

On Storms, Grief, & Healing

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From the Pastor's Pen

There are times when the magnitude of an event defies description. Nothing to be captured in prose or seen in pictures adequately convey what is experienced, seen, or felt. The impacts irreversibly change daily routines and patterns of life. The effect is such that we cannot talk about “getting back to normal.” Rather, discussions about adjustment take shape as defining a new normal.

The tornados of April 27, 2011 were such an event; we have passed through a horrific moment as a congregation, community, and city. The immediate fear and chaos of the storms are past. Rebuilding of what was destroyed in minutes will take years.

Countless lives have been touched in every way: physical, mental and emotional, social and financial. Forty-three people died; it is nearly miraculous that it was so few. Property damages vary from a few shingles missing to homes and possessions utterly destroyed. Of the destroyed homes and possessions many have said, “It’s just stuff.” Well yes. Lost stuff can be replaced with new stuff, but the heartache that accompanies losing the old stuff takes a while to heal.

Throughout the Scriptures the drama of God’s story illustrates his presence with his people in the storms of life. Job lost his home and family to a storm. David endured through war, persecution, the death of some of his children and a revolt against his kingship. Peter and the other disciples experienced persecution at the hands of the religious establishment. And Paul the Apostle was beaten, imprisoned, and ultimately martyred for his faith.

The men in each of these examples and dozens of others seen in the Scriptures and across the ages have faced difficult circumstances. Through similar storms, and through war, sickness, famine and persecution the testimony of God’s people is that he is with them in it and has seen them through it. That testimony reflects his faithfulness and their faith. If their testimony is that our Lord sustained them, it poses for us a question: How can we come to grips with our own circumstances and move forward with hope and renewed purpose? There are some common sense things each of us can do.

Acknowledge the Loss

Loss takes various forms and impacts our lives in many ways. For more than 40 families of our town there are the irreversible losses of the death of loved ones. People from all walks of life died in the storms, including adults, adolescents, children and infants. Death stands out as the most painful of all losses. It is considered normal to grieve the death of a family member, a friend, or a neighbor. But so many who did not lose loved ones are all the same grieving. What is going on with that?

Grief accompanies all types of loss. Some losses are obvious and others are subtle. Obvious losses include homes, automobiles, and other possessions and things one can see. The more subtle losses are the life-connections to things and people. When one’s neighborhood is gone the neighbors that made it such now live elsewhere. Looking out of different windows many are thinking, “Who are those people across the street that I know nothing about?” These lost the familiarity of known neighbors and friends. Other real but subtle losses are the favorite chair that had broken in to fit your back or the birdfeeder you looked after in the evenings. The drive home from church or to the grocery store or to the home of a family member means taking a new route and learning new potholes.

The disruption of familiar living patterns creates a particular type of stress that seems to embroider the larger picture with an ugly fringe. Acknowledging the loss is the beginning point of healing.

Four Causes of Stress Injury

- Life Threat—a *traumatic injury* due to an experience of death provoking terror, horror, or helplessness
- Loss—a *grief injury* due to the loss of cherished people, things, or parts of oneself
- Inner Conflict—a *moral injury* due to behaviors or the witnessing of behaviors that violate moral values
- Wear & Tear—a *fatigue injury* due to the accumulation of stress from all sources over time without sufficient rest and recovery

Source—NAMB COSFA

Own the Pain

The pain that accompanies loss can have a physical sense about it. Our breathing may be impacted. Our body can physically hurt. We can struggle with tiredness and that vague sense of what is sometimes called “fighting off a cold.” For many there is a sense of sadness that lingers and for others a mild confusion that feels like a fog hanging over the mind. All of these things are a normal response to an extraordinary set of circumstances. Every person has four basic emotions: sad, glad, mad, and fear, and many people I know are vividly feeling all of them. Whether voiced or not, the heart-cry of many across Tuscaloosa is “Lord, I am hurting, confused, angry, and don’t know what to do next.” The sadness, anger, and anxiety are normal given the circumstances. Rather than deny it admit it. Instead of avoiding it meet it head-on. In God’s kingdom we hasten our healing when we face our pain.

Feed Your Soul

As found in Scripture the soul is the entire person. The traumatic stress of natural disaster, horrific accident, or extreme violence impacts every facet of one’s life. Feeding your soul means being intentional about self-care. Getting adequate rest, eating healthy, exercising, and taking in spiritual, mental, and emotional nurture are critical to adequate self-care. Give attention to those things you need to strengthen your entire life. If there are favorite hymns or Scripture verses or selections of poetry that speak to your heart, revisit them with a new perspective. In particular read things that are uplifting and encouraging, and look specifically to the Scriptures to hear from God. If you previously set aside time for a daily devotional return to that practice. If you do not have a routine devotional life this is a great time to get started. From within the words of God’s word the Spirit bears witness to his wisdom and brings comfort and strength to the soul.

Share Your Story

There is a healing effect to sharing your story that has a power of its own. “Confess your sins to one another and pray for one another that you may be healed” (James 5:16). “If we confess our sins he is faithful and just to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us of all unrighteousness” (1 John 1:9). Too often we limit our understanding of those verses to confession of wrongdoing and forgiveness of the same, but in principle they speak to deeper needs. Confession is to speak the truth, whether it is truth about our sin or the truth of what we have seen or the things we feel or think. James is speaking of tender points or weak places in our lives – those places where we need care and perhaps shoring up. Cleansing of the soul includes much more than the guilt of sin; cleansing includes letting go of bottled up grief from losses that came in the midst of chaos. Tell someone what happened: where you were, what you did, what you thought and felt, what you are doing to move forward and cope. As others hear us they are empowered to help. As we hear ourselves tell our story we realize freedom from the burden.

Aspire to Heal

An uncomfortable truth is that some people do not want to get better. This is seen in various ways and circumstances when observing people who hold onto their personal misery or to their plight in life. For some the hardships of the past become leverage points for sympathy in the present. For others, the comfort of their familiar misery is preferable to the unknown of life without a crisis. They have access to the same knowledge, opportunity, and resources as everyone else, but they choose not to improve or heal. Their response ignores the promise of healing that we find in the Scriptures, and it cripples the individual who chooses victimhood over victory. Become a survivor. Begin taking time off from the activity of cleaning up. Get outside instead of watching replays of the storm on television. Dig in a flower bed, go for a walk, take a break. Create for yourself the time and emotional space to begin and continue recovery. Survivors exercise the courage to choose healing and move forward.

Symptoms of Traumatic Stress Response

- Flashbacks and/or nightmares
- “Zoned out” daydreaming of the trauma
- Unreasonable or “phobic” avoidance of places, people, and experiences that might reawaken the trauma
- Chronic physical signs of hyper-arousal, including sleep problems, trouble concentrating, irritability, anger, poor concentration, blackouts or difficulty remembering things, increased tendency and reaction to being startled, and hyper-vigilance (excessive watchfulness) to threat
- Changes in personality or temperament seen as emotional numbing or a lack of interest in activities that used to be enjoyed. Or, uncharacteristic emotional outbursts become a pattern
- Relationship changes — distancing oneself from people who have previously been close
- Hopelessness — a sense of a foreshortened future (for example, not being able to think about the future or make future plans, not believing one will live much longer), or a belief that things cannot get better.

Source—Compiled

Embrace the Future

Going back is not an option. For those who lost homes and possessions many things will never physically be the same. What is not so obvious is that those of us who did not lose anything also find that everything has changed. Wherever we travel in town we see storm damage and everyone we know is impacted spiritually and emotionally. “When one member rejoices all rejoice ... when one member suffers all suffer” has become real in dozens of congregations, and throughout our community, town, and state.

While our only choice physically is to embrace a future that is different, we can nonetheless choose a spiritual and emotional future that is stronger. “Consider it pure joy, my brothers, whenever you face trials of many kinds, because you know that the testing of your faith develops perseverance. Perseverance must finish its work so that you may be mature and complete, not lacking anything. And we know that in all things God works for the good of those who love him, who have been called according to his purpose” (James 1:2-4, Romans 8:28). Scripture reveals that not only is our Lord providing physically and healing spiritually and emotionally, but that the end of his work we can be stronger, more capable, and more settled in his Kingdom and things of eternal significance. That is a future worth seeking.

Put Another Way

In closing I want to suggest some practical steps that will assist a healthy grieving process. Some of these are different and others a restatement of the things seen above.

- Think it over
- Talk it out
- Write it down
- Let it process
- Pray it through

Think It Over – As you reflect back on the storm events it will be helpful to think it over in light of the support of friends and church, the testimony of the Scriptures, and the knowledge of God’s provision. Choose a daily focus that anchors your thinking not in what was lost, but in what God has done and will do. Stay close to those who positively support your personal recovery.

Talk It Out – Some people cope by talking and others by reflecting, but for all there is a value in speaking. Whether you choose your pastor, your spouse, your one best friend in the world, or a group of trusted confidants, talk it out so that others can give you encouragement and feedback. To play on the analogy of a puzzle, their insight can add to your perspective the wisdom you need for a complete picture.

Write It Down – Recording things on paper is helpful. As Peter Lord says, the “shortest pen is more reliable than the longest memory.” Whether you choose to record your thoughts and impressions in a nicely bound journal or on a page from an ordinary note pad, write down key thoughts and feelings that express your story. It may be well worded sentences or a bullet-point list of dates, times, and words to jar your memory later. After the healing process is far along your notes will help inform the story of God’s activity in your life of faith.

Let It Process – Grief is like the common cold and must run its course to heal. Some people are comfortable with public displays of emotion and others prefer to grieve privately and quietly. To draw upon the well-known adage, “It’s a matter of style.” Stuffing emotion makes a compost heap of the soul. Whether you cry openly or weep quietly — let it out. Whichever style of grieving and emotional release is comfortable to you, know that letting it out helps free the soul of emotional pain.

Pray It Through – There is security in Christ alone. Prayer is our conversation with God that voices faith in the One who is unshakable. It is not what others hear us say but when God hears from us that our faith connects us to the healing power of Christ and the cross. I know many who pray freestyle and as their thoughts occur, and others who write letters to God and then read it as a form of prayer. Some popular devotional books have a suggested prayer at the end of each daily thought. Yet another approach to praying through is to reword a passage of Scripture in personal terms and pray it back to God. However you choose to pray it though, give the time to doing it.

Working through the grief and conflicted emotions of all that happened is calling for intentional thoughtfulness, courage, and hope. Courage is not the absence of fear but the resolve to do what needs to be done in spite of fear. Scripturally, hope is not an uncertain possibility but the assurance and expectation that what God promises will come to pass. In this moment hope reminds us that things can get better. And they will!

As I close I'll offer several examples of praying Scripture back to God. These are drawn from familiar passages and are intended to be read out loud.

O LORD, you have searched me and you know me.
You know when I sit and when I rise; you perceive my thoughts from afar.
You discern my going out and my lying down; you are familiar with all my ways.
Before a word is on my tongue you know it completely, O LORD.
You hem me in--behind and before; you have laid your hand upon me.
Such knowledge is too wonderful for me, too lofty for me to attain.
Where can I go from your Spirit? Where can I flee from your presence?
If I go up to the heavens, you are there; if I make my bed in the depths, you are there.
If I rise on the wings of the dawn, if I settle on the far side of the sea,
even there your hand will guide me, your right hand will hold me fast.
If I say, "Surely the darkness will hide me and the light become night around me," even the darkness will not be dark to you; the night will shine like the day, for darkness is as light to you.
For you created my inmost being; you knit me together in my mother's womb.
I praise you because I am fearfully and wonderfully made; your works are wonderful, I know that full well.
My frame was not hidden from you when I was made in the secret place. When I was woven together in the depths of the earth, your eyes saw my unformed body. All the days ordained for me were written in your book before one of them came to be. (Psalms 139:1-16)

Lord Jehovah you are the one who sees me ... provides for me ... heals me. You bring me out of darkness and deepest gloom and break away my chains. I will give thanks for your unfailing love. (Genesis 16:13, Genesis 22:14, Exodus 15:26, Psalm 107:14-15)

Who shall separate me from the love of Christ? Shall trouble or hardship or persecution or famine or nakedness or danger or sword? No, in all these things I am more than a conqueror through him who loves me. For I am convinced that neither death nor life, neither angels nor demons, neither the present nor the future, nor any powers, neither height nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate me from the love of God that is in Christ Jesus my Lord. (Romans 8:35-39, NIV)

Oh Lord, you are my shepherd, I shall not want.
You make me lie down in green pastures; you lead me beside quiet waters.
You restore my soul; you guide me in the paths of righteousness for your name's sake.
Even though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I fear no evil, for you are with me; your rod and your staff, they comfort me.
You prepare a table before me in the presence of my enemies; you have anointed my head with oil; my cup overflows.
Surely goodness and loving-kindness will follow me all the days of my life, and I will dwell in your house forever. (Psalm 23)

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