

Proverbs 16:9 says, *“The heart of a man plans his way, but the Lord establishes his steps.”* When I came to CPC, I had a plan in my heart that included serving God alongside Neal Benson for a lot of years, at least until my Medicare kicked in! But the Lord establishes his own different set of steps. We are soon going to say good-bye to Neal and his wonderful wife Charity and their children, Sophie, Leah and Isaiah. I remember after being at CPC about six months, standing in this spot saying, “I wish I had known as much as Neal knows when I was his age. It would have saved me from a lot of mistakes early my ministry.” Our loss is Coastline Bible Church’s gain. Continue to pray for the Benson family in their transition into this new adventure God has for them.

And speaking of loss, it’s a subject that comes to mind for many of us, particularly on Memorial Day weekends. Memorial Day is a national holiday set aside for the purpose of honoring those who gave their lives to defend our nation. Some of us see Memorial Day as a day to memorialize our loved ones who have passed, whether they served in the military or not. Memorial Day is a hard day for some of us, but for others Memorial Day isn’t a hard day at all. It’s a nice extra day to play or relax and you are happy to look ahead to a shorter workweek.

No matter our feelings about Memorial Day, we can all relate to feelings of grief, of loss, of sorrow and all the emotions that come with it. It could be grief and sorrow over the loss of a friend, a family member, your health, your job, your marriage, yes even the loss of a pastor and a family you love when they move away.

Grief, loss and sorrow will cause us to feel all kinds of things. We may feel disappointment, guilt, hurt, rejection, regret, loneliness, and cynicism. If we don’t know how to find help through our losses and sorrows, we can find ourselves going down a dark road of anger, hate and fear, even despair and depression. Grief, as Christian psychologist H. Norman Wright puts it, “leads to a tangled ball of emotions.”

Loss, sorrow and pain are things that no one really wants to talk about, but today, on Memorial Day weekend, it is right for us to talk about it. I want to give each of us permission to grieve a loss, to grieve tragedy, to acknowledge your sorrow and pain. The reason I want to give you that permission is that the church should be the place to do this in an authentic and transparent way.

As Christians, we must understand that we are not left here to suffer in our sorrow, with our loss, or in our pain alone. God came to us in the flesh in a manger, born in an obscure little

village named Bethlehem, and he came into our fallen world and lived here. He came to people in that first century who were asking, “Does anybody care what I am going through?” “Do I matter in any way to anyone?” How can I find relief from my pain?” He comes to be with us here today. And he meets us in our loss, our sorrow and our pain.

There is a passage in Isaiah 53 that’s absolutely magnificent. The prophet Isaiah forecasts that the messiah—the Son of God, God in the flesh—will come into the world 800 years before it happens. In verse 3 of chapter 53 Isaiah says, *“He was despised and rejected by mankind, a man of suffering, and familiar with pain. Like one from whom people hide their faces he was despised, and we held him in low esteem.”*

Jesus was despised and rejected by others. But did you know that Jesus was a man of sorrows and familiar with suffering? The word familiar in this particular context means Jesus had intimate, first-hand experience with pain and suffering. God in Christ actually experienced our sorrow and our suffering. He was no stranger to what we go through. He has tasted it. He has first-hand experience. The good news is that there is no “valley of the shadow of death” that any of us can go through that God in Christ hasn’t already gone through before us. There is no path we will travel down where Jesus has not first mapped out the terrain and then walks alongside us. Our Messiah, our Savior, is a man of sorrows, familiar with pain.

In the Midst of Sorrow We Need to Remember:

God knows

The story of Lazarus in John 11 is an episode in the life of Jesus that illustrates so perfectly this man of sorrows, familiar with suffering. From our story we learn of a man named Lazarus, who lives in Bethany with his sisters Mary and Martha, and who is a good friend of Jesus. The story tells us that Lazarus became ill, gravely ill. We learn that the sisters were very concerned, so concerned that they sent word to Jesus saying, “Lord, the one you love is sick.” It wasn’t an invitation to Jesus or even a request to come. It was more of an announcement and they assumed that as soon as Jesus heard he would drop everything he was doing to come to the aid of his sick friend.

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” (v. 4).

In other words, death would not be the ultimate tragedy that would happen here. Jesus is saying, this isn't going to end the way you think it will end. Something very unusual was about to happen that would bring glory to Christ. Verses 5-6 say that Jesus loved Mary, Martha and Lazarus with the highest most unstoppable kind of love. Then incredibly, it says that Jesus didn't immediately go to Bethany, but stayed right where he was for two more days.

I can imagine that Mary and Martha were eagerly waiting for Jesus to arrive. They would be at the bedside of Lazarus and then probably take turns going out in front of their house to look up the road to see if Jesus was almost there. Their situation was urgent, even desperate, but Jesus delayed coming. He delayed coming to alleviate the pain and suffering of a man and his two sisters that he loved deeply.

How can we come to understand God's love for us? How can we come to really believe despite our crises, the delays, and when his plans cross our plans? When the time was right, Jesus reveals what he knows about Lazarus to his disciples.

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" (verses 14-15).

It is becoming clear from this passage that Jesus knows everything about what is going on with Lazarus and his sisters. He knows what has happened and he knows what will happen.

We need to think about that for a moment. Because the feelings we have when we experience a loss or witness a senseless tragedy exasperate us, don't they? They can raise doubts and confusion in our minds about who Jesus claims to be. We question why he doesn't intervene when we know if he is who he says he is he could. So we question his goodness. We see unjust things happening every day in the headlines and in the lives of those we love. But the first thing we need to remember from this text this Memorial Day is that God Knows. The intimate details of our lives, the losses, the sorrow, the pain—He knows. The events we see played out in the headlines this week like terror in Manchester, and the murder of Coptic Christians in Egypt. He knows.

Jesus finally arrives in Bethany and Lazarus had already been in the tomb for four days. Martha was the first to meet him on the road. A grieving sister, tired, stressed, struggling to make sense of her loss, approaches Jesus on the road and says to him, "Lord, if you had been here my brother would not have died."

Can you relate? Lord, where were you when my loved one died? Where were you when my marriage dissolved? Where were you when my father became an alcoholic? Where were you when I was cheated out of that promotion? Where were you when my child went astray? And notice Jesus doesn't rebuke her words? He wants us to pour out our hearts to him.

Jesus said to her, "Your brother will rise again" (v. 23).

Then Martha gives her bible class response in verse 24, "***I know he will rise again after the resurrection at the last day.***" We all can get proficient with the Bible class responses, but deep in her heart, she is asking, "I understand the last day, but what about the present? I'm hurting." Soon, Martha's sister Mary comes to Jesus.

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" (v. 32).

Both Mary and Martha make the same statements, "Lord, if you had been here, my brother would not have died." These are amazing statements. When you think about it, they contain in the same moment both amazing faith and great blame. "Lord, if you had been here, you would have been able to save him." There is faith. Then, "I believe you're able to stop this. But, Lord, where were you? There is blame." "Lord, you are able, where are you?" This wasn't just an ancient question from a peasant woman 2000 years ago. This is what we say too. Lord, I know you are able, where were you when this disease spread to my family? Lord, where were you when that drunk driver crossed the centerline? Lord, where were you when I got laid off? Lord, you are able. Where were you when the young soldier down the street gave his life in Afghanistan? Where were you when those terrorist shooters opened up on innocent people in Cairo and Manchester?

God knows. He is not surprised. Through this text so far God is assuring us that he knows intimately what has happened and he knows intimately what will ultimately happen. And you and I need to know that "He knows" to comfort us.

Jesus sees Mary and Martha crying. Then he looks out and sees their friends around them crying. And then another amazing thing happens. Jesus begins to cry. Why did Jesus cry? If he knows what will ultimately happen, why does he cry? Because Jesus doesn't just **know** what is happening, he also **cares** about what is happening.

So what do we need to remember this Memorial Day? Jesus, the God-man in John 11, expressed his perfect and sinless humanity by weeping.

God cares

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. "Come and see, Lord," they replied. Jesus wept. Then the Jews said, "See how he loved him!" (verses 33-36).

How do I know Jesus cares? Because Jesus wept. Even those who are watching in the background know that he cares. You get the sense that Jesus is not just letting a little wet tear come down his cheek. Tears are wrenching him in such a way that people said, "My, how he must have loved him."

The stark plain fact is that his friend is dead. His weeping reveals to us that to Jesus, any death is the destruction of the good plan of God. Death was not the plan for the world he made. Jesus wept over the reality that the universe that God created was corrupted and will require the death of God's son to put things right. Jesus wept over the fact that in this corrupt world, God's people will experience sorrow and misery. Events in this corrupted world may play out with violence and terror and Jesus wept over the fact that the devil is having his day reaping destruction for a season.

As I try to make sense of all of this, I realize I need to know some things about my God. I need to know from my God that he knows everything that will happen because of his divinity. I need to know from my God that he understands my misery and my sorrow and that he is sympathetic to it because of his humanity. I need to know from my God even more. I need to know from my God that he has experienced the reality of loss, sorrow and pain that many of us here today have faced in this fallen world.

So when I read that Jesus, in his full and beautiful and sinless humanity, wept, I now know some things. I now know I have permission to weep when I suffer loss. I now know that sorrow, loss, pain and death are all part of the curse. I now know that Jesus had to die to overcome these things. And I now know as a Christian I don't have to fear death as much as others fear death because I know the outcome. I now know I have permission to feel at deep levels, my own broken humanity, and be willing to say to one who is hurting that I don't have quick and ready answers. I can look at a tragedy and say, "this is horrible, it really is," and then confess to the one I seek to comfort that I don't understand why it happened to them.

I can be released to come alongside someone who is in misery and sit quietly. And I can be released from trying to "heal" them with insensitive comments that communicate like I somehow, "know what they must be feeling right now," or feel I must put my arm around them and tell them my opinion that it is time for them to move on and put their grief behind them.

We hear people say about Manchester, "Yes, some died, but many many more were spared. There could have been ten thousand who were killed but only 22 died." This makes perfect logical sense to us unless we are sitting with someone trying to comfort them and their son or daughter was one of the 22 who perished.

I'm not saying that rational arguments have no place and that they are not in some way useful, they are. I am a firm believer that the works of God's providence are holy, wise and powerful and preserve and govern all his creation and all their actions. I believe and my feet rest firmly on good biblical theology. In my humanity, God by his grace has allowed me to think, but he has

also made me to feel. And this is why "Jesus Wept" is so important for us.

John 11:35 is just two words: "*Jesus wept.*" And it is one of the finest expressions of the humanity of Jesus Christ. "Jesus wept" is what I need to know when all my logic fails.

Years ago, a friend of mine who served in my church and was well known in our community showed up at my office with his wife and together we sat there as he explained to me that he had fallen morally and that it was public and it was about to hit the papers. We sat in my office and we cried. It began a long process of counseling, intervention and accountability to save his marriage and heal his and his wife's wounds. We kept saying to him, "We do this because we love you. We do this because we care." My friend believed all that and I was very proud of the serious dedication he had to come under authority and receive the help he needed. A few years later we talked and he said when he walked into the office that day, he was so broken, so ashamed, so scared, that he didn't need good advice, he just needed to know that he was loved. He needed to know I cared. He said, when we cried together he knew we cared. And by God's grace my friend was assured that God loved him through our love for him. Today my friend and his wife serve all across the world in short term missions and they are happily married and have a beautiful legacy of children and grandchildren.

Does God care? When I read that Jesus wept, I know he cares. There are times when answers to my circumstances aren't what matters. What matters is that in the circumstances the only thing that makes sense is the character of God and to know that he loves me.

Does God care about you? Look at the cross. Look at the Savior who wept for you and bled for you. When our pat answers about our loss, our sorrow, our pain circumstances fail, go back to his character. Go back to the cross where his character was fully revealed when he suffered and died for you.

We don't hear much about Oklahoma City. Besides having a decent NBA basketball team, it is likely most famous because of a tragedy. On April 19, 1995, a terrorist set off a bomb outside the Alfred P. Murrah Federal Building, killing 168 men, women and children. Prior to 9/11, it was the largest act of terrorism on U.S. soil. The city wears the scars of that attack to this day. There is an Oklahoma City Memorial Museum that says, "Come to Remember. Leave with Resolve." Just east of the memorial stands a statue of Jesus. The statue simply reads, "And Jesus wept." The Jesus depicted in the statue looks away from the site of the attack weeping. It stands as a beautiful and tragic reminder of a God who feels our deepest pain and weeps over our brokenness. But it's still not the end of the story this morning.

We are brought to the powerful conclusion that the God who knows every intimate detail in our lives and knows our future,

who hears our cries and weeps with us is not only a friend with an ear to listen, but is also the Lord over life and death. Because this is true, every story—even your story of sorrow, your story of loss, and of pain—can have a surprise ending. In John 11, some in the crowd that had formed around Jesus asked a hard question out loud.

But some of them said, “Could not he who opened the eyes of the blind man have kept this man from dying? (v. 37).

They were saying, “Hey, a messiah who is compassionate and sympathetic is a deeply moving sentiment, but if that messiah has no power from God to right the wrongs of this world, what’s the point?” This messiah is no more useful than a good friend during a hard time. To this we get this brilliant and unexpected conclusion: God not only knows, God not only cares, God rules.

God rules

We learn from this story that even though we might be struggling through a delay, the power of God will one day be unleashed and all that is wrong will be made right. And this God reigns over death and sin and brings life and forgiveness.

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” (verses 38-39).

We can understand how Martha felt. With all this misery, why open the grave and let the stench come out? Why look at the face of a corpse? She didn’t understand or expect what Jesus was about to do.

Then Jesus said, “Did I not tell you that if you believe, you will 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” (verses 40-42).

Jesus makes it clear in his prayer that he is not simply a human used to performing a miracle. He is the Son of God who unleashes the full power of God. This wasn’t turning water into wine at a wedding; this was “Behold the Lord, the giver of life.”

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” (verses 43-44).

It’s obvious Mary and Martha, not to mention Lazarus, didn’t expect someone who had died to come back to life until the last day. But Jesus throughout the gospels is saying that everything God is... it’s happening here in your midst. In verse 25 Jesus says, *“I am the resurrection and the life. He who believes in me will live even though he dies.”* Then he asks Martha, *“Do you believe this?”* You don’t have to wait until death or until the end of times to experience resurrection. Resurrection begins the moment you believe and continues on. Jesus redefines resurrection to mean deep life now and long life tomorrow.

What happened here at a tomb in Bethany is a lens we can look through to understand Calvary. And Calvary is a lens to look through to understand eternity. Because we have faith in Christ, this Memorial Day means that when we experience sorrow, loss, and pain, we know that Jesus cares deeply and he has walked that road before us and now he walks that road with us until he takes us home when we are resurrected from the dead.

I think if I was at the foot of the cross looking up at Jesus suffering and dying for me, I would have said, “Lord, don’t do this. This is wrong.” But it was right, and I know it because I can now look through the lens of his tears to see that for Jesus to rule Jesus had to die the way he died. It is why Jesus wept before the tomb of Lazarus, and again over the city of Jerusalem, and again in the Garden of Gethsemane the night before he was crucified.

So we are now comforted to know that the God-Man Jesus shed not just his blood but also his tears for us. Because his tears mean that we can trust that he cared enough to do the right thing.

Does Jesus know what we are going through? Yes. Does he care? Yes. Does he rule? Yes. Every tear Jesus shed is a lens that reveals to us the heart of our God who rules with love on behalf of his people. So we know when we face the sorrow, loss and cry out to him from our place of pain, we can see through our own tears that he knows everything, and he cares deeply for us and rules over all with power to bring us new life and new beginnings and a secure future.

This manuscript represents the bulk of what was preached at CPC. For further detail, please refer to the audio recording of this sermon.

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Catalog No. 1431-FC