

Set Up

Welcome to Christ Church. My name..., special welcome to those who are new.

We are in a series entitled Broken. It is one that recognizes that sin has made a mess of things, marred us and marred the world – that bad things happen. Through books and sermons and small groups we are thinking about what that means and how we can be better prepared to face the day when life stops working and our faith is tested.

In the sermons we've been looking at how we respond to a major loss. We started by looking at the three stages we will go through: shock, sorrow and struggle – or numbness, sadness and anger. Last week we looked at three additional stages we can move through if we lean into God. This week we look at surrender, which leads to peace.

Transition Video: Jason Surber

Jason, let me ask you a couple questions.

Jason and I share a few too many things in common. We are both great looking and wonderful athletes. Perhaps not. We both have wonderful and supportive families; we went to the same college – DePauw University – and we both had strokes.

Jason was one of the very first people to visit me. When I had a lock down – no visitors, this means you – request out, Jason waltzed in anyway, saying, “You visited me when I had a stroke; so there is no keeping me away.” And he brought me the sign he had used that morning during the cardboard testimonies sketch on Easter.

He showed up a couple weeks later, after I was finally able to swallow and was cleared to eat real food. He showed up with a steak!

Today's topic is surrender. Jason, what does that mean to you?

Was there a moment when you surrendered?

HERE I AM LOOKING FOR YOU TO SAY SOMETHING ABOUT THE
FACT THAT IT'S NOT A ONE-TIME EVENT

What else would you like to say to people?

Introduction

This series is based on the idea that trouble is coming our way. And because Americans are uniquely unprepared for it – which makes it worse – we are looking at the roadmap from trouble to service.

Today's topic is surrender. Not as in giving up. Not as in giving in. But as in moving forward, as in winning by losing. As in yielding to God and a grander plan.

The sequences that follow a major loss: shock, sorrow, struggle – which might also be described as numbness, sadness and anger – can keep going to surrender, which brings peace.

Peace is possible. A quiet but strong sense of well-being and hope that come what may, God loves us and in the end is leading down a path that will lead to glory.

Surrender is the first optional step we have.

When a major loss comes we will go into shock, we will move out of shock into sorrow and we will struggle with what is happening. Surrender is optional.

Surrender is also on-going. It's not a one and done event. Romans 12:1 reads:

Therefore, I urge you, brothers and sisters, in view of God's mercy, to offer your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and pleasing to God—this is your true and proper worship

The problem with a living sacrifice is that it keeps crawling off the alter. And that is what we do. We keep wanting to take control back, rather than embrace the idea that we are a living sacrifice.

Today's claim is that surrendering to God is the path to peace. That rather than let a trial stop us, destroy us or define us, we can let it develop us – and we move forward to sanctification and service.

I don't know what losses you've had and I don't know what losses await you or me. But we are all better off if we know how to respond to them. We are better off if we understand that God is God and we are not, but He loves us and we can trust Him. We are better off if we opt for the win by losing strategy. Hold on to that, I'm coming back to it.

This is a Christianity 301 or 401 talk. It's one of those messages where it may not make any sense at the moment. Write it down and file it a way so you have them for future reference.

The passage for today is 2 Samuel 12:16-24.

We are going to be looking at how King David responded after losing a child – which I think we would all agree is among the very worst things we can possibly imagine.

The passage described here begins right after David made some pretty bad choices.

He is king, but instead of being with his troops where he belonged, he was back in Jerusalem. And one night he went out on his balcony and saw a woman bathing. And though she was married to a soldier, he sends someone to bring her to him, which was a stupid abuse of his power. She shows up, not having a lot of say in things. They sleep together. She becomes pregnant. He tries various ways to cover his sin. Eventually he arranges to have Uriah die in battle.

At some point the prophet Nathan confronts him, and to his credit he repents. We read his prayer in Psalm 51. He also marries Bathsheeba, who gives birth to their son, but the baby dies.

We are reading about how David responds when the baby is sick and then, later after the child dies.

I am reading now, 2 Samuel 12:16 and following

David pleaded with God for the child. He fasted and spent the nights lying in sackcloth on the ground. The elders of his household stood beside him to get him up from the ground, but he refused, and he would not eat any food with them.

On the seventh day the child died. David's attendants were afraid to tell him that the child was dead, for they thought, "While the child was still living, he wouldn't listen to us when we spoke to him. How can we now tell him the child is dead? He may do something desperate."

David noticed that his attendants were whispering among themselves, and he realized the child was dead. "Is the child dead?" he asked.

"Yes," they replied, "he is dead."

Then David got up from the ground. After he had washed, put on lotions and changed his clothes, he went into the house of the LORD and worshiped. Then he went to his own house, and at his request they served him food, and he ate.

His attendants asked him, "Why are you acting this way? While the child was alive, you fasted and wept, but now that the child is dead, you get up and eat!"

He answered, "While the child was still alive, I fasted and wept. I thought, 'Who knows? The LORD may be gracious to me and let the child live.' But now that he is dead, why should I go on fasting? Can I bring him back again? I will go to him, but he will not return to me."

Then David comforted his wife Bathsheba, and he went to her and made love to her. She gave birth to a son, and they named him Solomon. The LORD loved him; and because the LORD loved him, he sent word through Nathan the prophet to name him Jedidiah.¹

So what we are told is that:

When the child gets sick David spends a week fasting and praying that God would heal the child. He is overwhelmed, as any Dad would be. He's not eating, just praying. Everyone around him is encouraging him to take care of himself.

¹ Solomon had two names: the first was the name "Solomon" given him by his parents; the second was the name "Jedidiah" given him by the Lord through the mediation of the prophet Nathan. The second name, which has spiritual significance. In Hebrew it literally means "Beloved by the LORD," does not appear to have been used very often.

I have just a hint of how David felt in the days leading up to the baby's death, but thankfully no idea of what that's like.

Shortly after Ben was born both he and Sheri had complications and they both quickly rallied, but there were a few hours when I thought I might lose both of them. And that was a very dark couple of hours when I was simply begging God to spare them.

Not everyone has happy outcomes there. We have people here who have lost children and, well, it's unthinkable.

I read Rick Warren's reflections after his son Matthew took his life.² Rick says that he prayed for Matthew every day of his life, mostly that God would heal him from his mental illness. But he didn't.

So what do you do? Well, David does a few things, let me focus on four.

Four Steps to Surrender

Number One: Accept what cannot be changed.

Part of shock is denial. We refuse to accept something. We cannot process it. But slowly reality sets in and we accept the truth. And more than that, we make peace with it.

In 2 Samuel 12:22 David says:

“While the child was still alive, I fasted and wept. I thought, ‘Who knows? The LORD may be gracious to me and let the child live.’ But now that he is dead, why should I go on fasting? Can I bring him back again? I will go to him, but he will not return to me.”

David accepts what cannot be changed. He is not going to invest anymore energy in hoping for a different outcome.

Sometimes this takes a while. As I have mentioned, it took me four days before I could accept that I'd had a stroke. Some of that was the fact that I had had a stroke and wasn't thinking clearly, but some of it was denial.

Step one is accepting what cannot be changed. This doesn't mean you like it; it doesn't mean it doesn't hurt; it doesn't mean you think it is good. Acceptance simply means: this is reality, and I am going to have to accept reality before I can move forward.

Is there something you need to accept? Are there losses you have suffered that you are still fighting? Perhaps it's a dream that you need to face and realize it's

² As noted earlier, Warren's series of eight messages, called “Getting Through What You Are Going Through” have been a very helpful outline for me in this series.

not going to come true. It's time to move on. Perhaps it's that a certain relationship is over.

Step one: accept what can't be changed.

Step Two: Shine your headlights into eternity.

Remember, eternity changes everything. If you've read Book Three you know how important this was to me. For the most part, I was falsely optimistic about my prospects, but there were moments when I wondered if I'd ever walk again, ever work again. But it never seemed like the end to me because I was able to think – things will get better. Maybe not quickly. Maybe not according to my time line; maybe not in this life, but they will.

David says to his aids: "I will go to him" – he is talking about his son. "I will go to him one day, but he cannot return to me." He accepted that his son would never be with him again on earth, but he declared his hope – his confidence – that he would see his son again in heaven.

Death is not the end of the story. Death is not the end of the story. If you know Christ your problems are all temporary. One day all will be right and good. That should give us hope. I'm not talking about being optimistic.

Optimism is based on circumstances. Sometimes we can look at the circumstances and think, things will get better. But sometimes the circumstances point in a different direction. I am talking about hope, and hope is not based on our circumstances but on the promises of God. We can have hope – as David does – that death is not the end of the story. Our circumstances can get very dark, but we should never lose hope. David framed his problems in light of forever. In that context, the death of his child is bad, crushing, but not permanent. Eternity changes everything.

I do not want to suggest that thinking or living this way is easy.³ We do not always like what happens. I get tired of my deficits and I miss my Dad.

When I think about Christmas I still initially picture it with him there. I think, "I'll see my Dad at Christmas." It takes a while to move on.

Yesterday was the Michigan vs Michigan State game. My Dad went to State and hated Michigan and lived for the game. I came into the office around one to work on my sermon, but I kept the game on in the

³ For one thing, we live in a culture that obsesses about the present. Secondly, for a while it's hard to imagine a new future. In his book *Grace Disguised*, Jerry Sittser describes his journey after he lost his mother, his wife and his four-year-old daughter in a car accident. He asks: "How could I conceive of a future without them? The very thought was abhorrent to me. Whenever I thought of the future I still found them there. They were not going to be there, which only made me more aware of how devastating my loss was. I remembered a past that included people I did not want to give up. And I imagined a future that excluded people that I desperately wanted to keep."

background and every time I saw that Michigan State had scored I wanted to call him. It's hard to move on.

It can be easy to be stuck in the present, but we can do what David did and look beyond the grave. I have to think, "I will not see my Dad at Thanksgiving or Christmas, but I will see him!"

Three: Get on with life.

2 Samuel 12:20 reads, "Then David got up from the ground, washed himself, put on lotions and changed his clothes." This might strike you as a little thing, but it's amazing what a difference this can make.

Eighty percent of people who have a stroke get depressed.

I don't think it happened to me. If it did it was very mild. But there was a turning point when "the sun came out." I like to get up early, to pray and then study. It's my favorite part of the day. The house is quiet. The coffee is strong. It's my favorite part of the day. But after the stroke mornings didn't work. First of all, I wasn't allowed to get out of bed without help. Secondly, I had a roommate – so I couldn't turn on the light. And third, I couldn't read. So I slept in as long as I could. I didn't shave. I was wearing those goofy hospital gowns.

And then one day I thought, tomorrow I am going to get up, shave, shower, put on real clothes, sign myself out, and go down to the lobby and get a cup of coffee. And it was amazing how much better I felt. I almost cried in the coffee line. I was in a wheel chair but I was managing on my own, and there was a sense that I can do this. I can get back into life.

At some point you just have to go through the motions.

The passage says that David "got up from the ground." You can imagine that he's either on the ground praying, or he fell to the ground when he heard his son had died. But he got up, cleaned up and decided to face the day.

There are four steps to surrender. Accept what cannot be changed; shine your headlights into eternity; get on with life and finally, number four:

Fourth Step: Worship.

2 Samuel 12:20 says, "Then he [David] went to the Tabernacle and he worshiped the Lord."

This is another key insight. David had prayed diligently for his son. God had not spared his son's life. And yet here he goes to worship him.

We are not told whether David wanted to worship or not. Maybe he did. My experience is that tragic events like this are inflection points for people.

Sometimes those in deepest pain go right to God because there is nowhere else to go with their pain, while those looking on are the ones asking, “How could God let this happen?” The person in pain is in too much pain to do anything but run to God. Maybe David ran to God.

Maybe he did it even though he didn’t want to. Maybe David turned to God because he knew it was the path that would allow him to get his bearings back.

In last week’s sermon we played a video of Jeff Schlachtenhaufen, who spoke about how events like a stroke, cancer, the death of a child, the death of a dream, force you to move towards God or away. Worship by its very nature is an act of yielding to God. It frames things in a particular way:

God is God and worthy of my devotion and admiration.

I declare His ultimate worth. I surrender my dreams and aspirations in order to serve according to His plan.

I trust that He loves me and has a better way.

Let’s acknowledge that sometimes this is not what you want to do. Let’s acknowledge that sometimes what we want to do is run. But where are we going to run to? Who are we going to run to?

And when we have an accurate picture of God the Father, and His great love for us – on display in the fact that He sent his Son to die so we can get back to a world that works – then we see that surrendering to him is the way forward.

Psalms 73:16-17 is helpful here. It says, “I tried to understand all this, but it was too hard for me to see until I went to the Temple of God.” Sometimes we cannot make sense of what God is doing. But when we come to the Temple to worship, and remind ourselves of who He is – and how big He is – then we can relax and say: God is God. I’m not. I’m not the star of this show, but I know this will end well.

There is more in this passage. There are some things I left out.

Many think Psalm 6 – which is the first of the seven penitential Psalms, that is, those that reflect sorrow over sin – was written during the time David was praying that the baby would live. So we can read that for some insight over how he might have been thinking.

We also see that he risked again. After all of this, David goes to comfort Bathsheba and eventually he sleeps with her and they have another son – Solomon. In other words, he risks again. He loves again, and to love is to risk.⁴ Some people’s initial reaction is to hide, to barricade themselves off so they can’t be hurt again. Bad plan.

⁴ “I’ve found a paradox – that if you love until it hurts then there can be no more hurt and only more love.” Mother Teresa

There is more to see in 2 Samuel, but let me return to this idea of surrender and make sure you understand that it's not defeat.

It's not giving up. It's signing on to a more important plan.

I don't like the word surrender. I want to be bold and relentless and take ground and all of that. So you need to hear that there is nothing weak about this type of surrender. It's a way forward.

God doesn't call on us to give up as much as he invites us to sign up for a bigger, better dream. But for us to get to a better place some of our dreams have to die – some of our expectations will need to be set aside so that we can take ground in the way that matters most.⁵

The days following my stroke were actually among the most peaceful I've had, because it was obvious to me that all I can do is trust. There was a sweet dependence and really low stress because I couldn't do anything. I couldn't sit up. I couldn't read. I couldn't do anything but quietly pray and trust that, come what may, my task at that moment was to ask, "What does it look like to be faithful to God in this situation."

I don't know what you're going through. I hope it's not something major right now.

But whether it is or it isn't, you will go through these kinds of things in your life and you need to be ready to walk the path of peace which is surrender.

Someone suggested that we have a signing of the Declaration of Dependence. When it is stated that way we are reminded of how contrary to our American nature it is to surrender at all. But this is actually the wise and strong move.

I've been reading a legal thriller in which the protagonist – a defense lawyer – is a recovering alcoholic. And much if made in the book of the Serenity Prayer, which most of us know part. The first part goes like this:

God grant me the serenity to accept the things I cannot change, the courage to change the things I can and the wisdom to know the difference.

Well, as it turns out, that's only part of it. That's the part AA uses. But it goes on. Let me read you the rest of the prayer:

Living one day at a time, enjoying one moment at a time, accepting hardship as the pathway to peace [that's what we're talking about] taking as Jesus did this sinful world as it is, not as I would have it [that's accepting things that can't be changed] trusting in your will that you will make all things right if I surrender to

⁵ I believe I had an advantage over others on this matter, because my "career plan" died years ago when I responded to what I felt was a call back to pastoral ministry. As a pastor I do not feel as though I have a career to manage. I need to go where I'm sent. To some extent this is true for everyone. But I believe that if I had a career, I would feel more ownership or need to manage it.

your will, so that I may be reasonably happy in this life and supremely happy with you forever in the next. Amen.”

Surrendering to God is optional, but it's the way forward. We can win by losing. We surrender to God's plan. As it turns out, the most deadly disease is not cancer or a stroke, it's the illusion that we can make it without God. We need to recognize the grand order of things and find our place in His family, surrounded by His love and care. There is great peace that follows, even in the midst of trials. We can rest in his love and care.