

Loss, Healing, and Joy

We know that the Bible doesn't promise us earthy prosperity, but joy is supposed to be something that Christians experience.

Phil 4:4 tells us, "Rejoice in the Lord always. I will say it again: Rejoice!"

1 Peter 1:8, "Though you have not seen him, you love him; and even though you do not see him now, you believe in him and are filled with an inexpressible and glorious joy,"

And this is not some unattainable, pie-in-the-sky promise. Four years ago, with the majority of the same people in this room, we were a joyful, growing congregation.

But we are not there anymore. We are not that same congregation. We have lost our joy. What happened? I know I am not the only one who has noticed this. A group of men and I were talking just the other day about what had changed with this group and why it has changed. We were not sure at the time but we felt it was serious. We were very seriously concerned. We came to a conclusion. This church is still grieving. We have experienced some big losses over the last two years and we still have not fully healed. If we are to find our joy again, if we are to heal, then we need to acknowledge these losses, our own feelings about them and then move forward. I am not sure if we have done that yet.

Think about it. Over the past two years –

Loss of members – (DO NOT READ SCRIPTURES AT THIS POINT)

- To death: 1 Thess 4:13 "Brothers and sisters, we do not want you to be uninformed about those who sleep in death, so that you do not grieve like the rest of mankind, who have no hope. Paul is writing this to the Thessalonians because they have had members die, possibly from the persecutions. And this was only a few months since Paul had left them. They were grieving loss.
- Moved away: 2 Tim 4:10 "for Demas, because he loved this world, has deserted me and has gone to Thessalonica. Crescens has gone to Galatia, and Titus to Dalmatia.
- Fell away: 2 Tim 4:10 "for Demas, because he loved this world, has deserted me"
- Left due to disagreements:
1 John 2:19 They went out from us, but they did not really belong to us. For if they had belonged to us, they would have remained with us; but their going showed that none of them belonged to us.

Each of these had a significant impact on this church. There are feelings concerning some of these, that I am still dealing with. Now none of these things mean we are a bad church or even an abnormal church. The first century church dealt with these things too. (NOW GO BACK AND READ SCRIPTURES) But just because it was common doesn't mean it is easy to go through.

Loss of the Eldership

- It was in danger so we studied, and prayed, and discussed. There was conflict and disagreement. We thought things were going to be OK.
- Eldership ended up being dissolved anyway.
- Not pointing fingers or assigning blame. That is not what this is about. But we need to acknowledge that this was a major loss this congregation is still dealing with.

Loss of Eldership = Loss of Leadership

- Loss of identity. We identified ourselves as a church with elders. It was something we took pride in. Now who are we? These are questions that might be going through some minds.
- Loss of continuity and stability. Before, we knew that the elders would be there to handle difficult choices and situations. Now we no longer have men in that fulltime leadership role. They are still here and are still necessary members of this congregation, but they are not elders. It is not the organization that God has set up, but until the time comes again when we can establish that biblical organization... men, **we** must step up. Not step up as unqualified men asking to be elders, but step up as men who lead by examples through our service. Plus as long as we have Jesus and his word, we are never truly leaderless.

Plans were put into place before the resignation of the eldership – i.e. change in worship service, (which we are still trying to fine tune) – and we went ahead into this brand new, uncharted territory with no leadership.

What about the men? We are not leaderless, right? Well I think all that attended those first men's meeting would agree that they were neither effective nor profitable. We spent a lot of time on things we shouldn't have and often many men left those meetings feeling angry, discouraged or both. It has been a year and we are still trying to find the best way to make this whole "Men's Meetings" thing work.

We are still grieving and we are still healing. And this makes perfect sense. A LOT of stuff has come down the pike. We have lost a lot over the past couple of years and it would be more surprising if we were NOT affected as strongly as we have been. If we were to behave like we aren't bothered by these things, it would mean that we had no connection to those we have lost or that the eldership was not a big deal. That, friends, would be horribly ungodly. So it makes sense. But now we need to heal. We need to get through this so we can find our joy again. How do we do that?

First we must forgive. That is a commandment.

Eph 4:32, “Be kind and compassionate to one another, forgiving each other, just as in Christ God forgave you.”

Any resentment we have must be done away with. If you have resentment towards anyone here you must let it go – that resentment is stealing you joy and keeping you from healing. “How do I do that, Josh? I was really hurt.” You do it by recognizing that men – even men we greatly respect, are just that – fallible men. Jesus forgave Peter. When Paul had to reprimand Peter to his face, do you think the two could never work together again? Paul forgave Mark and his relationship with Barnabas was just fine. Do you know how many times I have let God down? How many times I have disappointed him? Yet every time He forgives me and continues working with me because He wants me to be a better person. If you want your joy back, foregive.

If you have any resentment towards those that are gone and not here anymore – definitely let it go because the only one it is punishing is you.

Phil 3:13, “Brothers and sisters, I do not consider myself yet to have taken hold of it. But one thing I do: Forgetting what is behind and straining toward what is ahead, “

And most importantly, if you have any resentment towards yourself – let it go. I am personally dealing with a lot of guilt when it comes to those that are not attending here anymore. I am still asking myself if I could have done more, and often I come up with the answer of “Yes.” I could have made a better effort to talk to them and I didn’t. Or even, “when I did talk to them, I did not handle it in the best way and maybe I made things worse instead of better.” These are issues I am still grieving and trying to heal over.

Now when I say, “let it go” I am not talking about some passive way of shrugging it off like it never happened and you don’t care. I mean analyze it, accept it, learn from it, and move forward. If you have issues like this, we need to forgive ourselves and not spend energy beating ourselves up. That is a tool of the devil. **You** need to heal so **we** can heal.

We have to get back to business. We have spent the last two years it seems just trying to maintain and hold things together. We have been in survival mode. Some of you have heard me say this before in talking about my students or clients. Now I am applying it to us:

When you are in survival mode, you are only thinking about the here and now.

When you only think about the here and now, you are not planning for the future.

If you are not planning for the future you have nothing to look forward to.

Without something to look forward to you have no hope.

If you have no hope, you have no joy.

Now being in survival mode for a time does not make us bad Christians either. Look at what Paul said in 2 Cor 1:8-9

“We do not want you to be uninformed, brothers and sisters, about the troubles we experienced in the province of Asia. We were under great pressure, far beyond our ability to endure, so that we despaired of life itself. ⁹ Indeed, we felt we had received the sentence of death. But this happened that we might not rely on ourselves but on God, who raises the dead.”

Paul was so deep in survival mode that he wasn't sure if he was even going to make it. Many of the heroes of faith went through times like this. It is easy for us to overlook the severity of their struggles because we know how the story ends. We know they had a happy ending. It's hard for us because we are not always so sure of our happy ending. So being in survival mode is not itself wrong. But we can't stay there. We have to move on. We have to get out of survival mode and back to the work of evangelism of the lost and edification of the saints. We need to do this even if we feel it is the LAST thing we want to do right now. Getting out of that “survival mode” rut is hard. But if we don't make the effort to get out of that rut, we may be stuck there indefinitely.

Do we have to completely heal ourselves before we move on to helping others? I tell you that the two are not mutually exclusive. In fact the two are connected very tightly.

Luke 9:11

“But the crowds learned about it and followed him. He welcomed them and spoke to them about the kingdom of God, and healed those who needed healing.”

When we focus on the kingdom of God first, the healing comes later. Does this remind you of another verse? Maybe one you have heard since you were little? Matt 6:33?

“But seek first the kingdom of God and His righteousness, and all these things shall be added to you.”

Why do we teach our children this verse? Because it is one of the most important lessons that a human can learn – GOD'S KINGDOM COMES FIRST and HE WILL HELP US WITH THE REST. Whatever “the rest” might be.

We have to be steadfast and not get discouraged. Will things change overnight? Absolutely not. I have confidence in my public speaking ability but I'm not that good. Change – even change we know is necessary – is scary. It will get uncomfortable and we will want to go back to the familiar. Even when we know and understand that the familiar is not what is best for this congregation. We must continue forward. If you have the desire and drive to get something started, by all means let's do it. But if the numbers of participants don't overwhelm you, don't get discouraged. If you want to have a Bible study or a singing or a get together and only 3 other people show up – then that is time well spent. The 4 of you have pleased God with your time and the 4 of you are stronger for it.

Finally, if we want to heal, get out of survival mode, get back to work and find our joy again, then we must trust the Lord.

Exodus 15:26

He said, "If you listen carefully to the LORD your God and do what is right in his eyes, if you pay attention to his commands and keep all his decrees, I will not bring on you any of the diseases I brought on the Egyptians, for I am the LORD, who heals you."

You think the children of Israel weren't in survival mode right here? You think there was a lot of joy going on? But the Lord got them through it and delivered them to their home. And He will do the same for us if we trust Him.

The final scripture I want to read this morning is Isaiah 61:1. Jesus is talking about why He came.

Isaiah 61:1

The Spirit of the Sovereign LORD is on me,
because the LORD has anointed me
to proclaim good news to the poor.
He has sent me to bind up the brokenhearted,
to proclaim freedom for the captives
and release from darkness for the prisoners,

Heal the brokenhearted. That's what He's here for. This sermon was not easy for me. I have been more nervous about this than any sermon I have ever given. It is because I love you all so very much and I want everything for this church. I know you do. We want to get back to work and we want to grow. Let's be joyous again brothers and sisters. Please take the words that I have spoken this morning and really examine them. If you need to come talk to me later, please do so.

So if you are new to this congregation or visiting here for the first time, I hope I haven't scared you off! Because I am not going to lie to you. Guess what? We are real people with real problems and serving God isn't always easy. But if you are a person with real problems, that means this is a church for you too. We just want to be right in God's eyes. Do you? What I hope you come away with this morning is that this is a group of Christians that wants to obey God and do what it right even if it is the difficult thing to do. Are you that kind of person? Have you been baptized for the forgiveness of your sins? Do you lack joy? Do you need healing? Have you been stuck in survival mode? The things I spoke to this group applies to you as well. Do you need to forgive someone or be forgiven yourself? Like I said the changes that need to be made here may not happen overnight. But the change you need can happen right now, this very day. If you need Jesus for anything today you have that chance. If you need Him won't you come forward now as we stand and as we sing?