

NATIONAL COMMUNITY CHURCH

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The Valley of Heartbreak

Dr. Mark Batterson

In 1861, Charles Dickens published a novel titled 'Great Expectations'. One of the cast of characters is Miss Havisham her wedding day, which she hoped would be the best day of her life turns into the worst day of her life. At 8:40am she receives a letter that will leave her humiliated and heartbroken. As she is putting on her wedding dress, she discovers that her fiancé is not coming. Even worse, he feigned love to defraud her. Miss Havisham would wear that wedding dress, the rest of her life. She got stuck in a moment, and she couldn't get out of it. It's symbolized by the fact that all the clocks in her house would read 8:40 for the rest of her life. I wish that Miss Havisham was a figment of Charles Dickens imagination. You and I both know so many people are prisoners to one or two or three moments in their past they get stuck emotionally, spiritually, or relationally.

Last weekend, we celebrated Mother's Day, so full of joy, for so many moms, so full of pain for so many others. If you are unable to have children, grieving a miscarriage or maybe a broken relationship with a son or a daughter or a mother then you turn on the news and you see what happened to Ahmaud Arbery and it's not just the video for some of you, it's a flashback, it triggers these deep seated feelings of anger and fear and frustration as it should. What do we do with that kind of injustice? What do we do with those kinds of feelings?

This weekend, we venture into 'The Valley of Heartbreak', you'll find it in the book of Hosea. We're going to talk about everything from prosperity, to idolatry, to empathy. But, here's what I'm believing this weekend, God is going to heal some broken hearts. Some of you you're stuck in a moment, its 8:40 AM but God is going to wind the clock this weekend.

In psychology circles, the Miss Havisham effect refers to a painful longing for lost love. It's a father wound. It's a friend who betrays our trust. It's a romantic relationship that goes off the rails. That's what happens to Hosea. No easy way to say this so I'll just say it the way that Scripture says it half a dozen times. Hosea's, his wife plays the harlot. She sells herself to someone else. It breaks Hosea's heart, but God tells him to redeem her, to buy her back. It's a picture of Israel's unfaithfulness to God. It's a picture of God's relentless pursuit of his people. He is the God of second chances and third and fourth, and thousandth. God is not capable of giving up on you it is not in his nature. Listen, you can turn your back on God, His goodness and mercy will follow you all the days of your life. If you turn around you're going to see a heavenly father with his arms wide open.

Hosea chapter two, verse 14, *"Therefore I am now going to allure Israel; I'm going to woo her. I'm going to win her back, once again."* How? *"I will lead her into the wilderness and speak tenderly to her. I will make the Valley of Achor a door of hope. There she will respond as in the days of our youth, as in*

*the day that she came up out of Egypt.*" The Message says it this way, "I'm taking her back out where we had our first date. I will court her. I will give her bouquets of roses. I will turn Heartbreak Valley into Acres of Hope." That is a word for someone this weekend.

Let me set the scene. Hosea is one of 12 Minor Prophets. His ministry begins during the reign of King Jeroboam II. It is a time of economic prosperity but that prosperity leads to idolatry which results in captivity. It's a cycle that we see over and over again in the Old Testament, prosperity leads to idolatry, which leads to captivity. Fortunately, that doesn't happen anymore - we wish!

John Calvin said the human heart is a perpetual idle factory. If you're taking notes, you can jot this down if you're on at our online campus, you can check out the notes tab. An idol is anything you trust more than God, anything you value more than God, anything you desire, more than God. I think sometimes we read the Old Testament, and we make fun of these ancient people for their idols, those silly Assyrian, those silly Philistines, those silly Israelites. How could they worship the sun and moon and stars as we check out our horoscope? How could they bow down to golden calves or statues of bale, while we worship green pieces of paper with numbers on them? I think our idolatry may be more sophisticated, but it is no less silly and ultimately, it's our idolatry that leads to heartbreak. Why? Because we're putting our trust in something that cannot deliver.

The fourth century Saint Augustine of Hippo said it this way. "Our hearts are restless until they rest in thee." Blaise Pascal said, "There is a God shaped vacuum in the heart of each man which cannot be satisfied by any created thing but only by God the Creator made known through Jesus Christ." Can I tell you what I think is happening right now during this COVID-19 crisis? I think that God is shaking our false sense of security. God is shaking our false illusion of control. God is shaking our false narratives. God is shaking our false idols. And I think that's a good thing if we respond the right way.

Let me spin this cycle. The Torah says that "*the Lord delights in prospering his people*", Deuteronomy 30. And then the prophets echo what the law teaches. "*I know the plans I have for you, plans to prosper you*", Jeremiah 29. The psalmist says the same thing, "*No good thing will God withhold from you from those who walk up rightly before him.*" God's most ancient instinct is to bless us but here's the catch. God doesn't bless us to raise our standard of living God blesses us to raise our standard of giving. We are blessed to bless. This is the very heart of the Abrahamic covenant. And if we fail to flip the blessing, then that blessing backfires and actually becomes a curse.

Let me say this in no uncertain terms, the prosperity gospel is a false gospel. Anytime you add something to the gospel, you are actually subtracting from it. The problem with the prosperity gospel is this, God becomes the means to an alternate end in this instance, prosperity, and I think that's idolatry. And this is where I want you to dial in. Your greatest asset becomes your greatest liability, if you don't use it for God's purposes. Well, what does that mean?

Well, your greatest asset might be the balance in your bank account. It could be the degrees, you've earned, the titles, you hold, the clothes you wear, the car you drive, nothing wrong with any of those things. But there is a danger if you are not careful; you begin to trust the asset more than the God who gave it to you. And that's when we're in trouble. That's when assets become liabilities, that's when assets actually become idols. Why? Because now we're trusting in horses and chariots instead of the name of the Lord our God.

I said this last week, sometimes the hardest place to trust God is in an area of our expertise. Why? Because we think we have it all figured out because we think we have it under control. The problem with that is this. We begin to find our identity; we begin to find our security in the things that God has given to us instead of the God who gave them to us.

I hope you're picking up what I'm throwing down Hosea 5:13 says, 'When Ephraim saw his sickness, and when Judah saw his wound, then they turned to the Lord.' Now, if you're reading your Bible, that's probably not what it says because that isn't what happened. It says that they turned to the Assyrians. And what happened? Well, in 722 BC the Assyrians conquered the northern tribes of Israel and that completes this cycle - prosperity leads to idolatry, which leads to captivity.

Let me ask you a question. Is there an idol that you need to put on the altar this weekend? Would you coup d'etat, would you dethrone whatever idol is on the throne of your heart? And would you enthrone the Lord Jesus Christ this weekend?

Let me do a little bit of etymology right here. Now the Valley of Achor is mentioned long before we get to the book of Hosea, it goes all the way back to Joshua chapter seven. The Israelites had just won their first battle in the Promised Land the battle of Jericho. As such, everything is to be consecrated to God as a first fruits offering and so all of the plunder is dedicated to the treasury of the Lord. But a man named Aiken sees a beautiful robe from Babylon, and he's got to have it. And while he's at it, he takes 200 shekels of silver, a bar of gold weighing 50 shekels, and he buries them beneath his tent.

We think that sin is our issue. We think that it only affects us we think we have it under control. 36 Israelites lose their lives in the Battle of Ai because Aiken acted out of self interest. John Don said no man is an island unto himself. Make no mistake; your sin is someone else's burden to bear. Is there a sin buried beneath your tent that is undermining your integrity at work, your integrity at home? Whatever it is, it's not worth it. Listen; don't trade your integrity for pornography. Don't trade God's grace for a grudge. Don't trade God's blessing for a Babylonian brand robe. "What does it profit a man if he gains the whole world, but loses his soul?" So much heartbreak is because of the things that we bury beneath our tents.

Listen, God can't heal what you conceal. You've got to confess it, otherwise you will repress it. And I promise you it will resurface at the worst time in the worst way. Right now would you just get that thing back to God? That's how and when and where the Valley of Heartbreak turns into a door of hope.

Now, let me give you some good news. We do not have a high priest who is unable to sympathize with our weaknesses. Why? He was tempted and tried, just like we are. The Incarnation spells empathy. Maybe you've wandered away; maybe you buried something underneath your tent. Listen, God is doing everything within his power to win you back. And He is the God of second chances. But would you give God a second chance? Listen, God hasn't given up on you, don't give up on God.

If that's you this weekend, if you want to give God a second chance, if you want to take step of faith into a relationship with Christ, you'll see a little button would you just raise your hand right now we want to pray for you. We want to give you some resources to take that next step in your spiritual journey.

We've walked through quite a few valleys during this series. If you want to get out of the Valley of Crisis, you've got to pray your way in and worship your way out. If you want to survive the Valley of Giants, do you remember this? You have to take a jump shot with your slingshot. The good news your brave is someone else's breakthrough. Last weekend, Valley of Dry Bones, listen, at some point you've got to stop talking to God about your mountain and start talking to your mountain about God. You have to prophesy the praises of God. And if you want to get out of the Valley of Heartbreak, you've got to own the past so that the past doesn't own you. You've got to put that idol on the altar. You've got to let God love you and help you and heal you. Would you do that this weekend?

In his inaugural address the very first sermon that Jesus preached, he said this, *"The Spirit of the Lord is upon me because he has anointed me to preach good news to the poor, to heal the brokenhearted and to set the captives free."* If that's you this weekend listen, I'm believing that God is going to do a healing work in your heart.

Let me switch gears. It was a week ago Wednesday, and I heard the news about Ahmaud Arbery, heartbreaking news. On February 23 Ahmaud was jogging through his Georgia neighborhood when he was shot and killed by two white men. Ahmaud would have been 26 a week ago Friday. Thousands of people, myself included, ran 2.23 miles to honor his life and to grieve with his family. I wish Ahmaud Arbery was an isolated incident. He is not. There are far too many names to fill in that blank, Trayvon Martin, Michael Brown, Philando Castillo most recently Breonna Taylor. When we find ourselves in a valley of heartbreak, there are no easy answers, but we have no other option. We have got to take steps of faith, steps of humility, steps of courage and we've got to believe that God will turn it into a giant leap of love.

I want to share a couple of thoughts..

1 - We listen

2 - We lament

3 - We leverage.

One of my concerns for our country is that we are getting more and more divided. Now there are lots of reasons for that. But I believe that one of them is that there are so many echo chambers. I think so many of us only listen to what we want to hear or what we already know or who we already agree with. That is a recipe for racism, for relativism, for a dozen other isms. Now, listen, you don't have to agree with what everybody thinks but you at least need to try to understand. That's at the heart of what the Incarnation is all about. And when I say listen, I don't mean formulate an argument against that person's opinion while they're talking. I mean, leaning in and listening and when they're done saying, "Tell me more".

When I heard the news about Ahmaud, one of the first things I did was call some of my friends, call some of our staff and I wanted to lean in and listen. And part of that is I have never gone jogging and feared for my safety because of the color of my skin and so I don't know what that feels like. And so I need to listen and as others process and help me process what is happening.

Francis Schafer, one of the great philosophers and theologians of the 20th century, was once asked what he would say if he had 10 minutes to share the Gospel. I love his answer. Francis Schaffer said that he would listen for nine minutes and talk for one minute. There is a lesson to be learned. There is an example, to follow. Would you get on the phone with someone this week? Just have a 10 minute conversation and see if you can't listen for nine of those minutes. You know what maybe with someone who doesn't look like you, maybe with someone who doesn't vote like you, maybe with someone who doesn't even believe, like you and you can talk about whatever. You talk about the COVID crisis, you can talk about Ahmaud Arbery, you can talk about the Last Dance, and who is the greatest basketball player of all time, as long as it's Michael Jordan. You can talk about anything, but listen for nine minutes. Now if it gets weird, you can blame it on me and tell them your pastor told you to do it. We need to get better at listening. Leading is listening. May God give us ears to hear one another and may the Holy Spirit this still small voice of the Holy Spirit be the loudest voice in our lives,

So one we listen. Two, we lament, when Job experiences his heartbreaking loss in a single day, his friends come and sit with him for seven days and seven nights, and they don't say anything. Now, as long as they kept their mouth shut, they did pretty good. Of course, they eventually open their mouths and insert their feet. But this is a practice called 'Sitting Shiva'. It's the way that the Jewish people would mourn for those who mourn. They would just sit in silence and be in each other's presence.

Can I be honest? Sometimes I don't say anything, because I'm afraid of saying the wrong thing. Would you forgive me for that? There is a sin of silence. And I believe that this is a moment where we have to

use the prophetic voice that God has given us to speak faith and hope and love. And it starts with a prophetic ear that really listens to the people around us and it has an ear tuned to the Holy Spirit.

On what would have been Ahmaud 26th birthday, National Community Church hosted a zoom call, where for an hour we just lamented with and for one another. We prayed together, we worship together but I think for me the most powerful moments, we're just sitting in silence together for a few minutes. Let me make a confession. One of my strengths is positivity in case you haven't figured that out yet. But I think what that means is that I have a hard time sitting with maybe what would be called negative emotions, but I don't know that they're really negative if we steward them the right way. I have a hard time sitting with anger or grief or sadness. And then I read a book last year, and it's a book I would recommend 'Emotionally Healthy Spirituality' by Peter Scazzero. That book helped me deal with some of the heartbreak in my own life that I hadn't dealt with. He says this, "Allow yourself to experience the full weight of your feelings, allow them without censoring them." And because I'm not good at it, I actually needed a counselor to help me sit with some of those feelings. I think lament is feeling the full weight of our emotions. I want to be clear about this I think we need to 'Sit Shiva'. But I also think that Godly sorrow in First Corinthians is something that leads to repentance, but it leaves no regret. This isn't about paying God back by feeling bad. This is about feeling the full weight and then leaving it at the foot of the cross. And we'll do that in a few minutes as we celebrate communion together.

Aristotle said anyone can become angry, that is easy, but to be angry with the right person to the right degree at the right time for the right purpose in the right way that is not easy. No, it's not. How do we steward the anger that we feel? Well, we don't just listen. We don't just lament, we've got to leverage those emotions. Daniel Goleman is the author of 'Emotional Intelligence'. And he talks about three kinds of empathy. Cognitive empathy is the ability to see through other people's eyes. I think that happens when we genuinely listen. Emotional empathy is feeling what others feel. And I think that happens when we lament. But there's a third kind of lament, its compassionate empathy. It goes beyond feeling and it becomes action.

On April 16, 1963, Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. was in jail. It was a Good Friday, and he was actually criticized by white clergy because of the timing of his actions. Dr. King would write a letter from a Birmingham jail. It is a modern day epistle. If you haven't read it, you need to; in fact, you need to read it again. In that letter, he said this, "We are now faced with the fact that tomorrow is today. We are confronted with the fierce urgency of now. In this unfolding conundrum of life there is such a thing as being too late. For such a time as this for such a place as this, this is our moment as a church to step up to step in. May this be a house of prayer, may this be a house of healing. May this be a house of reconciliation for all people. In Jesus name, amen.