



AT A LOSS

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All the New Day power players came out of the woodwork for game night at different houses. What they didn't know was that there was another game going on. We have a special prize for one person from each of the three homes.

Most competitive
Most gracious loser
Biggest cheater

You know what game stresses me out? Jenga. It's that game where you build a tower of blocks, and then you take away blocks one by one and see how long the tower will stand. What a twisted concept. Who came up with that? "How close can we push things to the brink of destruction?" It's like a kid wondering how much they can get away with before they get in trouble. I ask you: WHY are we promoting this kind of behavior? What's the fun in purposely creating instability?

Missing pieces make for a mess. And I realized that's not only true in Jenga – it's true in life. Take something or someone out of the picture and your whole world can crumble. It throws everything into chaos when part of your life is no longer there. We've been looking at all kinds of messes over the past several weeks – messes of discouragement, messes of need, messes of fear, messes of sin. Our premise has been that life is sometimes painful and difficult because we live in a world that is broken by sin. But God loves us so much he not only offers salvation, but help. Real, true help right when we're in the middle of our worst messes.

This morning, I want to wrap up our series by looking at the idea of loss and grief, because those are so devastating. Part of life is loss. That's just an uncomfortable reality. Can God work through it, and if he does, what does that look like? Austin O'Malley once wrote, "Sorrow, like rain, makes roses and mud." It's easy to see how it makes mud. But how does grief or sorrow produce something as beautiful as a rose?

There's a story I've read many times in the New Testament without ever thinking about it from the perspective of grief – even though it revolves around someone's death. But as I looked at it with this in mind, I could suddenly see so much in the actions of Jesus that I never noticed before.

John 11:1-6, 11-44

Now a man named Lazarus was sick. He was from Bethany, the village of Mary and her sister Martha. This Mary, whose brother Lazarus now lay sick, was the same one who poured perfume on the Lord and wiped his feet with her hair. So the sisters sent word to Jesus, "Lord, the one you love is sick."

When he heard this, Jesus said, "This sickness will not end in death. No, it is for God's glory so that God's Son may be glorified through it." Jesus loved Martha and her sister and Lazarus. Yet when he heard that Lazarus was sick, he stayed where he was two more days.

John goes out of his way to highlight a real disconnect here. This family is very close to Jesus. Jesus loved everyone he ministered to, but he shared a deeper bond of friendship with Mary, Martha and Lazarus. They were inner circle people.

But when Jesus hears Lazarus is seriously ill, he doesn't drop everything and go to him. Even though the sisters specifically sent him a message stressing how urgent it was, Jesus waited 2 days before even starting the trip to Bethany. If you've ever gotten a call that someone you love is in critical condition at the hospital, you know the normal response is to make an effort to get there during the crisis to support the family. So it puzzled everyone when Christ didn't rush to Lazarus's side.

Jesus was in the business of healing. He performed miracles everywhere he went. You would think that his closest friends deserved his skills more than anyone. You would think he would feel a tug to go help them. And yet, says John, he stayed where he was.

Here's a truth we don't expect about loss: **Jesus allows us to experience grief.** He didn't stop Lazarus from dying when he was perfectly capable of doing so. He didn't shield Mary and Martha from the painfully sad experience of losing their brother.

We sometimes assume that if we're tight with God, he will give us special treatment and spare us the hardest things and life. We are caught by surprise when we pray for God to help and he doesn't intervene. We think, "What's the good in believing in him if he's not there for you when you need him the most?"

This passage doesn't answer all the whys for us, but it does give us some insights into Jesus allowing us to experience grief.

First, *what's a crisis for us is never a crisis for God.* Jesus moved so slowly to respond, because it wasn't necessary for him to rush. He knew what the ultimate outcome would be. It's a good reminder that God is not bound by time in the way we are, so what feels pressing and urgent to us will never hit him in the same way.

What looks and feels like an emergency to me doesn't cause his adrenaline to rush because he surrounds time so completely, past present and future. My sense of panic doesn't cause God to panic, and that's a really good thing, even if I don't understand it.

Second, *God's love is undeniable*. Twice John makes it clear that Jesus loved these people. That was the foundation. His actions had to be interpreted with that as the backdrop, because otherwise what he was doing would have seemed cruel. Knowing he was motivated by love puts trust into the equation when what he was doing seemed to make no sense.

When God doesn't answer our prayers the way we want, we can easily jump to the conclusion that he must not really love us. Then we read his silence as punishment or anger. But here's the thing: We can't abandon what we know in the face of circumstances we don't understand. We can't let go of confirmed truth when we come up against events that are hard to interpret. And we know God loves us. He has stated it straight out over and over in the Bible. And he proved it once and for all on the cross:

Romans 5:8

But God demonstrates his own love for us in this: While we were still sinners, Christ died for us.

That's the unshakeable truth. The love is solid. And having confidence in that makes all the difference in how we decode God's choices in our time of grief.

One last point we learn here is that *God makes sense of senseless*. He sees something in the circumstances that isn't immediately obvious to the rest of us. Jesus states that what Lazarus is going through will bring glory to God. What appears to be meaningless suffering has the potential for great meaning. God's original design for the world did not include sickness and death and accidents and abuse. That all resulted from sin. He's not a God who takes pleasure in making us go through awful situations. But he is not going to let all that evil have the final word in our lives. He overrides it and redirects it to accomplish what he wants.

One of the most basic human needs is the need for significance – to know that who we are and what we're going through matters. God infuses purpose in what otherwise is just painful. And that purpose is not just for the world's good – but ours as well. We were designed to be meaningful and to give God glory, and our suffering moves us toward that end.

So God lets us go through the valleys. It's not a crisis for him, he loves us and he wants our suffering to have a higher purpose. Speaking of purpose, the disciples were having some difficulty figuring out what Jesus was planning to do and what his purpose was in waiting.

After he had said this, he went on to tell them, "Our friend Lazarus has fallen asleep; but I am going there to wake him up."

His disciples replied, "Lord, if he sleeps, he will get better." Jesus had been speaking of his death, but his disciples thought he meant natural sleep.

So then he told them plainly, "Lazarus is dead, and for your sake I am glad I was not there, so that you may believe. But let us go to him."

Then Thomas (called Didymus) said to the rest of the disciples, "Let us also go, that we may die with him."

I love it that John is so honest about the communication troubles between Jesus and his disciples. It makes them seem so much more human. The disciples were always having trouble keeping up with Christ's metaphors, and in this case, it was the word sleep that threw them. In their minds, this was still just an illness. They didn't understand what they were dealing with. Jesus had to plainly tell them that Lazarus was dead.

I think one of the most vital points in this passage is that **Jesus helps us recognize grief.**

Now you may say, "It's not very hard to tell when someone has died. That's easy to recognize." But I'm not limiting grief to death. Life is full of all kinds of losses, deaths big and small. A divorce. Getting fired. The fall of a role model. Kids growing up. Getting wrinkles. Having innocence shattered by abuse or betrayal. A miscarriage. A small group ending.

And then there are less tangible losses. Having to raise kids in a city instead of a small town like the one you grew up in. Living far away from family. Seeing that your career will never be what you imagined, or that your health won't get any better, or that friends from your past have drifted away.

What we consider good developments also have an element of loss. When you move into a new house, that's an exciting thing. But you've also left behind a place full of your history and memories. Graduating from school is a major accomplishment and the loss of a place of security and identity. Getting a new job, getting married, having a baby – all are positive, happy occasions that also mark the end of certain things in our lives.

My point is this: Life is filled with moments of loss, but most of the time when we go through them, we don't recognize that the emotions we're feeling are grief related. But they are. And in order to move forward in life in a healthy way, we need to identify what is going on and give ourselves permission to feel our sorrow.

In her book, "Growing Through Changes," Linda Kondracki writes, "Every change creates loss, and loss must be grieved."

That's a powerful concept. What she is saying is that we have to acknowledge what's really going on and face it. If we don't admit that something is a loss when it is, if we don't take the time to feel the depth of that loss, then we're going to carry the emotion of that into other relationships, where it will come out sideways. Those feelings will come out one way or another, and they will be destructive rather than healthy.

There's a reason we don't want to acknowledge how much we've lost. It's painful. If we let ourselves feel it, we're afraid it will be too much for us. But if we don't walk through it, we start to disengage from life. It's like we said a couple weeks ago: Fear makes us less present. Lewis Smedes wrote, "I worry about fast forgivers. They tend to forgive quickly in order to avoid the pain."

Are you a fast forgiver? Do you try to rush through your pain? The good news is that the Lord is close to the brokenhearted, and he meets us at the point of our suffering. It was not as early as Mary and Martha would have liked, but Christ did eventually make his way to them.

On his arrival, Jesus found that Lazarus had already been in the tomb for four days. Bethany was less than two miles from Jerusalem, and many Jews had come to Martha and Mary to comfort them in the loss of their brother. When Martha heard that Jesus was coming, she went out to meet him, but Mary stayed at home.

"Lord," Martha said to Jesus, "if you had been here, my brother would not have died. But I know that even now God will give you whatever you ask."

Jesus said to her, "Your brother will rise again."

Martha answered, "I know he will rise again in the resurrection at the last day."

Jesus said to her, "I am the resurrection and the life. He who believes in me will live, even though he dies; and whoever lives and believes in me will never die. Do you believe this?"

"Yes, Lord," she told him, "I believe that you are the Christ, the Son of God, who was to come into the world."

And after she had said this, she went back and called her sister Mary aside. "The Teacher is here," she said, "and is asking for you." When Mary heard this, she got up quickly and went to him. Now Jesus had not yet entered the village, but was still at the place where Martha had met him. When the Jews who had been with Mary in the house, comforting her, noticed how quickly she got up and went out, they followed her, supposing she was going to the tomb to mourn there.

When Mary reached the place where Jesus was and saw him, she fell at his feet and said, "Lord, if you had been here, my brother would not have died."

When Jesus saw her weeping, and the Jews who had come along with her also weeping, he was deeply moved in spirit and troubled. "Where have you laid him?" he asked.

Jesus helps us process our grief

Lord, if only you had been here. None of this would have happened. If you had been here, Lazarus would still be alive. Two sisters with the same thought going through their minds. You can hear hurt, frustration, bewilderment, maybe even anger in their words.

Lord if you had been here. The same exact words, but two very different personalities. And Jesus handles them differently. Martha's struggle comes across as more theological and intellectual, so Jesus reassures her on that level. Mary is the more emotional one, letting her tears do the talking. Jesus doesn't even attempt to give her any comforting words. He just empathizes and asks where the body is.

In both cases, Jesus avoids trying to defend himself. He also avoids shutting them down. He lets them give voice to their feelings and helps move them to the next things they need to focus on.

Grief is a process. It's not instant, and it is always individual. Nobody goes through it the same way. But there are definite stages. Elizabeth Kubler-Ross is the individual who first identified them, but here they are again.

Denial. I can't accept reality. It's too much. Again, this is not just limited to someone's death. I was once with a friend when they exploded at their spouse. He had never let me see that side of him before, and so he was ashamed. When he had calmed back down, he shook his head and kept saying, "That did not just happen." He wanted to deny it, because the reality was too embarrassing and painful.

Anger. Again, you can hear a bit of that in what Mary and Martha said. We rage at the powers that be for letting this hard thing happen. We vent and get out all the negative emotions we feel about what we have lost.

Bargaining. Here we try to negotiate a way around the pain or a way to lessen the pain. This is important for us mentally to feel that we have tried everything within our power to prevent what has happened. So for example, a child might think, "If I'm mean to dad's new girlfriend, maybe he won't marry her and he and mom will get back together." It's an important stage to work through because it is where we come to terms with what is outside of our control.

Depression. At this point the weight and the sadness of the situation sinks in. We might feel we will never be happy again. This look grim and black.

Acceptance. Eventually, we emerge into a place where we come to terms with the finality of what has happened. We quit trying to change it or put things back to the way they were and move on.

Linda Kondracki has added one that I think is appropriate, and that is **Hope**. The Christian has a cause to believe in something better. Paul said we do not grieve as those who have no hope. We'll talk about that more in a minute.

What we're trying to get at here is that grief is a process with several stages. Many people try to jump straight from denial to acceptance. They look about the same. I'm fine. Really. Everything's okay. But if we haven't worked through our anger or our bargaining or depression, those will show up other places and we won't understand why we're doing what we do. Guys – we tend to become angry and controlling when we haven't dealt with our pain. We deny what we're feeling and take it out on our families. For women, perhaps a more common symptom is deep depression. If you can't see and deal with the grief behind it, you get stuck in a place with no healing.

This is profoundly important. The stakes are incredibly high. Give yourself permission to stop and think about your losses. Then, like Martha and Mary, bring them to Jesus. Talk to him about them.

Jesus asked Mary a simple question about Lazarus. "Where did you put him?" I think that question works on a metaphorical level. What have I done with my griefs? Where have I put them? Have I stuffed them deep down inside to try and forget them? What am I feeling about them right now?

If you're not sure how to answer that, take some time to write it out. Write down a change in your life and the loss that has come from it. Then ask, What am I doing with that loss right now? Does it make me angry? Am I feeling flat about it? If so, is that denial or acceptance? If writing isn't how you process, sit down with someone you trust and talk it through. They can give you feedback and help you discover what's really going on. Getting to the question of where you've placed your grief is key to moving on.

It was Mary's willingness to take Jesus to the graveside that led to everything else that came afterwards, and it is as we take Jesus to our points of grief that we are able to see him unleash his power.

"Where have you laid him?" he asked.

"Come and see, Lord," they replied.

Jesus wept.

Then the Jews said, "See how he loved him!"

Those two words, "Jesus wept," are two of the most astounding words in the Bible. If you were Jesus and you knew you were about to raise Lazarus from the dead, why take the time to cry? Why not tell everyone, "No, no. Stop crying! It's okay – watch me do a miracle." I would want to get to the happy ending right away.

But that's not what Christ does. Instead he weeps. He feels the sadness of Mary and everyone around her and he takes it on as his own. He entered into the human experience of loss, even though he didn't need to. And that's what is so remarkable. **Jesus joins us in our grief.**

When Annika was a preschooler, she had some medical issues that required her to get a blood draw every few months. Talk about traumatic. There are plenty of adults who don't like needles, let alone a 4 year old. I was a wimp. I didn't even want to watch her go through that. Besides, mothers are just more comforting, right? So Karin would take Annika. And in order to get the blood draw, Karin would have to hold her on her lap and wrap her arms tightly around her. The whole time, Annika would be screaming in fear and trying desperately to get out of it.

As a parent, that's excruciating – knowing your child is distraught and knowing they absolutely have to do this for their own good. But without Karin's presence there, Annika wouldn't have stayed.

Christ does that for us – he stays right with us in our grief. He holds us and goes beyond that: he takes our pain on as his own.

People going through a serious illness will often turn to a support group filled with people who are dealing with the same disease. Why? Because it is extremely helpful to know somebody else understands exactly what we're going through. We seek out those who know what our suffering is like. And this is one of the biggest gifts Jesus gave us – a Savior who identifies with our pain because he knows it from the inside out.

And he's given us the church. One of the best things that happens in church is when we are honest about our sin our pain and our struggles. It is a way we show one another the love of Christ, because it helps other people see they're not alone. We embody what it means that Jesus joins us in our grief.

Isaiah 53:3-4

*Surely he took up our infirmities
and carried our sorrows,
yet we considered him stricken by God,
smitten by him, and afflicted.*

He carried our sorrows – our griefs over our losses – to the cross. He not only forgives our sin – he feels our pain.

That's a comfort. But it isn't the end.

Jesus, once more deeply moved, came to the tomb. It was a cave with a stone laid across the entrance. "Take away the stone," he said.

"But, Lord," said Martha, the sister of the dead man, "by this time there is a bad odor, for he has been there four days."

Then Jesus said, "Did I not tell you that if you believed, you would see the glory of God?"

So they took away the stone. Then Jesus looked up and said, "Father, I thank you that you have heard me. I knew that you always hear me, but I said this for the benefit of the people standing here, that they may believe that you sent me."

When he had said this, Jesus called in a loud voice, "Lazarus, come out!" The dead man came out, his hands and feet wrapped with strips of linen, and a cloth around his face.

Jesus said to them, "Take off the grave clothes and let him go."

Everybody was skeptical when Christ approached the grave. Four days of decomposition meant death was irreversible. What was the point in opening up that grave again? It was going to be smelly. Besides, who wants to open up a world of hurt when you're trying to put things behind you and move on?

But eventually they do as he asks, and that's when Jesus does the impossible. He changes the crying to laughter and the pain to joy. He brought forth life out of death in the way that only he can.

Jesus transforms our grief.

When we open ourselves up, when we let Christ into those painful, dark places of grief and loss, it's scary. It's a world of hurt we'd rather not look at. But even where we think there is no life at all, he can do a new work.

Gerald Sittser is an author who understands grief. In on terrible car accident, he lost his mother, his wife and his daughter. His entire life changed overnight. He wrote a book about his experience called "A Grace Disguised: How the Soul Grows through Loss." And he basically says you never technically can recover from loss, because there's no way to put things back the way they were. There's no reversing what happened. You really only have two choices: to be devastated by it, or transformed by it. Something new can come out of it.

He says loss does not necessarily make you less than you were, it can make you more, because now you have this piece called sorrow that you didn't have before, and that can enlarge your soul. You absorb that loss so it becomes part of who you are. And what that does is expand your capacity to comfort other people. I've seen it firsthand in people like Katy, Jimmy Z., Roxy, John, Nancy, Judi, Becky, Maria. These people have had their hearts opened up for others because of what they've suffered themselves. It grows your appreciation for living and cherishing every moment. It clarifies your priorities. It makes you look forward to heaven. It makes you less superficial. It makes you more humble and vulnerable. It makes you less fearful because you've seen the worst.

But sorrow can only do that as we open it up to Christ and face it with him. When we do, he can take even our deepest pain and redeem it for his glory and our good.

I want to leave you with one more story. Football hall of famer Jim Kelly, and his wife Jill had a boy named Hunter who seemed healthy when he was born. But at 4 months, he was diagnosed with a rare disease with no cure. It affected the brain and meant he wouldn't be able to walk or talk, or even smile. For Jim, whose life was all about sports, having his only son be unable to even move was shattering. Jim was angry at God and wanted nothing to do with him.

Jill, on the other hand, ran to Jesus in the crisis. Eventually, Jim saw the change in her and he too gave his life to Christ. By the time their son passed away at the age of 8, something remarkable had come from the tragedy: Jill and Jim had both found God, their marriage had been healed, and they had a deep desire to reach other hurting families with the hope they had found. Jill said, "We took our suffering to the only suffering that matters – the cross."

There's only one place where our grief can be transformed, and that's at the cross. Are you taking your losses to Jesus? Where have you put your grief? Are you ignoring it? Are you feeling it? Are you ready to open up and be changed by the new work he wants to do?