dependent on this issue, this circumstance, this acquirement, this possession, this thing I've bought. That can't get me through it.

So that takes time to let something go and turn back to who God is again. And that's a difficult journey. So I think the journey will teach really helps with this and the good grief compared to outside.

So I appreciate you raising that. It's an important phrase. Somebody else? Yes? Yes. Yeah, the question is somebody dies and you're not sure where they are in the faith journey.

How do you deal with that? Well, that's a massive question. Well, a couple of things.

I'm always thankful I'm not God when that happens. Because God knows and God understands and God is sovereign and God is in control and God has, you know, omnipotence and omniscience and like he has all the qualities that can render decisions that I don't have.

[63 : 26] So I think it's that crawling up on the throne thing again. Like one of my sort of metaphorical images I can worry sometimes as Christians in our confidence about our faith we crawl up on the throne and make pronouncements. And I think we need to stay off the throne and just let God be there.

So part of, I think, the test when somebody passes away and I'm not sure what their faith journey is or where they go on or however you want to frame that, I think it is a deepening faith and trust in God.

That he is a just and merciful God and he will be the right person of final judgment. That's not to be sloppy on our theology. It's not to be sloppy on evangelism.

It's not to be sloppy on how we understand scripture. But I think when that happens, we need to trust God in a very deep way. And so many people die, not everybody, but so many people die in a slow process and it's not always conscious and they have a life before it.

Who knows what's going on? Like, we don't know. And the thief on the cross to me is an interesting paradigm for this area. Like, it's like, today I'll be with me in paradise. Like, I always want to say, what happened there?

[64 : 36] Like, what did he do? What did Jesus do? Like, how did that happen? And I don't have good systematic theology categories for explaining that relationship. Like, I don't think, well, God does. So he can be on that.

So that's kind of the way that I've found helpful now. But once people pass to the other side, you are dealing with a lot of sort of top culture, a lot of mysticism, a lot of psychological things.

There's people wishing this and wanting this and hoping this. And, you know, it's a normal part of losing suffering. But it is challenging, especially when it's something you care about. It's always put pressure on when you say time for one more question, but time for one more question.

Yes? Hello there. D tranquil person?

Okay. Yes? Yes? Yes, he's one of the things that are related to the importance of most people, but people do not of large leadership, and some people do not of them want this and some people who want to to the quarantines of ancient visions. And this is not but they're going to restaurants in New York, and they're going to mention it in New York, setting up weit above the French descent.

[65 : 59] We know each other, so she's saying that with affection. I mean, I remember when your dad was. I mean, your dad was very close to me, as you know.

I was close to him. I think when I saw you after he died, I was talking to you. I don't think I had a lot to say to you. Like, I was, I mean, you were brokenhearted because it was your dad. I was brokenhearted because it was your dad.

And even at the funeral, when I spoke at the funeral, like I said, words. But I didn't know what to say. I just, wow, he's gone. I can't believe he was such a central part of my life.

It was just really, really sad for me. So sometimes our need to speak and our need to say also needs to be sacrificed. But I think just being there may be enough.

And I find in the really, in the really heartbreaking ones, like, you know, children dying. We've got good friends who lost a 10-year-old daughter recently. What do you say?

[66 : 56] What do you say in that situation? Like, nothing you say brings dignity to that kind of situation. Like, a 10-year-old child is gone. It's awful. It's just awful.

And so sometimes not saying anything. And it's the job's friends thing. I mean, one of the problems is not just what they said, but that they said anything. You know, that they just spoke up and felt the need to talk. So I think that's part of it.

I think the other part of it is speaking more briefly and just, you know, statements that are caring and loving in light of your relationship. I think that could be really helpful. It doesn't need to be a kind of long, well-developed dissertation, which is often what we feel like we need to do, but just more about some simple statements of comfort.

And I think in the right situation, like, the song is going to be filled with reassurance and comfort about who God is. And I think in certain places, that's really important to do.

I mean, some of the grant C.S. Lewis' grief observed, and he talks, he said, like, his wife, like, don't give me these consolations of religion. Like, I don't need to get those right away. I will come to those eventually.

[67 : 58] So a lot of it's timing as well when we say things. And it might be saying, like, you know, when do you think you're able, like, I'd love to sit down and chat with you about how you're doing. Like, when do you think you'd be able for us to have that conversation?

And you would say, you know, I'm looking for that. And then we do that. So I'm giving you the leadership on that process. Oh, not the last question.

No, it's not right. This is not a question. That's all right. I love the future. The point that you will publish for us to see the whole foot next. Really, the last.

I want to be just. Yeah. Yeah. Yeah. Yeah, there is light there, too. Yes. Yes. I mean, this is another whole seminar.

In and of itself. But I think often our need to help is more about us than it is about the other person. Like, we feel like, oh, they're in pain.

[69 : 20] What am I going to say? And we get all self-preoccupied about what we're going to say. Rather than just going up. I think your line is a great one. I have no idea what to say.

I'm lost for words. And there's something incredibly powerful about that. That I'm lost for words. In this culture, with so many words, just to say I'm lost for words can be very, very reassuring.

Because often when we open our mouths, that's when we get in trouble, right? We kept them closed. We put them in a hospital. And so we're all there. So my prayer before I came tonight was that some of you in the room would be helped.

And some of those who were helped by you who were in the room would be helped. So I hope that happens. And I'm going to suggest before James comes up and does a reverse introduction of whatever we're going to do.

I think in the spirit of what we talked about earlier, we should just sing that chorus together. So let's stand and sing. Okay? Okay? First verse and chorus.

[70 : 22] My hope is built on nothing less than Jesus' blood and righteousness.