

SESSION 4: LIVING WITH LOSSES

How can you find peace and meaning when living with loss? Where is God while we mourn losses?



SHARE A PRAYER

Open the session with prayer requests and a prayer.

INTRODUCTIONS

Last week's homework was to think about how your family of origin has influenced who you are today and what characteristics you want to carry forth for future generations.

- Does anyone want to share what they learned from the homework?

BEHIND THE SCENES

Today's session focuses on the aftermath of loss. In this movie clip, Brooks returns to his family's home weeks after his parents' deaths. He's devastated. *What now? How will he ever recover? How did this happen?* Brooks is stunned and literally brought to his knees.

MOVIE CLIP – *Play Session 4: Living with Loss*

THINK-PAIR-SHARE QUESTIONS

Before discussing these questions as a group, take a minute to write your own responses (think), discuss them with a partner (pair) then join together for a group discussion (share).

- 1) What did you observe in Brooks when he went to his parents' gravesite and then back to his family's house? What did he say? What did he do? What do you think he was feeling?

- 2) What did you observe in Leslie when she stood by her parents' gravesite? What did she say? What did she do? What do you think she was feeling?

- 3) Think back to a time you experienced significant loss (it might have been a death, a broken relationship, or something else). How did you respond to that situation? What were you thinking and feeling at the time?

FAITH WALK

John the Baptist was a beloved and brave missionary. Throughout his ministry he was fully committed to preparing the way for Jesus. When asked about his authority to baptize others, he quoted the words of Isaiah 40:3. *"I am the voice of the one calling in the desert: 'Make straight the way for the Lord.'"* He remained selflessly devoted despite hardship and imprisonment. Jesus' disciples were shocked to hear of John the Baptist's execution at the whim of King Herod and his wife.

Read aloud Mark 6:14-29.

"When Jesus heard what had happened [to John the Baptist], he withdrew by boat privately to a solitary place" (Matthew 14:13). Even Jesus was overcome and grieved by death. There are several accounts of Jesus weeping in his lifetime over loss and disappointments. John was his mother's (Mary's) cousin's (Elizabeth's) only son. This was a crushing blow for their whole family, yet God allowed it to happen.

While John was languishing in prison his faith weakened at one point and he sent a message to Jesus, asking *"Are you the one to come, or should we expect someone else?"* (Matthew 11:3). This is the only record of John doubting God, inadvertently asking Jesus: *"if you're the Son of God, why can't you get me out of prison?"*

Jesus responded to John's question: "Go back and report to John what you hear and see: The blind receive sight, the lame walk, those who have leprosy are cleansed, the deaf hear, the dead are raised, and the good news is proclaimed to the poor. Blessed is anyone who does not stumble on account of me" (Matthew 11:4-6).

- **What do you think Jesus meant by this response? What was he trying to tell John?**

As Jesus' disciples witnessed Jesus' many miracles then heard of John the Baptist's execution, they must have wondered why Jesus didn't save John. *Why did John have to suffer then die?* They watched Jesus saddened at the news of John's death, but He didn't save him. *Why?*

Read aloud Matthew 11:11-15.

Jesus had the highest esteem for John the Baptist but recognized the context of his life and death from a different perspective than we typically do as humans. He saw greater purpose citing what came before John's life, what would follow, and how it advanced the kingdom of heaven.

Richard and Marilyn Douglass also died faithful believers—victims of a senseless crime. Richard was a beloved pastor and missionary, and people still talk about Marilyn's beautiful singing voice. They tell us her voice could fill the sanctuary and their hearts, as she sang "The King is Coming".

After more than 30 years of living with their loss, Brooks took *The Amendment* movie (formerly known as *Heaven's Rain*) back to the church his father pastored. Needless to say, the congregation had been devastated by their pastor's and his wife's murder and the ordeal their children endured. Nothing like that had ever happened in rural Oklahoma. There had been a six-week manhunt searching for Glen Ake and Steven Hatch that dominated the news and shook their community to the core. You can't meet anyone who was in Oklahoma in 1979 who doesn't remember exactly where they were the moment that news broke. It was beyond comprehension.

It wasn't until Brooks went back to his father's congregation with *The Amendment* about Richard and Marilyn's examples of love, parenting, and forgiveness, that I [*Julea*] had a true sense of peace and understanding about why God allowed them all to suffer that day, and for Brooks and Leslie to survive. Richard preached the same sermon about forgiveness that Brooks portrays in the movie to that congregation the day before he died. Now that sermon is shared with anyone who watches *The Amendment*. His words have reached beyond his congregation and into the hearts of many who need his and God's words the most.

As people from Brooks' home church lined up after the movie to share glowingly fond memories of Richard and Marilyn, I got a unique glimpse into the before, the after, and the greater purpose of living with loss. The very people most broken by the death of their pastor were now part of a larger message and mission. I've since heard many stories of renewed faith and heartfelt forgiveness inspired by Douglass family's story. As Steven Curtis Chapman sings after the tragic death of his daughter, "*Out of the ashes, beauty will rise.*"

REFLECTION AND APPLICATION

- **As you look back on the loss you've experienced, can you think of a greater sense of purpose that has or might emerge from your loss? Is there any goodness that has surprised you?** (*It often takes years for a greater purpose to emerge so if you can't think of anything, that's OK. Just save this question for the future when an answer may reveal itself.*)

- If you can't think of an example of purpose or goodness emerging from your own loss, try to think of examples from other peoples' lives [E.g., Mothers Against Drunk Drivers (M.A.D.D.) was inspired out of great loss and has since saved countless lives and changed legislation].

HOMEWORK

Read Romans 8:28-29.

Some interpret these verses to mean that part of God working all things for the good is the process of making believers more like Christ. Read Galatians 5:22-23 for examples of Christ-like characteristics and site at least one more example of character traits Jesus exhibited in his time on earth.

- Write about how your loss has helped you improve in one or more of these Christ-like characteristics. What have you gained from your loss?

FROM BROOKS

Looking back on your parents' death, can you see a greater sense of purpose from their loss?

I miss my parents every day. So many times, since I was 16 years old, I've wished I could hear them tell me they loved me or were proud of me. They weren't there when I graduated from high school, college, law school or graduate school. They weren't there for my wedding or the birth of their grandchildren. But most importantly were the times I just wished I could have asked for their advice. I believe I could have avoided so many of the mistakes and pitfalls I found myself making and stepping into.

But looking back, I do believe that God has been able to use their lives, in significant ways, even more than He would have, if they had lived. There's really no way of knowing what might have been. They had been so young and hadn't even hit their stride, yet... but the tragedy of their story and the seed of forgiveness that they had planted in me, which had been nurtured by God for so many years, has helped many, many people. Forgiveness is not something that comes natural for me. It is only by God's will and the example they set for me, so many times, through their words and actions, that I was able to forgive Glen Ake. We are capable of so much more than we ever thought possible—both good and bad. They taught me that we can choose to nurture the good and try to walk clear of the bad. And through their deaths, their story has reached across the world. That's something I never could have seen coming the night I watched them die, or until the past few years.

FROM RICHARD – POWER FOR LIVING

By Richard B. Douglass, January 14, 1975



An elderly man was thinking back over the years and talking about some of the highlights of his life. Suddenly he became very somber. "My biggest regret during all these years is that I was just too weak to live up to my good intentions." He missed failure by miles. He achieved great personal success. Still his memory refused to bypass his failures. He admitted what most of us know to be true. We do not have the strength to do what we know is right.

The Bible deals with this weakness in people. Man stands out in its pages as a rebel who cannot do the things his conscience tells him are right. But the Bible does not stop there. It shows us that God wants to give us a new quality of life and to empower us so that we can do what we know is right.

The little Book of Ephesians gives us a graphic example of what the Bible teaches on this subject. The writer begins by picturing God's great power. This only seems to make us feel more powerless. That is not the object though. A picture of the power of God becomes an encouragement to us. We come to realize that with this great Source of Power available to us, we do not have to live powerless lives.

Having established the potential power at our disposal, the Apostle Paul moved on to picture man without God. Man lives in spiritual defeat. Spiritually he is dead. Sin controls his life. Satan leads them around because of their runaway passions and ambitions. We would really like to deny such a picture, but human

experience agrees with it. Man without God lives without power or victory.

The picture changes completely. The Apostle pictures what happens when Christ enters a man's life. Spiritual life comes. God's grace begins to remold the life. Forgiveness of sins is experienced. Victory replaces defeat. Such a dramatic change can only be explained on the basis of the grace and mercy of God.

What the Apostle says defies human logic. We assume that we must try harder if we are to have changed lives. We think that victory over selfishness and weakness comes only to those who work at the job. Paul brings everything into proper focus. We have our lives changed because of our faith in Christ. We do not work ourselves into a right relationship with God. That comes as a gift from God when we trust Him with our lives. We work to please God because of the change he makes in our lives.

A teenager recently recounted the story of weakness that led him to use drugs. "I just became so anxious to please everyone that I couldn't say no to anything," he commented. He tried everything until finally a friend told him that God could help him. "I decided to try God and see what happened, and now my life has been turned around," he reports. Scripture and experience agree that God empowers the people who trust him.

[Intentional blank page. Designed to be copied double-sided.]