

## GOD'S REMEDY FOR SURVIVOR'S GUILT

For many, Memorial Day weekend signifies the **unofficial** “kick-off” to summer. **Seniors** are graduating from High School...many in **the workforce** have a 3-day weekend...and a number of families use this as their **first camping weekend** of the year.

To those with **military connections**, though—particularly those **who had loved ones die** while serving their country—this weekend is **not a time** of celebration. Regardless **of the honor bestowed** through the decorating of graves—or Memorial Day Services...or parades—their loved one is **still gone**—and nothing can change that painful reality!

Although **the loved ones** left behind don't suffer **physical** pain, the pain of a broken heart...and shattered dreams...and their world turned upside down can be **every bit as intense** as physical pain is.

The **loved ones left behind** aren't the only ones who suffer **emotional trauma from loss**, though. **Soldiers themselves**—on top of sometimes experiencing **physical** injuries—are often **deeply scarred emotionally** from what they experience during war.

My wife and I were reminded of that a couple of weeks ago while watching a movie called “Peace River.” I'll try to be vague enough to avoid being “a spoiler,” but the plot is about a boy and a girl who are each raised by their grandparents. They grow up in “cowboy country” and while in high school, the young man becomes the state champion **bull rider**, but the young woman falls short of being the state **barrel racing** champ.

After graduating high school, he joins the military, qualifies for Special Forces, and is deployed to Afghanistan after September 11, 2001. During a fire fight with the Taliban, everyone in his squad is killed—except him, of course. If that wasn't bad enough, he is convinced that **his actions** led to the death of his entire team!

He returns home not only **physically** hurt, but **emotionally crushed**—and haunted—by what is known as “Survivor's Guilt.” His godly grandfather prayed for him and tried several times to counsel him. I was so drawn into the movie that I found myself thinking about **how I would go about** trying to help someone who had gone through something similar.

So...as strange as that may sound, that is what I'm going to share with you this morning! ‘But Pastor, many of us have **already served** in the military—or are **too old to serve now**—and nothing like that happened to us! How can this possibly **be beneficial**—or relevant?’

Because hopefully we realize that “Survivor's Guilt” is not unique to the military! Boat sinkings...and car crashes...and earthquakes...and fires...and hurricanes...and shootings...and tornadoes can all take the life of **some**—and **leave** a lone survivor. My sister told me just this past week that 2 canoes went over a waterfall in MN and two people survived—but the other two didn't!

So because this is a real-life issue, we ought to believe that God's Word provides the answers as to how to **deal with**—and **heal from**—this kind of emotional trauma. I believe it does—and that is what we are going to look at this morning.

### 1. **Death—and life—are under the control of God**

#### A. The declaration of God's control over life and death

Please turn to Deut 32, beginning with vs 36. Moses was the human author; notice what he writes.

--In vs 37, the text switches from what **Moses says about God** to what **God Himself says!** God doesn't just make a declaration, though—**He asks** the people a question. What does God ask? Notice what it says in vss 37-38. In essence, God says: ‘Where are your gods? You sacrifice to them so they should be pleased with you. Not only that, they should “rise up and help you and be your protection.” They couldn't do that, of course, because they aren't God—and aren't **alive**...and aren't even **real!** Now vs 39. “See now that I, even I, am He, and there is no God **with** me...”

Does that mean no other gods **sit next** to the God of heaven?

--In a way, yes—because there are no other gods! **He alone is God** and He has no equal!

Although people **have** their “gods” (little “g”), false gods cannot help or protect anyone or anything.

--Vs 39 again: “...I kill, and I make alive; I wound, and I heal: neither is there any that can deliver out of my hand.” In the end of this verse, we see what we refer to as **the sovereignty of God**—God’s ability to do what He wants because **no one**—and nothing—can stop God from doing what He wants to do!

--In vs 40, we again have a confirmation that God is speaking. No one but God can make an oath to heaven and say, “I live forever.”

The main point, though, is in vs 39: God **takes life**—and God **gives life**. In other words, **God controls** the number of our days. He has an **appointment** date set—and He will ensure we **don’t miss** our appointment!

This is not the only place in the Bible where this declaration is made.

**Hannah** in her song of praise said in **I Samuel 2:6** “The Lord killeth, and maketh alive: He bringeth down to the grave, and bringeth up.”

**Job 7:1** “Is there not an **appointed time** to man upon earth? are not his days also like the days of an hireling?”

**Job 14:5** “Seeing his **days are determined**, the number of his months are with thee, thou **hast appointed his bounds** that he cannot pass;”

**Psalms 31:15** “My **times are in thy hand**: deliver me from the hand of mine enemies...”

#### B. We can’t keep ourselves alive

**Psalms 22:29** “...all they that go down to the dust shall bow before Him: and none can keep alive **his own soul**.”

**Psalms 89:48** “What man is he that liveth, and shall not see death? shall he deliver his soul [life] from the hand of the grave? Selah.” The answer, of course, is no! This current body will not live forever! It will see death—and we cannot avoid our appointment with the grave!

#### C. We can’t keep others alive

**Psalms 49:7-9** “None of them can by any means redeem his brother, nor give to God a ransom for him:

<sup>8</sup> (For the redemption of their soul is precious, and it ceaseth for ever:) <sup>9</sup> That **he should still live for ever**, and not see corruption.” Simply put, we can’t **buy from God additional days** for the life of a loved one!

So... to believe that it was “your fault” that someone died is **to deny that God** is in control of life and death!

But...there are a **couple of situations** that **test our thinking**—and **challenge our faith**—in this area.

1) One is **abortion**. Was it **God’s will** for that baby to be killed in that way? Obviously not!

--But...was it that **baby’s time**? I say, “no”—but that’s a tough one, isn’t it?

2) **Murder** is another. Please don’t misunderstand me; I very much believe **abortion is murder**. But I’m talking about one person going into the home of another person and killing them—or something like a drive-by shooting.

Although it’s been almost 6 years now, some of you might remember us praying for the **Charles Wesco family**. Charles and his wife Stephanie—along with their 8 children—were recently-appointed missionaries to the people of Cameroon. They had been there **for only two weeks** when the car that Charles was in—along with his wife, a son, another missionary, and the driver—were caught in cross-fire between security forces and separatist fighters. Charles was killed; **right next to**—and **witnessed by**—his wife and son!

Was it **God’s will** for Charles to die **in that way**? Was that **his time**? Would he have died on that **date and time** in a different way if he **had not been caught** in a shoot-out? And what about the **young missionary couple** killed in Haiti just a couple of days ago? Was it their “time”? Tough questions, aren’t they? How do I answer these things? I really don’t know **how to answer** except to say this: there is a **pre-determined** will of God where He brings to pass **what He has planned** and that happens—period!

But...there also seems to be a **permissive will of God** where He **allows certain things** to happen without stopping them—even when He could have. Why didn’t He stop Charles—and Davy and Natalie Lloyd—from being killed?

We **don't know!** We **do know this**, though: God's ways and thoughts are higher than ours, right? We may **not like that answer**—but it is really the only satisfactory answer! **Isaiah 55:8-9** “For my thoughts are not your thoughts, neither are your ways my ways, saith the Lord. <sup>9</sup>For as the heavens are higher than the earth, so are my ways higher than your ways, and my thoughts than your thoughts.”

How does someone recover from “survivor's guilt?” One truth to be reminded of is that God is in **control of life and death**—even though we may not understand the mystery behind it all.

A second truth to remember is this: **2. The decisions of our heart are known by God**

That truth should be an incredible encouragement to us. **God knows** if the decision made on the battlefield was to **intentionally bring about** the death of your team—or if it was an accident.

**God knows** whether you **intentionally** got into a car accident so you could kill your spouse—or child—or if it was an accident.

**And God knows** if you purposely shot your deer hunting partner—or if it was an accident.

We're not going to spend a lot of time on this one because most people agree with the truth that God is all-knowing—and part of His “all-knowing-ness” is that He knows our **motives and thoughts**.

**Psalms 94:11** “The Lord knoweth the thoughts of man, that they are vanity.”

**Psalms 139:2** “Thou knowest my downsitting and mine uprising, thou understandest my thought afar off.”

**Isaiah 66:18a** “For I know their works and their thoughts...”

**1 John 3:20** “For if our heart condemn us, God is greater than our heart, and knoweth all things.”

(See also 1 Samuel 16:7; Jeremiah 11:20; 17:10; Romans 8:27; Hebrews 4:12)

A third truth that can help deal with “survivor's guilt” is... **3. The declaration of God's everlasting love**

I'm sure **I'm not the only one** who remembers how **Elisabeth Elliot** used to open her devotional talks on the radio: “We are loved with an everlasting love—that's what the Bible says—and underneath are the everlasting arms.” That saying is based on **Jeremiah 31:3** “The Lord hath appeared of old unto me, saying, Yea, I have **loved thee with an everlasting love**: therefore with lovingkindness have I drawn thee.”

Please take your Bibles and let's turn now to Romans 8.

Notice **vs 35**. “Who shall separate us from the love of Christ? shall tribulation, or distress, or persecution, or famine, or nakedness, or peril, or sword?”

Two questions **are asked** in this verse, but no answers **are given**. Why? Because they are **rhetorical** questions—meaning the answers are implied! “**Who** shall separate us from the love of Christ?” **No one!**

Shall any of these bad things that could happen to us—listed here in this verse—separate us from the love of Christ? No! Seven times—one for each—no!

‘But **I don't feel loved** when I am being persecuted...or when I'm without food...or when my life is in danger.’ **Your feelings—and my feelings**—don't change **the fact** that God declares **nothing** shall separate us from the love of Christ!

Jump ahead to **Romans 8:38-39** “For I am persuaded, that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor principalities, nor powers, nor things present, nor things to come, <sup>39</sup>Nor height, nor depth, nor any other creature, **shall be able to separate us from the love of God**, which is in Christ Jesus our Lord.”

In vs 38-39, God through Paul **repeats** what He Himself said in vs 35.

What **separates** us from the love of God? Nothing! The **present thing** you are going through does not separate you from the love of God—and neither will a **future thing**—regardless of what it is!

And all God's people ought to say, “Amen!”

Not exactly a newsflash—but it is a truth we need to be reminded of often. Why?

Because **sometimes bad things happen to us**—or our loved ones—that cause us to **doubt** God's love. Or sometimes **we do bad things**—we make foolish, sinful choices—and we question whether or not God **can forgive us**—and whether or not **He still loves us**.

So how can a person—who innocently makes a decision that they feel leads to the death of another—cope with that guilt? First, understand the truth that God is in control of life and death—not us!

--Second, because the motives of our heart are known by God.

--Third, because God Himself declares to us that **nothing** shall separate us from His love!

Next, let's consider... **4. A demonstration of God's forgiveness**

--How do we truly know God forgives someone who is involved in the **accidental death** of another person?

--More importantly, **can** God—and **will** God—forgive someone who **intentionally takes** the life of someone else? Although we **don't have** Biblical examples of God forgiving a mother for aborting her child, we do have examples of God forgiving people who **intentionally** took the life of someone else.

One such example is Moses; notice on your outline **Exodus 2:11-12** "And it came to pass in those days, when Moses was grown, that he went out unto his brethren, and looked on their burdens: and he spied an Egyptian smiting an Hebrew, one of his brethren. <sup>12</sup> And he **looked this way and that way, and when he saw that there was no man**, he slew the Egyptian, and hid him in the sand."

--How do we know this was **intentional**? Pretty obvious, isn't it? You don't look "this way and that way"—to ensure no one is watching—if an "accident" is about to happen! But you do if you are about to **commit a crime!**

--**When did Moses** ask for forgiveness—and **when did God forgive** him? We don't know because **neither one** is recorded in the Bible! We do know this, though—Moses **knew all about forgiveness** because he asked God to **forgive the people** on multiple occasions.

We also know that generally speaking, God **does not use those** who have **unrepentant sin!** God doesn't **sweep sin** under the rug—and He doesn't forget about it. Sin **must** be dealt with; it must be confessed and forsaken. **Psalm 66:18** "If I regard iniquity in my heart, the Lord will not hear me:"

God unquestionably answered Moses' prayers numerous times.

God also **prospered Moses**. In other words, He helped him and blessed him. It is impossible to read the account of Moses' life without seeing a **special closeness between him and God**. And in the NT book of James, Moses is referred to as the friend of God. None of those things would be true if Moses had not repented.

**Proverbs 28:13** "He that covereth his sins **shall not prosper**: but whoso confesseth and forsaketh them shall have mercy."

The point that should be obvious is this: Moses **was not** a has-been...or a reject...or an outcast of God because he killed someone. He was forgiven by God...and blessed by God...and used by God.

Lastly, I want us to consider...**5. The depth of God's forgiveness and mercy**

How **deep** is God's forgiveness and mercy? It seems to me that when it comes to understanding God's forgiveness, people swing between **two extremes**.

--**One extreme** is the group that is **too proud** to sense their need for forgiveness. They are "not that bad" and consequently don't **see the need** of mercy from God.

--**The other extreme** is the group that wants the forgiveness of God—but doubts that God is **able and willing to give it!** They do not believe God **can forgive them** for what they have done and because of their doubt they live a life of despair and hopelessness.

--So how rich—how vast—is the forgiveness and mercy of God? Way more than we can adequately cover in one point of a sermon, so I'm just going to point out a small sampling of what God says.

**Exodus 34:6-7a** "And the Lord passed by before him [Moses], and proclaimed, The Lord, The Lord God, **merciful and gracious**, longsuffering, and abundant in goodness and truth, <sup>7</sup> **Keeping mercy** for thousands, **forgiving iniquity and transgression and sin...**"

Please take your Bibles and turn to Psalm 86. Notice what it says in vs 5: "For thou, Lord, art good, and **ready to forgive**; and **plenteous in mercy** unto all them that call upon thee."

**Who** is God ready to forgive? **Who** does God have plenty of mercy for? Those who **call upon Him**; those who sense their need—and look to Him to meet that need.

Now turn to Psalm 145:8-9. “The Lord is **gracious**, and **full of compassion**; slow to anger, and of **great mercy**.

<sup>9</sup> The Lord is good to all: and **His tender mercies** are over all his works.”

The Bible also says in Ephesians 2:4 that God is “rich in mercy.”

How great...and plenteous...and rich is God’s mercy? How compassionate and ready to forgive is He?

--He forgave Moses for intentionally killing a man

--He forgave David’s adultery with Bathsheba—and the incredibly evil plan David came up with to have Bathsheba’s husband killed so David could have her for himself!

--He forgave Peter of denying that he even knew Jesus

--He forgave the Apostle Paul’s involvement in the death of Christians

--He forgave the thief on the cross

And—based on those examples and what God says about the riches of His mercy—He can forgive you, too!

But **an awareness** of the riches of God’s forgiveness and mercy is not enough—we need to be a **partaker**—we need to be a **receiver**—of that mercy.

How? It’s pretty simple, really.

--We need to admit our sin to God and our desire to be forgiven by Him for that sin

--We need to ask Him to forgive us—and believe that He will based on His Word

--And we need to purpose in our heart to forsake that sin, counting on His help to do that

And **I John 1:9** promises us “If we confess our sins, He is faithful and just to forgive us our sins, and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness.”

*“Come ev’ry soul by sin oppressed, There’s mercy with the Lord;*

*And He will surely give you rest, by trusting in His Word.”*

*Only trust Him, only trust Him, Only trust Him now.*

*He will save you, He will save you, He will save you now.”*

So, what is it that God wants you **to do today**? I believe two things:

1. First, are you a child of God? Has there been a time in your life that you have come to God in humility and repentance and said something to the effect: “God, I know I am not worthy to dwell in the presence of a holy God. I need your mercy—I need forgiveness—and I’m putting my trust in your Son Jesus—and only in Jesus—to be the payment for my sins.” Have you ever done that? If not, that is what you need to do?

2. Second—if you are a child of God—we still need God’s daily forgiveness, don’t we? Sometimes we make some choices that make us feel God is done with us. Based on His Word, He is not done with you!

He is rich in mercy—and wants you back—and is waiting for you to come back.

Why not come back to Him today?