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Title: "Tragic Hope: For the Worst Day of Your Life...and After"

Scripture: Samuel 30: 1-11

Description: What do you do following the worst day of your life? And how does your faith come into play?

From the beginning, it had been a bad day. David had been told his services were no longer needed, and that was a blow. It wasn't his performance; they had questioned his loyalty & his character. But what can you do? You can't argue your way back into the good graces of people you serve. So David and his staff returned home.

When they arrived, the entire town looked like it had been fire-bombed. Everything lay in smoldering ruins. Everything. And every single resident gone missing, which meant they had been taken by the attackers, probably worse than being killed. Suddenly, it was not just a bad day; it was the worst day of David's life. "4 And when they saw this, they cried out and wept aloud until they could weep no more...David was in anguish." (I Samuel 30: 4,6)

Life can be terribly harsh. Sometimes the blows hit with the suddenness of a tsunami. Sometimes it builds up: news of violence in Baton Rouge & St. Paul, then murder in Dallas and Nice; eventually your heart crumbles under the accumulation of grief.

What do you do when your world has been destroyed? When it's *your* world that will never be the same—what do you do, and how does your faith come into play?

"Yea, though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death..." says the psalm. Two important words: *though* and *through*. *Though*, not "if". This is a hard planet, and you will go through that valley of loss and sorrow. *Through*. That valley is where you camp for a while, but it is not your dwelling place. You can get through this; you *will* get through it.

Going through it, people have several experiences. Sometimes they're called "stages" but I don't use that term. "Stages" can sound like these are predictable, progressive, and orderly. No way. I love the sign that Jody has on the door to her office. (*Show slide.*) No matter how many books have been written, tragedy is still chaotic and we're still a mess.

The initial reaction is often shock. You often turn numb. Your spouse walks out on you, you lose your job, your baby is born with autism...and you don't feel a thing! Emotionally, you just shut down. That's your heart's form of anesthesia. When you're injured physically, you don't really feel pain at first; it's how your body protects itself. Your emotions do that when your heart is broken. It's a survival mechanism.

Surprisingly, shock can also take a form that looks just the opposite. In shock, you completely fall apart. Coming unglued, you forget to eat, forget to shower, forget to let the dog out. This is not a time to operate heavy machinery! That was David's initial reaction. (v. 4) "And when they saw this, they cried out and wept aloud until they could weep no more." Shock.

The second ingredient is sorrow. You begin to grieve. Sorrow isn't depression. In depression you don't know what's wrong or what makes you feel so down. In sorrow, you know exactly what's causing you to feel this way...and it's sad.

Sorrow lasts awhile, and as it does, it's a struggle. That's when you ask the hard questions: "Why did this happen? What's the purpose? Where is God? Why did God allow this? You know, you can give up on God at this point. Or you can protect God by blaming yourself. "If I'd had more faith, or been a better parent, or been smarter and seen it coming." Or you can blame others, which is what David's men did: (v.6.) "Some of his [David's] men talked about stoning him because they were so bitter about their families being taken."

You're going to ask hard questions. What you do when you don't get the answer? Because you're not going to get it. If you're not going to blame God and you're not going to blame yourself or others, where do you go with these questions?

Eventually struggle turns into one of two things: bitterness or acceptance. You can become bitter and hard for the rest of your life. You know someone who's gone down that path? From your viewpoint, how's that working for them? It isn't pretty. Struggle can turn into bitterness or acceptance.

In acceptance you reach a point when you just give up on trying to change it or even understand it. It is what it is. That isn't a one-time, turn-the-corner decision. You can accept the tragedy, then the next day wake up to find yourself back in the depths of sorrow or struggle. Acceptance grows by the spoonful, one at a time.

Finally, there's the ingredient of growth. Your greatest pain can become your life wisdom. You find that from your tragedy, you can offer hope to others. God can use your mess and turn it into a message, one that gives comfort and life to others.

How do you help a friend who is in shock? First of all, just show up. You don't need to say anything: just show up and shut up. "I don't know what to say!" You don't need to say anything. When you're in deep pain, you don't need words, you need touch. Most of all, don't offer any explanations. You don't need an explanation, you need God. You need a friend.

The greater the grief, the fewer the words needed. The greater the loss, the less you say. If I have a splinter, you can talk to me about it for half an hour. Tell me about when you had a splinter, about how your mama used to remove splinters. Tell me that in Canada, they don't have splinters; they have "slivers". But if it's more than a splinter, don't say much. Just show up and shut up.

I don't know why the simple presence of a friend helps, but I do know from experience that it makes a world of difference and often it is the only thing that makes a difference.

God knows this. When someone is falling apart, we ask God to do for, to change things, to provide a miracle that makes it all better. What God offers, however, is to be *with*. God comes to you and offers you God's presence. In the Old Testament (Isaiah) God says, "When you pass through the waters I will be with you.." In the New Testament (Hebrews), "I will never leave you and I will never abandon you." And it turns out that presence is what we really need.

When you're in shock, don't make any big decisions. In shock is not the time to redecorate your home, run off and get married, or change your golf swing.

Try this: cry out to God. You're not going to be able to sleep when you're in shock, so don't fight it. Cry out to God in the middle of the night, even when you're bitter or insane or totally broken. Because those may be the times when at last you're completely honest with God.

You might say to God, "I am exhausted and depressed beyond words, and I don't like You at all right now, God. And I find the people who believe in you to be really annoying." That might be the most honest prayer you've ever said to God. God can handle honesty. God will answer, "Okay. I can work with that."

In shock, we may discover three great truths of life: we are in control of so little; we can become so ruined; and we are so loved.

Sorrow usually takes a long time, way longer than your friends want it to take. People want you to get over it, but don't let them push you. It isn't grief that is the problem, it's the avoidance of grief. We can't tolerate the pain, so we try all kinds of bypass routes, including but not limited to: drugs, alcohol, shopping, shallow sex, hours in front of a computer, or (my personal favorite) staying endlessly busy. Then we discover that there is no joy in these things.

But still, it is so hard to stop because if you stop, you might fall into a bottomless hole. An abyss, actually. That's when you begin to bear the sadness that is too hard to bear. When you stop trying to hide your sadness and let it teach you instead, it will lead you to a place where God is. That's when Jesus comes to you and says, "Cast your cares on me..." and not in a greeting-card way, but in a deeper way than you've ever known. That's when your precious Lord takes you by the hand and leads you on, lets

you stand. You find yourself held in the tender, loving hands of God, which is what you've really wanted all your life.

Here's one thing you can do with your sorrow: when you're ready, let people in. Usually during shock and sorrow, people want to go off by themselves. Okay. But not forever. Open yourself to the possibility of developing deep-rooted relationships. You were not created to be a tumbleweed, you're made for deep roots. These roots are the relationships in your life. You'll know the truth of these words, "They shall be like a tree planted by water, sending out its roots by the stream. It shall not fear when heat comes, and its leaves shall stay green." Jeremiah (17:7-8)

Amen.

Let's talk about hope. Polls show that 70% of us think America is going in the wrong direction. That's the average of polls taken over the past two decades. Currently, the percentage is higher. Seven or eight out of ten of us believe America is going in the wrong direction. Do you really believe that Donald Trump or Hillary Clinton can turn the nation around. Do you expect a new set of senators or a different House of Representatives will solve the nation's problems and set us on a right path? Is there hope for America?

On Monday, from her bed in Intensive Care, she signed an application to participate in a clinical trial for the cancer that had spread throughout her body. She gripped my hand tightly as we prayed. "Don't ever give up hope," she admonished me. She died the next morning, so these were the last words she spoke to me. "Don't ever give up hope."

I fingered the small piece of plastic held between my thumb and forefinger. "What's the 'security code' on a credit card?" I called to my wife. I had just watched an amazing ad about hair restoration. A newly developed product, all natural in showed astonishing results, with actual photographs of satisfied customers. To receive the free bonus offers, I needed to place an order in the next three minutes. "Don't ever give up hope."

Let's talk about hope.

Truth number one. Life is tough. You're going to need hope, because you're going to go through some hard times. Every one of you are in one of three situations: you're going through something hard; you're recovering from something hard;

something hard is on its way for you. Life is tough, and hope is for when things go wrong. You need hope on your bad hair days, not on your win-the-lottery days. Needing hope is a sign that something has gone wrong. Needing hope is a sign that you haven't discovered a simple solution to whatever you're facing...so you need hope.

In John 16:33, Jesus said, "In the world you will have tribulation. But take courage, I have conquered the world." That's one of the things Jesus promised, that in the world, you're going to have trouble.

You're going to have trouble; you're going to go through deep water. Then Jesus[a] told them a parable about their need to pray always and not to lose heart. That's not a bad thing. There is no growth without change, no change without loss, no loss without pain, and no pain without grief. You're going to go through losses in your life, and you'll need strong hope.

There are three kinds of hope. The first kind is wishful thinking. This kind of hope is telling yourself that things are going to turn out just fine. It's Little Orphan Annie singing, "The sun will come out, tomorrow." I'm sorry, but some days the sun doesn't come out. "Leave them alone and they'll come home, wagging their tails behind them." To be honest, Bo Peep, real sheep don't always come home.

But reality doesn't matter to wishful thinking hope. Empty hope sees everything through rose-colored glasses. Through rose-colored glasses, everything looks rosy regardless of what color it really is. So you can't address it with reality because it isn't in touch with reality.

This is not the kind of hope faith offers, not the kind of hope the Bible describes. Empty optimism is no more a virtue than freckles or flat feet. But it is so appealing. "Keep on the sunny side, always on the sunny side. Keep on the sunny side of life." Makes about as much sense as "Always part your hair in the middle." But, boy, does it sell. Search Amazon and you'll find 604,261 books on "hope." "Half Full: Forty Inspiring Stories of Optimism, Hope, and Faith." Just reading the title make you feel good.

Wishful optimism is all calories but no protein. It's nice to put on tweets, but it doesn't really help you through hard times. Wishful, empty hope will return to bite you like pieces of broken glass on the deck of the swimming pool.

A second kind of hope is pragmatic hope. If I plant tomatoes in my garden and hope for tomatoes, there's a basis for the hope. (Well, not in my garden, but for most folks.)

Pragmatic hope is all about probabilities. This kind of hope is close to its first cousin, cynicism. It's based on odds. A cynic not only sees the glass as half-empty, it is likely to contain some foul-tasting liquid that is potentially poisonous. Hope or cynicism is determined by circumstances. The Cavaliers were down three games to one

to the Warriors—a glimmer of hope, but only a glimmer. The Braves are going to win the World Series this year? Not a chance.

We need a hope that is stronger than assessing the odds, a hope based on something more solid than a 60% chance of scattered showers. We need a stronger basis for hope than the Vegas bookmakers. We need a hope that is strong and true, an anchor to steady our shaky lives.

Hebrews 6:19. “We have this hope, a sure and steadfast anchor of the soul.”
What’s the purpose of an anchor? 1) to keep from drifting and 2) to add stability in a storm.

Drifting down the Chattahoochee on a hot July day is a pretty great thing to do. But drifting isn't always cool. While not paying attention, I drift back into deadly habits, eating too much, drinking too much, complaining too much, paying attention to everyone's stuff but my own. And I fail to do the things that make for health and life. Marriage can drift into indifferent distance. A great nation can drift into distrust and acrimony. Faith can drift into dull routine. Drifting along, everything goes slowly, unnoticed, and suddenly you're rushing toward a huge waterfall or a violent storm. By then it is too late. An anchor keeps you from drifting.

The first anchors were rocks, big baskets filled with rocks. As ships grew bigger, those rocky baskets weren't enough, because the ships merely dragged them along. So they designed anchors with hooks. Today, the largest anchor is 75 tons. The bigger your ship, the bigger your anchor. If you can settle for a tiny little life, you won't need much of an anchor. If you want a big life, you'd better have a big anchor, because you're going to have storms.

Real hope is an anchor. Real hope is based on God, not on my wishes or the probabilities. Anchored hope connects me to something solid. “On Christ the solid rock I stand,” because it is true, “all other ground is sinking sand.”

Here are ten times when you're going to need hope:

- 1) When you feel abandoned. Pain isolates, whether it's physical or emotional pain. The hardest part is feeling forsaken.
- 2) When life seems out of control. The hardest words to hear are, “There's nothing more we can do.”
- 3) When you don't see a purpose. It's just an exhausting, senseless grind.
- 4) When you're grieving a loss. It can feel like you're going to be sad forever.
- 5) When you don't have what you need and don't have a way to get what you need.
- 6) When you've done something wrong and there's no way to make it right. Guilt causes hopelessness.
- 7) When you've been wronged and are deeply wounded.
- 8) When you're pulled in the wrong direction and the pull seems irresistible.

- 9) When you're hounded by fear. When your world feels filled with terrorists.
- 10) When it looks like defeat is certain.

How does hope anchored in God come into play in these situations? You already have the answer in a form you can take with you anywhere. The Lord's Prayer.

- 1) "Our Father who art in heaven..." When you feel abandoned, you trust in the God Jesus called "Dad." God is a loving Father who will never abandon you.
- 2) "Hallowed be thy name." Jesus, the name above every name is King of kings and Lord of lords. God has put all things under his feet and he will rule forever and ever. Things are never out of God's control.
- 3) "Thy kingdom come, thy will be done." You are called to the greatest purpose you can imagine: to be partners with Christ in creating God's kingdom here on earth.
- 4) "on earth as it is in heaven." Whatever you're going through, it is only temporary. Even if it lasts the rest of your life, it is only temporary. Ultimately, you will be held in Jesus' arms and every tear will be wiped away.
- 5) "Give us this day our daily bread." Life is a gift. We don't have to earn it, produce it, achieve it. We don't have to hope everything is a success; we hope in God, who generously gives us all we need.
- 6) "Forgive us our debts" When you're overcome with regret or shame about what you've done, place your hope in this one truth: in Christ you are forgiven.
- 7) "As we forgive our debtors" When you've been deeply wounded, your healing comes not from revenge or stronger protection. Your own hope for healing comes from forgiving.
- 8) "Lead us not into temptation." When you're pulled in the wrong direction, place your hope in God's strength within you.
- 9) "Deliver us from evil." Your strong hope is in God, not in Homeland Security or Live Alert.
- 10) "For thine is the kingdom, the power, and the glory forever." When it looks like defeat is certain, remember that our hope is in God who will reign forever and ever.

You remember the story of God's people fleeing Egypt. They reached the Red Sea and were trapped between Pharaoh's army and the briny deep. But God parted the waters. God is still a Red Sea God. God still parts the waters and allows us to walk from bondage to the place promised to those who follow. There's a lot of wilderness remaining, but people grow strong surviving the wilderness. God still heals, still redeems, still restores and revitalizes the ruins of our lives. I beg you to

continue to place your hope in God. Rebuild your hope. Don't be afraid to hope again. Go out on that audacious faith limb. Don't be afraid to trust God again. God is filled with power and love, and God has not finished writing your story.