



Praise, Prayer & Preaching sermon

Does anyone actually care?

Part 2: Surviving a crisis

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2 Thessalonians 2:16–17

“16 May our Lord Jesus Christ himself and God our Father, who loved us and by his grace gave us eternal encouragement and good hope, 17 encourage your hearts and strengthen you in every good deed and word.”

We continue a pastoral series which asks the question: “Does Anyone Actually Care?”

The context of each address is twofold on the recipient’s part ... that is all of us! Firstly, there are the things that happen to us which leave us bereft of friends and wondering if there is anyone who actually cares. On the other side of this question is God reaching out to us in love and offering his grace.

Of course, a crisis can be intensely personal ... but it can also be those events which shake a community to its very core:

- As a boy ... I recall a coal slip in Wales ... lives lost.
- As a young minister ... I recall the Lockerbie air disaster ... on the Scottish borders.
- All Australians of the right age will recall the Port Arthur incident ... and all of us recall the Victorian Bush Fires.

The difference between those tragedies and personal crises is that there is a corporate identity with them, but in our own individual lives a personal crisis or tragedy can be just as difficult to deal with. Very often we lack the kind of support that will enable us to survive. People may make an immediate response to us ... but we know we require deep resources for the long-term.

Consider the situation ... Your world has fallen apart, but somehow your life must go on. You wonder how you will ever get through the succession of joyless days that seem to line the path ahead of you. You wonder how you will get through the next moment, because the distress is so great.

You may be facing the loss of a loved one, the end of a career, a separation, an injury, a serious illness, a bankruptcy or some unwanted news. You may feel your life has been so overturned that you worry if you will ever survive. Who can you turn to for comfort? What resources can you draw upon? Are there coping strategies that you can learn?

We cannot avoid the pain of the crisis, for it comes with power to us unawares and we feel its shock ... and “Are we able to survive it?” is my question.

This evening, essentially what I am saying is that there is no bypass. However, there is a way of survival which is wholesome and good ... and it relates to Jesus Christ. Our text acts as a starting point for us ... of discovering this way.

Text: 2 Thessalonians 2:16–17

“May our Lord Jesus Christ himself and God our Father, who loved us and by his grace gave us eternal encouragement and good hope, encourage your hearts and strengthen you in every good deed and word.”

This letter gives us insight into the generous and warm nature of Paul ... and our text is an encouragement to Christians who are undergoing difficult times. It is not surprising that the content centres on standing firm. It is exactly the kind of response required when facing a crisis.

The writer is strengthening his readers by reminding them of God’s love and grace. The letter speaks of ‘bravely enduring’—but I sense this Second Letter to the Thessalonians, as I read it as a whole, has a tone which speaks of the positive activity of doing good and being encouraged in Christ.

I want to bring practical insight into this important theme, and ask how it might apply to us.

Allow ourselves the experience of grief

It is an unhelpful myth that grieving feeds pain or that grief is always negative. We must know what it is to grieve if we are to experience real healing. In practical terms, grieving appropriately is the way to reach a point of recalling a loss or crisis without pain.

There is no way of shortcutting or, even worse, bypassing grief, loss or sorrow. It is true that we can recover from devastation ... and even become stronger in the process, but it is a journey. I reach this conclusion after years of listening to people who have survived trauma and loss ... and after observing those who have been helped in their difficult situation.

Grieving means allowing yourself to feel the anguish—not suppressing it. It means sharing it, talking about it, crying about it and allowing yourself to come through the various stages that grief encompasses—which may include shock, denial, guilt, anger, depression, and finally—acceptance of the situation and moving on to the next phase of your life.

If we refuse to acknowledge the extent of the disruption in our life, and the resulting loss and pain, we are experiencing denial. It is here that people often lose themselves in sleep, drugs, alcohol, food, general over-activity, shallow platitudes, espoused good cause, superficially helping other people. There is a further stage to move on to.

Unexpressed sorrow may express itself in physical symptoms—not only of depression, but the inhibition of other emotions, such as love and joy. You cannot choose to cut down a particular segment of your emotions without being aware of the deeper damage that occurs.

Painful though it is, by allowing ourselves to grieve, we may come through the experience stronger, more alive, without deadening our capacity to feel.

Ann Morrow Lindbergh writes on Sharing Sorrow and says, “What I am saying is not simply the old puritan truism that ‘suffering teaches’. I do not believe that sheer suffering teaches. If suffering alone taught, all the world would be wise, since everyone suffers. To suffering must be added mourning, understanding, patience, love, openness, and the willingness to remain vulnerable. All these and other factors combined, if the circumstances are right, can teach and can lead to re-birth.”

Someone who suffers a tragedy inevitably asks, “What if...” and “If only I’d...” We need to take time to sort out the real scope of our responsibility. Perhaps we need to make amends where there are lapses or mistakes—and to forgive ourselves when atonement is impossible. Staying stuck in guilt will only cloud the issues and prevent us from making wise, objective decisions.

If we are to receive the encouragement of Christ ... and that is my chief concern ... then we must allow ourselves to grieve and share our pain with God.

One of the most striking stories in the gospels is when Jesus is called to Bethany, after the death of his friend, Lazarus. In Jesus we have a marvellous teacher for our feelings, too—for he did not find it hard to weep. I cannot imagine Jesus standing by someone, handing them a handkerchief and saying, “Come on, have a good cry. It will do you good.” No—Jesus cried with them!

We must allow ourselves to grieve.

Be ready to receive help from friends

One of the most basic of human fears is the fear of abandonment. One definition of friendship is “Stripped of all its other definitions, a friendship affirms that we will not be abandoned.” The same writer goes on to say, “The first gift of friendship is companionship, which is the knowledge that one will not be abandoned. The second is the gift of hope. A good friendship affirms that good things can still take place, no matter what the magnitude of the loss.”

People can give us hope and, when we face a crisis in our lives, we need to seek the people who will give us hope. Let us not confuse seeking out people who will give us hope ... from trying to find people who will only tell us what we want to hear. The best friends will be honest with us, but they will do it by being alongside us and loving us and allowing us to feel that they are not there to give advice and direction, but to really love us with a full heart.

A friend is a person you know well—and you need friends when you are suffering. You need people who will listen non-judgementally to your negative—as well as your positive feelings; someone who will patiently hear you reveal what you need to say, what you need to share over and over again.

What we are doing when we are supportive in a moment of need is giving our friend permission to re-tell the story, and letting them know we are not tired of hearing it ... because if the telling of it is part of the healing, then that’s all that is necessary to know ... and their healing matters more than anything else.

Sometimes people will get frustrated with those who are journeying through a crisis or tragedy and they will say to someone else, “He or she always comes back to the same point!” Of course they do! ... and they will do ... until healing has fully and completely come to their life.

Cultivating hope

Norman Cousins describes the will to live as “the ignition system to the motor that turns on the voltage and sets the stage for progress.” When we feel that nobody cares for us, we need to hear and to experience the hope of Christ which allows us to see beyond our present pain. During a time of crisis, we need to re-kindle our will and purpose—and Jesus Christ can do this for us.

We discover that adversity is a gentle teacher, guiding us into greater perceptions of life and illuminating lasting values. We learn what is really important in life and we are more prone to concentrate on the spiritual and the intellectual, rather than the passing and the petty.

Although God may seem hard to reach in our present state of mind, we can still allow him to reach us. God's love is a powerful force in our healing—guiding our response to crises—beyond despair to hope. Where human efforts fall short, God will take us up and allow our journey to be from darkness into light.

Hope is cultivated over a period of time ... not just in a moment. We may find Christ in a moment, but we cultivate our hope in him in a lifetime. O S Marden wrote these words, "There is no medicine like hope, no incentive so great, and no tonic so powerful as expectation of something better tomorrow."

For the Christian, there is always hope—and no matter how dark the night or how dismal the tragedy, there is light and hope. It takes a lifetime of investing in this kind of real faith that makes facing tragedy and crisis possible. The hope we cultivate bears fruit which can sustain us at all times. When it has been cultivated, it has deep roots which touch the heart of God, as well as the depths of our being.

Let go of the past

Naturally, there is a time to grieve, but there is also a time to let go ... and, in any crisis, letting go of the past is one of the most difficult things of all to do, but it is essential to healing.

Appreciating what you have in the present depends on your ability, at least to some degree, to relinquish the hold upon us of the pain of the past. Reviewing your losses is no longer helpful ... and we take control of our response.

Often survivors of a crisis can identify a turning point—a revelation that they can still find joy in daily life, or appreciate beauty or be of help to other people.

Can I use a personal illustration? When I was going through a difficult time a few months ago, someone rang me in great despair and I cannot tell you how healing it was for me to be able to help them. This can be a pivotal point in the healing process.

Sometimes people who are going through a crisis will say that when they force themselves to read a book, unburden themselves to a friend or write a thank you note, then that becomes a new beginning.

Of course we learn from adversity and move on to find new purpose. If we can find meaning in our suffering then so much the better, but even if we cannot find meaning there and then, some of us will be able to translate our suffering into ways that help other people.

We can be encouraged and take heart as we begin to control our response to tragedy. It does not happen all at once and it is not devoid of relapse, but in time we can view a crisis as an opportunity for learning and growth.

We can re-ignite hope and faith in Jesus Christ and grow as people ... and move confidently into a new chapter of our lives. Your new life will be especially rewarding because, through the Holy Spirit, you will have discovered and developed resources within yourself that you never knew existed.

Not long ago, I talked with someone who offered help to a person who had been on the last train to go through Kings Cross underground station in London, before a dreadful fire in 1987. She considered herself very fortunate and thanked God that she had been saved. Eighteen months later, doing the same journey, she found herself unable to stay on the underground train. She suddenly realised that she could have died that night a year and a half earlier! It prevented her from travelling on the underground for many months—until she had completed a protracted series of ‘talking it through’ sessions. She eventually let go of the past.

To survive any crisis or tragedy, we have to do the same—to grieve, to receive help, to cultivate hope—but eventually to let go.