

Strength for the Storms of Life

The Complete Series



**A four-part look at facing difficulties, trials, and
struggles.**

Presented by Reverends Tom & Patricia Campbell-Schmitt

Table of Contents

Staying Steady in the Storm 3
The Storm of Loss 8
The Storm of Anger 15
The Storm of Betrayal 20

Staying Steady in the Storm

(Luke 6:47-49, John 16:33, Ecclesiastes 4:9-10)

Today we are beginning a four week series called “Strength for the Storms of Life.” One thing that each human being has in common—one thing that unites us all—is that we all go through some storms in life. We all face some difficulties, trials, or struggles. It may be the storm of loss, or the storm of betrayal, or the storm of failure, or the storm of anger. But all of us will face some storm in our lives. Jesus himself reminds us of this when he said: “In this world you will have tribulations.” You will. You will have trials and troubles and storms.



Why? Is it because God has designed a trouble infested world and delights in inflicting those kinds of storms on us? No, God did give us the gift of freedom of choice, and many, many times our storms come because of the poor, destructive choices we make in life or others make and we become the victims of their poor choices. Some storms come because of the fallen-ness of the whole creation—because of the evil that came into the world through the poor choices of past generations. And sometimes we just don’t know why storms come.

No, God didn’t cause the storms of this world. God didn’t want evil and suffering in this world at all. Humans invited it into the world. And God won’t intervene to take our freedom of choice away from us. But God does intervene at times to turn some of these tragedies and trials into triumphs. But still the words of Jesus reverberate—as long as we are in this world we shall endure trials and tribulations. That’s the way it is.

Now, the question we are asking this morning is how do we survive the storms—especially those serious ones that come in and almost threaten our existence altogether? How can we endure these tragedies and trials and heart-breaks? What do you do when your world caves in? How do you stay steady in a storm?

Over 30 years in pastoral ministry have made me a sort of a student of storms in life. I have observed over the years that people who handle storms well tend to be people who have developed two sources of strength. First, people who have developed a real faith tend to survive storms, and secondly, people who have developed true friendships tend to survive storms.

I used to think that strong-willed, well-adjusted, able minded people would be the ones to survive storms, and the more weak-willed, softer people would be those that would collapse. But that hasn’t been the case in my

observation. I have seen many able-minded, well-adjusted, strong-willed people fold in the face of storms. They collapse or they quit or cop-out. Or they use escape mechanisms—drugs or alcohol. They cave in to doubt, fear, and/or depression. They become introverted, reclusive, pity prone or they become bitter, angry, or resentful kinds of people. Then I have seen people without a particularly strong constitution sail into unbelievable storms—force 10 winds, typhoon kinds of storms and I have seen them prevail. I have seen them be steady through the storm.

So I have concluded after being a student of storms that it is not ultimately a matter of personality type. It is not a matter of education. It's not a matter of age or sex or wealth. The difference to me seems to be that people who have a faith that is real and friends that are true tend to survive the storms of life. And those whose faith is not real and whose friends are not true tend to fold. So the issue this morning is not whether those of us in this church are going to experience storms in the future. Jesus said, "Plan on it. They're coming. You won't be spared and nor will I." The issue this morning is: "Will you be prepared? Will I be prepared?"

I'm always kind of amazed to learn of the preparations that are made by those who sail the great oceans of the world. Life rafts, storm sails, emergency equipment, and all kinds of medical supplies are needed to be prepared for the possibility and the eventuality of storms on the ocean crossings.

In 1912 a ship named the Titanic sailed out of the harbor on its maiden voyage. It was thought to be unsinkable. The crew and the captain were not prepared. There weren't nearly enough lifeboats for all the passengers. The crew wasn't skilled and practiced in being able to launch the lifeboats. And as you all know an iceberg appeared. There was a horrible collision. And because of ill-preparedness over 1500 lives were lost. Over and over again the historians say, "It was a matter of being ill-prepared." What I want to talk to you about this morning is: Are you prepared? Are you preparing yourself as time goes on for the certainty of the storms that are coming your way? First of all, are you preparing yourself by building a faith that is real?

Jesus ended his most famous sermon by contrasting the wisdom of two contractors. He said one contractor built his dream house on a weak, sandy foundation. The other contractor built his house on solid rock. Obviously, building a house on solid rock took a lot more time and effort. But that particular builder felt it was strong possibility that he would be struck by some storms. So he took the time. As you all know the story the storm struck and one house was devastated and the other stood firm. Jesus closed that

convicted about what he had done and he ended his relationship with our mutual friend. Then he hopped on a plane and flew across the country so that he could talk with me face to face. He apologized for the way he had violated my trust and betrayed our friendship, making no excuses for his actions. Then he asked whether I could ever bring myself to forgive him. Finally, he asked what he could do to regain my trust.

Now that took a lot of courage and commitment. Over time we rebuilt our friendship. During our senior year I introduced him to a friend of mine whom he would later marry. They asked me to be the best man at their wedding and our friendship has remained intact up to this day.

Some of you who have been betrayed, you may need to take a step toward forgiveness; because to live in bitterness and resentment over betrayal is certain death. Now remember, forgiveness doesn't necessarily mean that you start playing Trust with a person who has betrayed you. Some times that's not possible or appropriate. But eventually you can come to see your betrayer as a wounded, flawed human being. If you don't forgive you will simply keep yourself locked up in a prison. Again, it doesn't mean to trust an untrustworthy person. It means that for your own sake you need to let go of the bitterness and resentment you've been carrying around.

The primary word in the Old Testament for God's heart is faithful or steadfast love. God's love is faithful love, it is steadfast love you can count on it time after time. For God understands betrayal. Remember, Jesus lost his life through betrayal. The most famous traitor in the Bible was Judas. Who was Judas? He was Jesus' disciple. He was his close friend. He was in Jesus' small group. They lived together. They ate together. Judas was the treasurer of their little church. Jesus trusted him. Imagine the hurt Jesus must have felt when Judas—his friend, his follower, his companion—sold him out for thirty pieces of silver.

And that was not the only betrayal Jesus faced. He was betrayed by a mob of people who shouted Hosanna one week and "Crucify Him" the next. He was betrayed by his own followers who deserted him. But he never stopped trusting God. He went to the cross and he put his arms out. Everyone thought that was the end. But really he was just falling back into the arms of God. And God held him. On the third day God raised him up. That same God says to everyone here "Fall back into my arms, for I am very strong, I will hold on to you and will never let you go."

Prayer: *Now to all who have been betrayed, wounded, hurt, to anyone who has ever felt alone, God says, "I will not let you go." God, we're so grateful that your love is steadfast. And we say thank you. In Jesus' name we pray. Amen.*

Some of you come from families where betrayal is passed down from generation to generation. You can just trace it: where there has been a breach of trust in one generation, there is a violation of trust in another. But it is possible for you to say, “I’m going to be the one to break that cycle. Even though I have some wounds and scars, I am going to choose to be a faithful person who honors trust in my relationships, in my marriage, in my work. I will not use or manipulate people even if I could gain from doing so. I’m not going to break my promises to friends, to my children and then shrug them off casually. With God’s help I’m going to break the cycle and end the pattern of betrayal.

As I have been talking some of you are very aware of someone in your life that *you* have betrayed. You have deceived someone, you have been dishonest, and you have been unfaithful. In order to begin to set things right you may need to ask God’s forgiveness and you may need to seek that person out to ask their forgiveness. If it’s a deep betrayal—say, an adulterous relationship with someone else—before you go to that other person I would strongly urge you to seek out some wise counsel so that your next step can be wise, redemptive one.

Others of you here may not have reached that point yet. But you are walking down that road and if you keep going in the same direction it will lead to a very serious betrayal. There is a delicate trust in your hands. You need to stop right now, turn around and walk another way. Because you don’t want to cause the kind of devastation that betrayal will bring.

You need to be very careful about who you play Trust with. Don’t set yourself up for betrayal. You can jump too quickly into a relationship when you don’t really know that person. When you’re dating and you find yourself attracted to that other person, it can be very tempting to move too deep too soon. But the Apostle Paul writes in the New Testament, “Don’t be unequally yoked.” In other words, don’t commit yourself to someone who doesn’t share your basic beliefs, basic values, someone who isn’t really committed to you, and may be using you. Be careful who you play Trust with.

Wise people know that trust grows slowly: You go through stages. First, as you’re getting to know someone there’s what’s called *provisional trust*. You trust someone as far as you know them but no further. Then you watch how they respond, and if they do so in a way that is trustworthy then you go on to deeper trust and greater risk. Over time, you can bring people into your life that you’re able to play Trust with.

Let me come back to my college friend for a moment, the one who betrayed me, because he did an incredible thing. First of all, he felt deeply

story by pleading with people to build their faith, to build their lives on the rock. To build a faith that is real. To build a faith that would withstand the storms of life.

How real is your faith? You might be tempted to blurt out, “Well, it’s real enough to be in church on a dark, rainy Sunday, or it’s real enough that I pray now and then, or it’s real enough that I try to live an ethical life,” or you might say, “It’s real enough for me.” The question is, “Is it real enough to sustain you through the storms of life?” The man in Jesus’ illustration who built his house on the sand had a house that was satisfactory for his purposes, but it didn’t serve him well when the storms came.

More than anything else at St. Andrew’s we want to help you develop a faith that is real enough to sustain you through the storms of life in this world and lead you into the world to come. So what is a faith that is real? A faith that is real is a faith that is first of all built on repentance. And repentance is simply a big theological word that means taking an honest look at your life, looking at your brokenness and sin, the ways in which you are trapped in self-centeredness and self-hate, and saying, “I need help to turn this around and be free. I need a savior.” A real faith, a faith that will sustain you through the storms of life, begins when you admit that you really do need help—that you can’t be the person you want to be without the help of a personal savior. A real faith is a repentant faith.

Secondly, a real faith—the kind we are trying to help you build here is a personal faith, not a hand-me-down faith. I know some of you are here today because your parents taught you to go to church, but you have never developed your own personal faith. You have a hand me down faith. Others of you are here out of a commitment to your spouse. You get the tug on your arm each Sunday morning, “Come on, it’s Sunday. Let’s go to church.” You’re here to please your spouse. And that can be a wonderful gift to a spouse, but you need to strive to make the faith your own. Some of you have what I call a “band-wagon faith.” You want to be apart of the exciting things going on around here. It’s a band-wagon faith.

But friends, that kind of faith—a hand-me-down faith, a martially motivated faith, or a band wagon faith—that kind of faith will not serve you well during the storms of life. It’s got to be personal faith. There has to come a time where it is your faith: your choice, your decision, apart from your parents, your spouse, your kids, apart from what anyone else says or does. It’s your faith.

Finally, it has to be a living faith. A real faith is a living faith. If you have a living faith you’ll find yourself throughout the day having a running dia-

logue with God—where you talk with God about your problems and concerns, and thank God for the many blessings in your life. There is a relationship. It is like an ongoing companionship factor with God in your life. That is a living faith. There's no doubt in your mind that you are relating to a living God.

I'm trying to describe what a real faith is because when you have a real faith, and then the storms of life strike you, you already have all those lines of communication established with God. You already know how to take everything to Christ in prayer. You already know how to cast all your cares on the Lord. You already know how precious Christ's presence is. You already know that Christ's spirit can be trusted to give you comfort and strength, and you find that second wind. You find that renewed strength in the middle of the storm, because your faith is real and you find out that it will sustain you.

The Apostle Paul told of a time when his faith became real in a time of great testing. It was at his first trial. And Paul says these words in II Timothy 4:17, "At my first defense everybody deserted me." He was on trial for his life, and he said, "Everybody deserted me." And he closes that verse by saying, "But the Lord stood with me...and he is enough." He is enough. A real faith is when you sense the accompanying presence of Christ because you are in a relationship with him, and you have dialogued with him and you understand his presence and you say, "The Lord is with me and no matter what happens as long as he is with me that is enough." And I have seen all kinds of people survive unbelievable calamity because they knew that the Lord was with them and he was enough. If you nurture a faith that is real in the weeks, months and years before the storm strikes, you will find that Christ is there and he will be enough.

What kind of faith do you have this morning? Is it a growing faith? Are you intent on developing it? Will you let us, as a church, help you in it? I'd like to make practical suggestions by challenging you if you are intent on developing a faith that is real, then be here when the body gathers, rain or shine, be here and come expectantly, come with the intent of growing, and attend classes that are offered, become involved in a small group, commit yourself to a service opportunity—all of that to build a faith that is real—that will sustain you through the storms of life. Believe me this is a wise investment. You won't regret the investment of time and energy that it takes because it will pay off, when a storm strikes.

And finally the other source of strength, in addition to a faith that is real you also need friends that are true. One of my favorite passages on this subject is Ecclesiastes 4:9-10. It says, "Two are better than one. For if they

Times that read: "New Porsche for sale: \$500." Thinking it was a joke, or that the car had been in a wreck, a man called the number and asked what condition the sports car was in. The woman on the other end of the line said, "Excellent condition. It has only a few thousand miles." The man said, "I'm confused. That car is worth thousands. Why are you selling it so cheap?" The woman said, "Well, it was my husband's pride and joy but he walked out on me. He said I could keep the house and furniture but asked me to sell his beloved car and send him the money. So that's what I'm doing. Five hundred dollars and it's yours!" She wanted her husband to experience some of the pain she had to endure.

Some times when people experience betrayal they're not yet ready to admit it, so they go through *denial*, a blindness to what has happened. They may make excuses or rationalize what has taken place. This happened not long ago to a certain national television personality who is married to a nationally known figure in the world of sports. At first the woman couldn't believe published reports that her husband had cheated on her. She ask him if he did it; he denied it and she said, "I believe him!" A few days later, however, someone produced a video tape of her husband with another woman and she was forced to deal with his betrayal.

Another response that people have when they go through the pain of betrayal is *self-criticism* or self-blame. They say, "How could I have been so foolish, so blind? What's the matter with me? What was I doing trusting this person when I shouldn't have been?"

Still another response people often have as they work through betrayal is they say, "I don't ever want to get hurt like that again." So they *isolate* themselves. They withdraw and try to protect themselves. But of course, if you refuse to ever trust again you'll never know love and intimacy; you'll never know deep friendship.

So that leads us to the question: "*How do I find the strength to trust again in a world where disloyalty and betrayal are often standard operating procedure?*" I want to start this section by walking you through several ways you can gain strength for the storm of betrayal. First, I want to talk about a basic decision we can all make. That is to say, "No matter how much betrayal I have experienced *I want to be a faithful person*—in every sense: as a spouse, employer, friend, or parent. I'm going to be trustworthy and loyal. Now, if you make that decision sooner or later you're going to come to a fork in the road where choosing to be faithful or loyal is going to hurt you, and will probably cost you something. You'll have to choose between jumping ship or staying stead in the storm.

people who were trapped in vanity, a deeper level for people trapped in greed, a deeper level for people trapped in deception, and then there is the lowest level of all. Do you know who was in this level of hell in Dante's world? Those who betrayed the ones whom they were supposed to love.

For some of you this storm started when you were just a babe in arms. Little children are born dependent. God wants every parent to make a silent promise to their children: "You put your arms out and I'll catch you." Some of you grew up in homes where that didn't happen. And you were neglected or ridiculed, abused or abandoned by the very people who were most obligated to love you. If that was your experience, you may have a damaged capacity to trust.

One of the deepest wounds that I received during my young adult years involved a close personal friend. We were college roommates and sang in the choir together. One summer I took a job in the New England area to work. While I was away my friend became involved with someone I was dating at the time. When she wrote to me I was stunned and I felt deeply betrayed by both of my friends. Some of you have been hurt in a similar way.

Business betrayals go on all the time. There was a man in California who hired illegal immigrants to work in his fields. He said to them: "If you work for me, I'll provide a place for you to live, I'll pay your wages, but I'll keep them until the end of the summer, then I'll give them to you in one lump sum, and you will have all this money to take back to your family in Mexico." So these people trusted him. Then, the last week of the growing season the man leaked to the authorities that he had illegal immigrants working for him. They came and arrested his workers and immediately deported them all back to Mexico. The grower paid a small fine that was a fraction of what he would have owed in wages. But none of the immigrants got a penny.

Trust is such a sacred thing and when it is violated the wounds go very deep. It's interesting to note that when Jesus talked about issues of trust he did not say: "When you are betrayed, don't do anything about it. Just turn the other cheek. Don't be concerned for justice and fairness; just let others walk all over you." People misunderstand this. Yes, there is a time for forgiveness, but there is also a time to confront someone when a violation of trust has occurred. But you need wisdom to know how and when to do that.

When you are betrayed there is a series of phases you can expect to go through. One of the most obvious is that you feel deep *hurt* and you are tempted to hurt them back. You want to make them feel the way you feel. A few years ago there was an ad in the classified section of the *Los Angeles*

fall, one will lift up the other; but woe to one who is alone and falls and does not have another to help." Here is the practical, penetrating wisdom of God. When the Bible uses the word "woe" it means bad news, big trouble. Don't ever find yourself in a position where you are walking alone because if a storm strikes and you fall, there is nobody there for you. And those of you who are married need at least one good friend, one support person in your life besides your spouse.

God says, "Build friendships before the storm strikes." Don't think you can make it as a self-made person. Don't believe you can handle it alone or think that the storms won't come to you. If you want to take that gamble, go ahead. But not me. I've learned a long time ago that if I don't have some close friends around me when my life caves in, I'm in a bad way. God says, "If you want to stay steady in the storms, develop significant relationships before the storms strike, so that the bonds of brotherhood and sisterhood are already well established, so that the love is already there, so that the wisdom has already been proven, so that the ability to communicate has already been tested, and then when the storm strikes, when you desperately need a friend, your friend will be there. Do you have any of those?"

One of the major goals of this church, one of the reasons we have small groups, classes, service opportunities and fellowship experiences, is because we want to provide contexts in which you can roam around and strike up possible relationships that can evolve into brotherly and sisterly kinds of relationships so that you can have friends that are true when storms strike.

If you have some true friends, if you have taken the time to build some of those significant relationships, why not verbally or in written form, why not say to somebody you consider a true friend: "I'll be there if a storm strikes. I'll stand with you in the storm." Can you say that to anybody? And if you can't, get about the task right away. Get out of your shell. I know it's hard. It has taken me years to build some significant friendships. It takes time. It takes energy. It takes effort, but it is worth the price.

Friends, when a storm strikes we all need two things—we need a faith that is real and we need a brother or a sister who will stand watch with us in the storm. The good news is that a real faith and true friends are available to you if you will assume the responsibilities, take the steps, and get these things in place. If you have those two strengths, a faith that is real and friends that are true, you will be prepared and you will stay steady through whatever storms come your way.

The Storm of Loss

(Revelation 24:1-4; Matthew 5:45)

How many of you have tuned in the Winter Olympics in Torino, Italy, in the past ten days? I have to tell you that I get a natural high watching them—although staying up ‘til midnight has taken its toll on my sleep needs. Maybe my fascination comes from grow up in Minnesota where the ice and snow hang around for nearly six months out of the year. We had the St. Paul Winter Carnival complete with dog sled races, ice carving contests, ice fishing contests, speed skating and snow mobile races, which I remember with fondness back to the time when I was a little boy. Or maybe my fascination has more to do with the drama that seems to accompany the Olympics as the athletes pursuing those precious medals fight their way through some pretty bumpy terrain. Many literally pick themselves up off the snow and ice to try to keep going.

The Olympics are like a crash course in absorbing loss. They certainly demonstrate is that the storms of loss can strike at any time. You can be in the prime of your life, you can be at the height of your game, have a spectacular warm-up, then all of a sudden things come crashing down around you as you are swept away in a avalanche of loss and defeat. For most of us, it’s not about athletic competition. It’s about life. Maybe it’s about the family where you grew up and you were deeply wounded. Or maybe your storm involves a marriage that has turned out to be nothing like you hoped for.

For still others of you maybe it has to do with the enormous pain you feel upon losing a loved one. Or maybe you go to the doctor for a routine visit and you receive some bad news. The health that you’ve always taken for granted is suddenly frayed.

From a biblical perspective, the storm of loss is not just something we can quickly recover from. Pick ourselves up off the ice as Sasha Cohen did this past week, and still win a silver metal. It’s not as simple as that. I want to be real clear about that. This message is not just about if something bad happens how you can get back on track as soon as possible; for loss is something that needs to be set right. The Bible’s word for it is that it needs to be *redeemed*. The scripture says that someday—maybe not today, maybe not tomorrow—but the day is going to come when God will set things right. But until that time we need to find a way to live in the in-between; we need to choose life in a world that’s battered by the storms of loss, because sooner or



This morning I want to look at three things about betrayal: *First*, I want to look at why it’s so devastating; why it has the ability to destroy lives. *Second*, I want to touch on some common responses to betrayal — because all of us go through it and when we do, what can we expect? And *third*, I want to look at where you can go to find strength when you live in a world where betrayal is often standard operating procedure.

Now for this first part on why betrayal is so devastating I want to give you a visual illustration. So here’s what I need: I need two volunteers — a couple of folks who are willing to come up here on the chancel right now. Are there are two people here who are willing to trust me on this? I promise not to embarrass you. You won’t have to say anything. Just come on up here for two minutes. You will help us all create a metaphor. This is the game that kids often play. It’s called “Trust.” Some of you may have heard of or seen this game before. It’s real simple.

In this game there are two roles: there’s the faller (that’s you!); and then there is the catcher (that’s you). I want you (the faller) to stand right here and you (the catcher) to stand a couple of steps behind. Now, when I give you the sign, I’d like the faller to fall. Hold your arms by your sides. Sort of stiffen you body a little. Keep your eyes and head looking straight ahead, put both feet together without stepping back to brace yourself. And then you simply fall backward. Now, this is an act of trust. You become vulnerable as you lean backward and let go. There’s a point of no return in this game because if the catcher isn’t faithful, the faller could get hurt. And if it works right, you’ll have a picture that you’ll remember for a long time of how trust in a relationship is supposed to work. And if it doesn’t work, well. Okay, so here it is! How did they do? Let’s thank them for their bravery!

One of the things about this game of Trust is that you don’t want to play it with just anyone. You want to be careful whom you select. The truth is that from the time you were quite young you were learning, watching and asking “Is it safe to play this game of Trust?”

This is why betrayal is so devastating. When trust is broken it throws you into chaos because it overturns your sense of who and what you can rely on. It can turn your world upside down. When you’ve been betrayed you wonder, “Can I trust anybody?” Maybe it would be safer just not to play Trust anymore. I don’t want to go through that kind of hurt again.”

One of the most famous names in American history is the name of Benedict Arnold. We still use that name as a label for someone who has betrayed us. Dante, in his *Divine Comedy*, depicts different levels of hell from less severe to more severe depending on the sin. There was a level for

The Storm of Betrayal

(Matthew 26:37-46; Ecclesiastes 4:9-10)

I want to start off by asking if you have ever been in any of these situations: Somebody that you had counted on makes a promise to you and then they break it. A trusted friend takes a painful secret which you shared with them in confidence and tells it to someone else. A business partner gets you to trust him or her and then exploits you financially. You work for years loyal to a boss who suddenly terminates you without cause. Somebody who is exclusively committed to you—or so they have promised—secretly takes up another relationship.

We've been in a series called "Strength for the Storms of Life" and today we're talking about betrayal and I believe it is one of the most devastating of all the storms of life. Nothing hurts like being betrayed. This subject is crucial for all of us because everyone here is likely to experience betrayal at one time or another. We need to know how to respond when the storm hits so we can recover from it. And all of us need to learn how to be more faithful to people so that we do not betray those who put their trust in us.

For some in this room this subject strikes at the very core of your being because your world has been rocked by the storm of betrayal. Usually when you're hurt by an enemy, at least you're not taken by surprise. When it's an enemy at least you know you should have kept your guard up, you need to watch your backside.

But betrayal is not just about being hurt by just anybody; it comes from a friend, a spouse, or a co-worker, a partner, an insider, someone you thought you could count on. That is why betrayal is a violation of trust which always comes as a shock.

This week's Oregonian carried an article about a woman who had developed an Internet gambling habit. In order to pay her debts she secretly stole money from her employer. She was arrested and accused of embezzling \$275,000, but she kept on gambling. Her bank froze her assets but she kept on gambling. Her trial was quickly approaching, but she kept on gambling. The company estimated she had stolen nearly half of its profits over the last three years. It had no choice but to lay off several workers and give pay cuts to all remaining employees, but she kept on gambling. Here's the kicker: the woman got the job in the first place because the owner was an old college friend.



later that storm is going to hit. On any ordinary day—maybe a sunny day, maybe a cloudy, rainy day—it can rock your world.

So what I want to do is to walk through four questions that people have been asking for a long time. I want you to think with me about what a faith firmly anchored in the God revealed in Jesus Christ has to say about loss and suffering and about how you and I can live through these things.

The first question I want to pose is the question that can occur before any other in the minds of those who suffer severe loss. A lot of you have wrestled with it; some of you are doing so right now. It's a question that asks: "*Why me? Why I am the one going through this? Was I singled out for this? What did I do to deserve this? Why me?*"

How about a show of hands on this one. How many of you have ever gotten a speeding ticket? Raise your hand. Now a follow up question: How many of you were actually speeding at the time you got the ticket? How many of you were speeding and should have gotten a ticket but didn't? Would you agree that there are certain kinds of suffering we bring on ourselves? If you eat enough, smoke enough, drink enough, sit around long enough, abuse your body enough, you're likely to develop some health problems that could be prevented. We bring certain forms of suffering on ourselves.

But sometimes suffering comes for no apparent reason. Part of why this troubles us so much is we live with this illusion of control. The illusion that "If I can just figure it out. If I can just be smart enough or clever enough or strong enough or good enough, if the seat belt is adjusted properly and the air bag is operating, I can make life accident proof, loss proof, suffering proof. But then suddenly, out of the blue—disease, disaster, disappointment strike, and you realize this truth: that life on planet earth is incredibly fragile—even for the brightest and strongest of us.

What the Prophet Isaiah said so many years ago still holds true, "All flesh is like the grass, the days are like a flower in the field, and the wind blows over it. And then comes a drought, a fire, a flood, a storm, and it's gone." And friends, life can be just that way.

Jerry Sitzer is a professor at Whitworth College up in Spokane, Washington. He wrote a book a couple of years ago in which he reflected on his own experience of loss. One day Jerry and his family were driving on the highway and there was a drunk driver coming the other way who plowed into him head-on. In an instant he lost his mother, his wife and one of his children. Three generations wiped out in a flash, through no fault of their own. And Jerry did what many of you do who have suffered severe loss. He replayed the scene over and over a thousand times in his mind: "What if we

had left ten seconds earlier, what if we had left ten seconds later, what if we had taken another route?

What he talks about is the terror of randomness. The crash seemed like such a random event. What he discovered over time is that sometimes you will never know why things happened the way they did. Sometimes you can spend an entire life and that question will never get answered. Then Jerry says one day another question struck him. A question that might be phrased like this: “Why *not* me?” In other words, what is that makes me assume that I will never have suffering and hurt? Am I a better person than a baby born to a starving family in Somalia? How can I assume that I should somehow be exempt? I am certainly not the center of the universe.

So Jerry writes that if he was going to gradually weather the storm of loss, the more important question for him would have to be “*How will I respond?*” When the storm of life strikes how am I going to respond to deep loss?

I want to start with what the Scriptures do *not* say because there’s a lot of confusion about this. What the Bible does *not* say to do as you go through the storm of loss is to pretend like it doesn’t hurt. A lot of us grew up being taught that we ought to deny the pain. That it’s a sign of strength; just pretend it doesn’t exist. Especially we men struggle with this. Sometimes we think we’re just supposed to take it in stride and keep moving as if it doesn’t bother us. There can be a kind of pressure not to grieve. People can play a game of pretending like it doesn’t hurt. Show by your stoic silence how strong you really are. People ask how you’re doing. Tell them you’re fine. People think that they can just hydroplane over suffering. But life doesn’t work that way; and neither does faith.

Right in the middle of the Bible there is a book called the Psalms. The Psalms are a kind of reality prayer book. Yes, some of them express thanks and praise. Do you know what the most common kind of psalm is? It’s called a psalm of lament. That’s the number one kind: “Why God? How long, God? Where are you, God? Why have you hidden your face from me, God?” You see, the God of the Bible is a very big God who is not threatened in the least by people expressing their anger and their grief over hurt and loss.

And when you turn to the New Testament you will find the counsel of people like the Apostle Paul. And it’s very interesting what he does not say. He does not say, “You are to give a theological explanation about why things happened the way they did.” He doesn’t tell them to say, “God must have wanted your loved one more than you do.” No, he just says, “Mourn with them. Weep with them. Pray with them. Hold them. Learn how to minister to

ing his position. He was a person of unquestionable integrity. Instead of giving up his concerns he invited others to join him.

A remarkable thing then happened. “All the assembly said, ‘Amen (so be it)!’ And they praised the Lord.” This result is so important. It shows that God can be glorified when we handle anger in the right way and avoid the sin associated with it. In acting as he did, Nehemiah avoided the dangers inherent in repressing anger. He did not become critical, defensive, competitive egotistical or depressed. He did not resort to lashing out or gossip. He retained his perspective and was able to continue with the work God had given him to do.

I want to add a brief footnote here. When it comes to these last two steps, dealing directly with the person you are angry with or seeking reconciliation, if you are in an abusive relationship, and fear for your safety, these are not steps I advise you to take at this time. Talk with Tom or myself, or seek professional help.

But for the rest of us handling anger in the same way that Nehemiah did, by admitting it, by understanding it, by releasing it appropriately and by seeking reconciliation —by doing these things we will find that God can be glorified by our actions. My guess is that God may have been talking to some of you this morning, and you may need to deal with this area of anger. I hope that you will take these steps this next week and, as you do, know that Christ will be with you every step of the way. Christ cares about you. Your pain matters to him. He wants to replace your hurt with his love, your fears with his power, and your frustration with his peace. May we each open ourselves to this possibility. Let us pray:

Gracious God, Thank you that your love is greater than any other problem—anger or fear. Thank you, that when we’re filled with your love, it changes us. We pray this in your name. Amen.

cently. Only under extreme circumstances do we discuss the issues directly with those with whom we are offended.

It is always easy to find excuses for not doing what we know needs to be done. “Oh, I might hurt his feelings, or she won’t like me if she knows how I feel, or he won’t listen anyway.” We’ve all heard these same old excuses. Nehemiah, for example, might have excused himself from open confrontation on many legitimate grounds. After all, he could have reasoned, is it wise to take on such influential people as the nobles and rulers of Jerusalem? And if I do, what if they make life difficult for me afterwards? As a pastor, I find that I would much, much rather hear a person’s anger and frustration with me directly, then later hearing about it second handedly. A direct discussion gives the opportunity for understanding and clarification and deepening in a relationship. Gossip only alienates and causes deeper mistrust and discord.

In directly expressing our anger it is helpful to remember three things. First, be brief. Learn to state your concerns without having to go on and on. Secondly, be specific. Instead of making general condemnations like, “You’re so messy!” Be specific “Would you mind picking up your dirty clothes from the living room floor?” Get specific. Third, be humble. Someone once advised, “Be humble or you’ll stumble.” In Proverbs 13:10 we hear, “Only by pride comes contention.” Pride is at the root of every argument. When we are prideful in an argument we are actually prolonging the argument. When we’re humble we’re reducing the amount of time needed to get it resolved. The way you do that is by making “I” statements rather than “you” statements. You statements are always accusatory. “You always....” “You never....” I statements are “this is the way I feel.” If you want to be humble, use “I” statements not “you” statements.

Nehemiah believed in being open and honest with others. He carefully weighed his words. He didn’t jump in and say things he later regretted. He reflected before he reacted. He didn’t blow up, pout, or manipulate. He convened a great assembly and directly laid out his concerns. Then he gave his opponents an opportunity to reply.

Finally, with all the people fully aware of the issues, Nehemiah sought reconciliation. That is the fourth way to handle anger appropriately. Nehemiah sought to bring the entire affair to a satisfactory conclusion. He sought to gain the favor of the people by wining them over with friendly persuasion. He sought ways to reconcile himself to the rulers and nobles. “Please, leave off this usury,” he said. “Please give back to the workers this very day their fields.” Nehemiah sought common ground with others without compromis-

those in pain while you are gently helping them learn to walk all over again. People sometimes think that being a Christian means getting a free pass from suffering. But that’s not what Jesus taught. To love means to suffer with. He said, “In this world you will have tribulation” (John 16:33).

The next question, which perhaps I’ve already answered, is also wrestled with by people who go through loss: “*How do I protect myself from it?*” Is there such a thing as storm insurance? Well, yes and no, because while you may be able to recoup your material losses, it’s a different matter entirely to recover emotionally. There will be a part of you that says, “I don’t want to go through that pain again. For if I give my heart to another he or she might reject me, might hurt or disappointment me, might die on me. If I give myself to a dream, the dream might shrivel up, I might fail at it. I don’t want to take that kind of risk again. How can I protect myself from loss. And the short answer in this one is: you can’t, not in this life.

One of the great Christian writers of our century is a man named C.S. Lewis. Some of you might have seen a movie about his life a few years ago. It was called *Shadowlands*. When C.S. Lewis was nine years old his mother died. He was deeply affected by her loss. And so he tried to arrange his life and his relationships so that he would be safe, so that he would not feel that kind of hurt again. He became a brilliant Christian writer and thinker, but he led a careful life. And then the oddest thing happened: he was in his late 50’s, still unmarried, when he met a woman whom he fell in love with. He decided to take a huge risk and ask her to be his wife. But not long after they were married she developed a terminal disease. It went into remission for a while but then it came back and she died. And while Lewis was in the midst of his grief this brilliant, careful man wrote these words: *To love at all is to be vulnerable. Love anything and your heart will certainly be wrung, and possibly be broken. If you want to keep your heart in tact you must give your heart to no one. Not even to an animal. Wrap it carefully around with hobbies and luxuries. Avoid all entanglements. Lock it up safe in the casket or coffin of selfishness. But in that casket safe, dark, motionless, airless, it will change your heart. It will not be broken. It will become impenetrable, irredeemable.*

Some of you in this sanctuary have been hurt. And you’re so afraid of being hurt again that you’ve closed up your heart. Refused to love. Afraid to dream. Avoiding friendship. Fleeing from risk. Isolating yourself. Friends, that way is the way of death. It’s just is. For some of you, it’s time to choose life again. It’s time to open your heart, time to get back in the game, which

brings us to the next question; one of the deepest questions that a human being can ask in this world of loss. The question: “*Where is God?*”

In the midst of human pain and suffering and death that is a kind of curse on this world, where is God? Now, let me be very frank. I have no easy answers on this. There’s a lot that I don’t understand. For those of you who think that because there is pain and suffering maybe God doesn’t exist at all—even the existence of pain and suffering means that there cannot be a God—let me say these words to you: People wonder sometimes, “Couldn’t God have created a different kind of world.” A world where there is no pain and suffering and everything just went according to plan. God would script every day and things would run by that script. God would tell every person what they were supposed to say and how they were supposed to act, and they would just do it.

But think with me for a moment about what that kind of world would be like. I suppose God could have made a science-fiction world. God could have created mechanical robots who were obedient in every detail. No hurt, no suffering, no conflict—no freedom. But God wanted real live human beings, not puppets or robots. God created us free to choose: free to choose the way of love, compassion, and faith. Or the way of hate, greed, and despair. So God had to back off. This all-powerful God chose limits. And that meant inevitably that people would be free to disobey as well as to obey. Parents could neglect and even abuse their children instead of loving them the way God intended. Children could refuse to listen to the wisdom of their elders and do whatever they felt like doing even if it brought harm to themselves and to others. Partners could fight and argue and run from their problems and responsibilities rather than face them together. The rich could steal from the poor instead of sharing and helping them.

In one of the first stories in the book of Genesis the writer describes how sin came into the world; it was a free choice that Adam and Eve made. Theologians have even called this “The Fall”; it unleashed versions of death and pain and suffering into our world which we still see today. But we need to be very clear about where God’s heart is in all of this. Because people sometimes misunderstand God’s role in all of this and think that God is this cruel dictator who just enjoys sending out pain. “I’ll send a flood here; I’ll send an earthquake here; I’ll skip this house and hit that one. I’ll skip that child and take that one.” The insurance industry even refers to natural disasters as “acts of God.” But are they? I don’t think so.

You see, the Bible does not speak of death as an instrument of God. It speaks of death as the enemy of God. God is unalterably, eternally opposed

cal or depressed. Doctors say that one of the great causes of depression is anger. Depression is often frozen rage. It is angry feelings stuffed down, taking itself out on our body in the form of depression.

Nehemiah simply admitted his anger. Even though it was brought about by circumstances over which he had no control; he did not blame others for the way he felt. Having admitted that he was “very angry,” he was then in a position to deal with his emotions and the situation. The starting point is to admit our anger because we can’t work on it until we admit it.

Nehemiah then proceeded to the second step in handling anger in an appropriate way. He sought to better understand his anger. He thought it over. He didn’t do what so many of us do when we become angry, namely gossip about the person we are angry at. He didn’t try to subtly get others to listen to his story and align themselves with his position as he discretely attacked the integrity of those with whom he differed. Nehemiah was secure enough in himself that he did not need to justify himself in the eyes of others. He was primarily interested in what God thought of the situation. By trying to understand his anger he avoided the temptation of maligning others.

By thinking the matter through, Nehemiah gave himself time to evaluate the situation and decide on a course of action. Had he not engaged in this introspection, he might have acted hastily and indiscreetly. All too often we fail to carefully identify the source of our anger. Sometimes what we think we are angry about may not at all be the real source of our anger. Anger is often described by counselors as a “cover emotion.” Meaning that it often covers other deeper, more vulnerable emotions. It’s a symptom, a warning light. It tells you something is wrong. Usually, there are three causes of anger: hurt, fear, and frustration. You need to understand your anger. Look at it. Analyze it. Ask, “Why am I getting angry?” Am I feeling hurt, unaccepted, unappreciated, unsupported? Or am I feeling fearful, unprotected, uncertain? Or am I feeling frustrated, thwarted, blocked? By carefully weighing the circumstances surrounding our anger and frustration, we can more honestly face our part in the conflict. Only then are in a position to address our concerns to others.

Having given himself the time to gain perspective, Nehemiah then sought to release his anger appropriately. This is the third step in handling anger. Nehemiah saw clearly what needed to be done and he took immediate action. “He confronted the nobles and the rulers.” So often, when we are angry, we lack the courage to go directly to those with whom we disagree. Satisfied that we are right (at least in our own eyes), we settle down compla-

Now anger is not necessarily sinful. At times it is a normal, appropriate feeling from God. It is what we do with our anger that determines whether or not it is sinful. The Apostle Paul recognized the inevitability of anger as an emotion when he wrote, “Be angry, but do not sin. Do not let the sun go down on your anger, and give no opportunity to the devil.”

Anger becomes sinful when we lose control of ourselves and lash out in a hurtful way towards others. It also becomes sinful when we harbor our anger in a grudging or revengeful way. This morning I want to explore four steps for handling our anger in a constructive way.

In the book of Nehemiah we see how a competent leader handled anger. The example Nehemiah set teaches us some important lessons for the real life situations we face. Nehemiah was engaged in building the wall surrounding the city of Jerusalem, in attempting to fortify the city from their enemies. From the very beginning the entire operation had problems. Nehemiah’s task was made even more difficult by the fact that all those assisting him were volunteers. They had left their farms and other forms of employment to work on the wall.

In the midst of the work there was a great outcry from the workers and their wives. They were being oppressed and exploited by the wealthy elite who stood to gain the most from the fortification of the city. Some of the workers had been compelled to mortgage their land in order to buy food, and others had been forced to sell their children into slavery.

Nehemiah’s response to this outcry gives us the first step in handling our anger. He says, “Then I was very angry.” The first thing Nehemiah did was admit his anger. He didn’t excuse it, ignore it, or minimize it. He did not try to project it onto others and blame them for the way he felt. And he didn’t try to repress it. He just said, “I was very angry.” Anger is not a sin. God gets angry. 375 times in the Old Testament it says God got angry. And Jesus got angry. In fact, in the face of a great social injustice, anger is the appropriate emotion, even a motivating emotion. Sometimes anger is an expression of love. Sometimes anger says, “I’m not going to stand by and watch you waste your life.” No, anger is not a sin, it’s what we do with it that makes it a sin or not. There is a constructive way to get angry, and there is a destructive way to get angry; an appropriate way and inappropriate way.

But I think Paul’s words in Ephesians, to put away falsehood, challenge us to think about this in a different way. I think Paul is saying that when we deny our anger, that also is a sin. Because denying our anger is a form of lying, and lying is a sin. Denying our anger only causes more problems. It can make us become critical people, overly defensive, competitive, egotisti-

to it. Death was not part of God’s original plan. It is not God’s final purpose for human beings. “Where is God?” people ask. The Bible says God is *with* those who suffer. Jesus said the day is going to come when we will stand before this Righteous Judge, and one of the things that will happen is that he will point to those who have suffered; He will point to those who have been oppressed, to those who are poor, to those who are imprisoned, and he will say to the rest of us, “Whatever you did to the least of these, you did to me.” This is the message of the cross. For on the cross Jesus takes on himself not just our guilt and our sin but also our suffering and pain. Jesus was the “Man of Sorrows.” Of all the gods that human minds have ever devised, of all the gods that have ever been worshiped, only the God of the Bible is the God who suffers with and for the suffering human race.

Other than the Bible itself, one of the most profound books on suffering and loss I’ve read is a book called *Lament for a Son*. It was written by Nicholas Wolterstorff who is Professor of Philosophy and Religion at Yale University. He wrote the book on the occasion of the death of his son, Eric, who was only 25 years old when he died. Eric slipped and fell to his death in a mountain-climbing accident. Wolterstorff writes that the hardest thing about the death of his son is the finality of it all. How he can hardly bring himself to look at pictures of Eric when he was a little boy. Because he knows he’s not going to see any more pictures of him as he walks through life anymore. He writes about a time after Eric’s death when he was taking boxes containing some of Eric’s things to put them away. In his mind he hears Eric’s voice say, “Hey Dad, I’m back!” But he realizes he’s never going to hear that voice again—at least not in this life.

What Wolterstorff comes to see, is that God embraces suffering. This is what he writes: *It is said of God that no one can behold the face of God and live. I always thought this meant that no one can see God’s splendor and live. A friend says, perhaps it means that no one can see God’s sorrow and live. For perhaps God’s sorrow is God’s splendor.* Maybe the greatest thing of all is that the Son of God would choose to suffer with us when he did not have to. For every tear that has ever fallen on every human being on the face of this earth is precious to him.

My final question then is this: “*How do I live in a dangerous world in the light of the inevitability of loss. I know that storms are going to blow into my life. So how do I live in light of that reality?*”

The scripture is very clear on this. Jesus says, “In this world you will have tribulation.” You and I will have loss. But then he adds these reassuring words, “take courage, be of good cheer, for I have overcome the world.”

When it comes right down to it, life is all so simple: It's just a gift. It's a marvelous gift from God, given in a world that is incredibly flawed and painful at times. But it wouldn't be so painful if the gift weren't so wonderful. We get so preoccupied with things that really don't matter. We worried about money or about possessions or about success or about the future. And God says, "It's just a gift. Every moment that you have is just a gift from me. So take it, embrace this gift of life. Love those whom I've given you, take time to appreciate the minutes you have with each other. And God says, "Get to know me. Learn to place your trust in me so that you might have life and have it abundantly. Embrace life, embrace faith—for that is what you were made to do.

I want to close with these final words from *Lament for a Son*. Nicholas is a professing Christian and he thinks about God's promise to resurrect all those who have died in Christ. He ponders the mass of humanity trailing off far beyond anyone's ability to see them all and says, "I don't see how God's going to do it." Then he adds, "I suppose if God can create, God can recreate." Then, in a spirit of honesty which all human beings experience, he writes "I wonder if it's all true. I wonder if God's really going to do it. I wonder, will I hear Eric say someday, really now, 'Hey Dad, I'm back?'" Then in the stillness, he hears the voice of God say to him, "Remember, I made all this and I raised my Son from the dead."

A day is coming—maybe not today, maybe not tomorrow, but a day is coming—when the promise will be fulfilled. "See," says the writer of Revelation, "the home of God is among mortals. And God will dwell with us as our God, and we will be his people. And God himself will be with us and will wipe every tear from our eyes. Mourning and crying and pain will end. Death itself will be no more. For the old things have passed away." "OK," this father writes, "so goodbye, Eric, goodbye, until we see, until we see, until we see."

The Storm of Anger

(Nehemiah 5:6-13, Ephesians 4:25-27)

This morning we continue with our sermon series, Strength for the Storms of Life. I have discovered that one of the most troublesome personal problems many of us face is an inability to deal constructively with our human emotions and feelings. Throughout our lives we are taught over and over again that our feelings, particularly our negative feelings are not okay. From our parents, from our society, and even from the church we get the message, loud and clear: "Don't be angry; don't be afraid; don't cry." So most of us end up stuffing our feelings and driving them further and further down into our personalities.

Today we are in danger of becoming a people cut off from our feelings. Few of us are really in touch with what we actually feel and even fewer know how to constructively express or release our feelings. This causes all kinds of problems for us, for whether we like it or not, feelings cannot stay bottled up forever. Eventually they must come out in some way. If we are not in touch with our feelings and do not know how to constructively release them, they will begin to seep out in all kinds of destructive ways. Our bodies, for instance, pay a great price for blocked feelings. Headaches, insomnia, and ulcers are often the consequence of stuffed feelings. Our relationships with others also suffer because of unexpressed feelings. Put downs, gossip, back biting, withdrawal, unresolved conflict, and alienation all occur when feelings are not expressed openly and honestly.

I believe that God our Creator did not make a mistake when we were created with feelings and emotions. Feelings are a big part of what it means to be a human being. They are never right or wrong, they just are. We will never be able to fully accept and value ourselves, nor will we become a whole person, until we accept our feelings. Since the God of the Bible is a God of feeling, neither will we be able to fully love and follow this God until we give up our fear of feeling.

This morning I want to spend some time working with the feeling of anger, for certainly this is one of our most troublesome emotions. Anger—we have all felt it at one time or another. Someone makes a put down, a sarcastic statement to us or gossips behind our back, or steps on our toes in a variety of ways, or excludes us or ignores us, and suddenly we feel it boiling up inside of us—anger.

