

In Celebration of Jacob

In the gospel of Matthew, chapter five, Jesus delivered His longest sermon recorded for us; you may have heard of it as the Sermon on the Mount. It detailed what life would be like in His kingdom, and the second line in this great sermon reveals quite a bit: “**Blessed are those that mourn, for they will be comforted.**” As we gather in this place, in what is, quite honestly, the worst circumstance many of us have ever faced, that promise of comfort feels a million miles away. And yet, either Jesus lied, and we have no hope in here, or he told the truth. Where is that comfort? Where can we look for any hope out of this utter disaster?

One of the best parts about the Bible is that it never shies away from the issue of darkness, death, sadness, and sorrow. If we go to the Bible looking for never-ending sunshine, we will inevitably walk away disappointed. The whole book points to Jesus Christ, and in one of the most straightforward descriptions of him, the prophet Isaiah said that he would be a “**man of sorrows, well acquainted with grief.**” As we gather here today, we can look at this situation and feel the weight of its sadness. In a year filled with much loss, hardship, and sorrow, it feels like any remaining light in the world has gone out. Is there any hope?

Hear the word of the Lord from Psalm 11, a Psalm of David:

In the LORD I take refuge; how can you say to my soul, “Flee like a bird to your mountain, 2 for behold, the wicked bend the bow; they have fitted their arrow to the string to shoot in the dark at the upright in heart; 3 if the foundations are destroyed, what can the righteous do?” 4 The LORD is in his holy temple; the LORD’s throne is in heaven; his eyes see, his eyelids test the children of man. 5 The LORD tests the righteous, but his soul hates the wicked and the one who loves violence. 6 Let him rain coals on the wicked; fire and sulfur and a scorching wind shall be the portion of their cup. 7 For the LORD is righteous; he loves righteous deeds; the upright shall behold his face.

David was facing dark circumstances. He began by declaring that the Lord was His refuge. Whatever he was experiencing, it was enough that others thought his life must be in danger, and they urged him to run away. To hide. To retreat into temporary safety. Why? Because the foundations of life were destroyed.

For many of us, Jacob was part of our foundation - solid and steady, building our lives with him, through him, alongside him. He was a lionheart, a man that could never be reduced to words. How do you describe a man that started a French club in middle school without knowing any French? The president of a bike club that roved around Savannah in matching T-shirts? A man that once accepted a challenge against an opposing team's basketball cheerleaders, doing the most pitiful cartwheels across half-court before shimmying at them? A man that picked up a hitchhiker on Christmas Eve and bought him a fried chicken dinner from the Dodge Store? The president of a TimberSports team that practiced at Dolly Parton's Dixie Stampede, and he claimed he ate dinner with her every time he went? A man that claimed he was the best Sunday School Teacher of all time because he taught first-graders how to love Jesus and play Butts Up? A man that recently referred to himself as the redneck Elon Musk and the future mayor of Selmer? You didn't know Jacob; you experienced him.

And for those of us who had that blessed privilege, he was part of the foundation of our lives. And now it feels like that foundation is crumbling. And if that foundation crumbles, what can the righteous do?

Over the last couple of years, Jacob's faith had been growing a lot, and he couldn't speak highly enough about his church. He'd call about a Sunday school lesson or a devotional he'd read and just talk about what it meant to him. I wondered how Jacob would respond if I could ask him, "what should we do now?" And I think his answer would be remarkably similar to David's in this Psalm. Simply, two things: hope in a holy, sovereign God and hope in the future with Him.

1. Hope in God's Sovereignty

David's hope was not to escape, not to run away or hide from the reality of the darkness in the world. He looked to God in His holy temple. Though the world was chaotic around him, he could say as he did in Psalm 61, "**1 Hear my cry, O God, listen to my prayer; from the end of the earth I call to you when my heart is faint. Lead me to the rock that is higher than I, for you have been my refuge.**" David knew of God's strength, of his holiness, of his complete control over the world, and that led him to a place of comfort. It wasn't that his circumstances changed; it's that he remembered that his circumstances are controlled by a good and perfect and holy God. He is in His temple. He is on His throne, and the world is still holding together by His power.

It doesn't feel that way, and it might not for some time. Jacob had experienced much loss over the last year, yet he and Addie were given incredible children with another on the way. We talked about how the circle of life happens, how life is short, and how God has a plan for us all, a plan that is producing an eternal weight of glory. "Gosh, does it hurt when things happen," he said, yet God used these times to shape him and mold him. Jacob believed that. He believed that God was powerful, that He was in control, and that He could trust Him.

He saw it in his life, starting with Addie, whom he said he had to quickly marry before she came to her senses. He grew up fast over the last few years. He loved those boys so much, and he loved the one that was on the way and was already praying for him or her. Jacob loved his family dearly. He loved his mom; I remember him giving a homeless guy five dollars once. The man proceeded to talk about how great Jacob was, and he said, "I know; Angie tells me that all the time." He loved his dad and brother. We talked just a couple of weeks ago and he reiterated how much he cared about them.

And all of this, those 30 years that he lived, the people he knew and impacted, none of them were a surprise to God. God's sovereignty is why any of us can say, "I knew a man named Jacob, and I'm better for it." And somehow, knowing that God is still in control can lead us to a place of comfort.

Inevitably, we will all wonder why God didn't stop this, and that is a perfectly fair question. I think God welcomes it and is not afraid of us asking that. And while we are not going to get a spelled out answer, I do believe David has one comfort for us:

2. Hope in a Future with Him

The last line of this poem reads, “**the upright shall behold his face.**” Some translations read, “the righteous shall behold his face.” Who are the righteous? What does that word mean? We read elsewhere in scripture that there is none righteous. None of us are perfectly upright. Jacob also knew this. We talked yesterday about the time he stole a mouthpiece from Walmart before football practice, and his conscience bid him take it back and try to return it and pay for another one.

None of us are righteous, so how would we behold God’s face? And the answer to that is through God’s grace and mercy. Jacob knew this well, and he loved to talk about it. Through our sin, our choosing ourselves over God, we are separated from God. But rather than saying, “give them what they deserve,” God entered into humanity in the form of a man named Jesus. He did live a perfect life; he was the righteous one. And rather than allow us to remain separated from God, Jesus died in our place and raised to life three days later, paving the way for anyone that believes in Him to be reconciled back to God in perfect harmony, given new life to live with God. And one day, He’s going to return, and every broken thing will be unbroken, and every hurt will be undone, and a New Creation will come.

That’s mercy and grace. If you believe in Jesus and follow Him as your Lord, God has not given us what we deserve but instead given us new life. We cannot earn that; we simply believe in Christ and follow Him. I remember sitting in a booth at Jason’s Deli with Jacob back in college, and I can hear him clearly say, over our fifth free ice cream cone, “*Grace is hard for stubborn people like me.*” And over the years, he charted a journey of finding out just how profound God’s grace was for Him.

And this is where we draw comfort. We can be upset with God and question why something like this could happen. We may not know why God does things, but He knows how we feel and even more. I don’t understand why He would allow this suffering to occur, but in the Biblical story, I do take comfort in this: God suffers worse than anyone. He knows what this is like.

And He did that because He loved us. He did that because He loved Jacob. And through this wonderful news, Jacob is beholding God's face right now. We are grieving; it feels like our foundation has crumbled. Jacob is rejoicing, celebrating the perfect life and the Lamb of God that made it possible. And I think he would want you to know that same truth.

I loved Jacob so much for this. Too often, Christians come across as inauthentic or sterilized; that wasn't Jacob. He was real. He loved much and forgave much because he had experienced much forgiveness.

And for those of us here, if we know that same grace and mercy, we will see him again. Jacob was not an exceptionally patient person, and I can hear him now, whenever we meet him there, say, "What took y'all so long?" And Jacob's light will point us back to a perfect and holy God, who loved us and gave himself for us. And this momentary affliction will be in our background, and we will experience the total weight of glory together.

The foundation has crumbled, and we will do one of two things: run away and try to heal ourselves, and we might be able to heal a little bit. Or we can run to a Holy, loving God that is weeping with us, ready to undo all of this hurt, that will bear all these things with us, and who has gone to every length to make sure that this is not the end. Because in Christ, the worst things are not the ultimate things. And what we think are the last things are never the final things.

Jacob would probably be upset with me at this, but I've written a short poem about him. I can hear him saying, "Don't do that!" I'll close with it:

For Jacob

Walking in the woods at the last light of day
When the light is coming in sideways
through the pine branches
The wind blows and rustles the trees

And if you close your eyes you sense
All that has gone before you and all
That will come after

I open them to see you there at the edge of the thicket
Tall and proud with a fresh haircut
And in a moment that reflects a lifetime of knowing
And being known by the other
As if we were biological brothers
We have an entire conversation
With just our eyes and expressions

As the light fades and goes dark
And I stand there waiting to see you again
I'm reminded that some things can't be undone
And every life has an end
Like a pine tree freshly limbed
This is the way things are now
And I'm left missing my friend

To the earth I fall in utter despair
And everything is cold
Everything is bare
Will there ever be light again
Do I even care?
My tears are my only comfort
And deep down, I am mostly scared

Then a thump next to my head
A pine cone had fallen from a branch above

Where a redbird had lighted
I saw the bird, its thick feathers
As bright as Jesus' blood.
And the pine cone seeds
Spilled out and onto the ground

The ground where my tears watered them
And those seeds went deep into the earth
Just as Christ did for three days
And in the darkest moment
Of human history
Sweet Jesus burst forth
In total victory

I don't understand all of this
I'll never stop missing you
But those hopeless seeds shot up
Straight and narrow,
like an arrow to heaven
Where you are
I'll see you there one day, beside your savior.

And I'll worship Him with you.

Jacob texted his men's group recently with this verse, John 14:27, as the one that had most transformed his life: **Peace I leave with you; my peace I give to you. Not as the world gives do I give to you. Let not your hearts be troubled, neither let them be afraid.**

In the months and years ahead, grief will rear itself in many ways. And when it does, remember this verse. Before Jesus was about to be violently taken away, he

comforted His followers with a promise that He would send them a helper, His spirit, to navigate the inevitable challenges of life. And that same Spirit is with us today. May He guide and keep us.

God, no words are sufficient to ask for what we need. You tell us that the Holy Spirit intercedes for us with groaning, and that is all that we can offer to you. You tell us that you are true and righteous, and we have no other recourse but to hold you to that. We ask that you display that in ways we never knew possible, that the deepening of our faith would draw us nearer to the throne of grace.

And we thank you for the life of Jacob Riley Lunsford. 30 years you gave him to this earth, and that's 30 more than any of us deserved. We thank you that he was fearfully and wonderfully made. We thank you that he reflected your goodness, your heart for others, your desire to see others flourish. We pray for his family and friends and the incalculable sorrow they feel. Sustain them with your steadfast love and mercy, and in the sure and certain hope of resurrection, we look forward to seeing Jacob again. Amen.

