

BELPRES CHURCH

Sermon: NECESSARY LOSSES

Dr. Scott Dudley

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Well, thank you for joining us. If you are just now joining us, as we said earlier, the reason I'm preaching from the lobby is we're trying some different things to work in this new medium that we are worshiping in. Out here allows us to use a better camera. It also allows me to talk to a camera that is close and is not way at the back of the room. All of which should make this a little more engaging as you are participating on worship with screens, wherever you are. So thank you for joining us.

Many of you know our young adults director, Gabe, and here's a picture of Gabe. What is one of the first things you notice about Gabe? The beard, right? Like it's epic. So two Sundays ago, I got home from preaching on Mother's Day, which was kind of a hard day for me. My mom had just died two weeks earlier and it was Mother's Day, and it was also my birthday. Whenever that combo happened, that was always a cool thing for my mom and for me, and so it's a hard day. I was feeling down. So I got home from preaching that day and Gabe texted me this picture. I looked at it, I was like, "Who is that?" I was like, "It's Gabe." He shaved his beard in honor of my mom on Mother's Day. That is a big deal, like to lose something so iconic, this has been part of you for such a long time. The reason he did it, he said, because I was suffering a loss of my mom, he wanted to join me in a loss of his own. I felt so loved. I felt so cared for. His loss pastored me in my loss.

Let me ask a question. It might even be an obvious question. Are any of you feeling any losses these days? Like maybe everything, right? Like high school seniors who don't get prom, they don't get graduation; folks losing jobs; the ability to hang out with your friends. Now, as we've been saying in this sermon series, some of those losses are good. Some of you have lost your busy-ness. That's a good thing. Here at church, it's been 10 weeks since I've gotten an email complaining that the music is too loud, so we found the perfect volume for everyone. The loss of those emails, that's a good thing. But honestly, mostly losses are just painful. Aren't they? Losses just hurt, and there's a lot of loss going on right now. People are losing their lives to COVID. People losing businesses they spent their whole life building. Those are tragic losses, and we need to pray for them to return because those are good things, and there are good things to want and there are good things to be a part of.

So if you're feeling sad, if you're feeling angry, if you're feeling confused, that is completely understandable. I got all kinds of grief right now for all kinds of losses that I'm experiencing. It is good and right to mourn those losses. But it's also true, it's also true that God can use our losses to make us braver, more joyful, less anxious people who make a real difference in the world. Some of the things we're

losing, not all, not all, but some of the things we're losing may be necessary losses for us to grow. We see that in a story in the Old Testament in Judges Chapter Six and Seven about a guy named Gideon. The background of Gideon's story is for seven years, Israel has been oppressed by a group of people called the Midianites, who rush in and take all of their crops every year so Israel has no food. So a lot of loss that they're experiencing. They cry out to God and He responds. This is what it says: "The angel of the Lord came and sat down under the oak in Ophrah," not Oprah, that's different, "Ophrah where Gideon was threshing wheat in a wine press to keep it from the Midianites." So you kind of got to picture this scene, because it's a little bit comic, right? The way you thresh wheat back then was you'd throw the wheat way up high in the air, the wind would blow away the chaff and the wheat would fall on the ground. But Gideon is threshing in a wine press, which is a hole in the ground with a cover over it. So you got a picture, there he is crouched down in fear, in a hole, hoping the Midianites don't find him. The angel of the Lord shows up and says, "The Lord is with you, mighty warrior." Say what? Like, what? Mighty warrior? Not so much mighty warrior. In fact, Gideon even says, "Pardon me, my Lord." Like, he's looking around, like, "I don't see a mighty warrior here. Where's ... No mighty warriors here." Then he says, "If the Lord is with us, why has all this happened to us? Where are all His wonders that our ancestors told us about when they said, 'Didn't the Lord bring us up out of Egypt?'"

Have you ever asked a question like that: "God, where are you? Can't you see God that I'm losing my job, my friends, my health, my chances to go to college? If you're so powerful, where are you God?" God answers that by the way He works in our lives and how He uses us, which we're going to see in this story. So verse 14, "The Lord turned to him and said, 'Go in the strength you have and save Israel out of Midian's hand.'" I mean, you can see Gideon is like, "What strength? What strength do I have? What strengths are we talking about?" He says, "How can I save Israel? My clan is the weakest in Manasseh and I am the least in my family."

So he's insecure about his social standing. Israel, there were 12 tribes in Israel, and Manasseh was not one of the cooler tribes like Judah. Judah was one of the cool tribes. Judah is super cool tribe. Not so much Manasseh. On top of that, Gideon is a youngest son in a system that privileges the older son. So he's saying, "I'm not cool. I'm not wealthy. I'm not strong. I'm not popular." "I don't live in New York. I live in North Dakota. What strengths do I have? What can I do? God, I can't talk about my faith with my friends at school or colleagues at work. I can't do that. What strengths do I have? They may ask a question that I don't know the answer to. Shouldn't the pastor do that? God, I can't stand up to my friends or my boss when they're doing something wrong. I can't go against the crowd. I'll end up all alone, living in a trailer by the river in Toppenish. No, too much loss. Can't do it God."

But then God says, "I will be with you, and you will strike down all the Midianites leaving none alive." So right here is one of the reasons that some losses, not all, but some of our losses are necessary because what you don't have often reveals what you do have. So Gideon doesn't have credentials. That's what he doesn't have. But he does have God who says, "I am with you; and Gideon, I don't call the qualified, I qualify the called." See, if we look inside of ourselves for our sense of adequacy, we will always toggle between two extremes, arrogance on the one side or insecurity on the other. But if our confidence comes from what God can do inside of us, if our confidence is in Him, then we're going to be braver because it's not based on us, it's based on God. We so often lean on our money, our education, our reputation to solve problems and to get things done, and those are good things, but they are also dangerous things. Because they've worked for us in the past, and so we keep going back to them and we rely on those things and not God. What that does over time is that shrinks our vision down to what we can accomplish in our own strength rather than what God can do in His strength.

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I've shared it with you before that when I was a little kid, I had this fascination with U.S. presidents. I had everything president: books and everything, little toys. I had action figure presidents. It was amazing. I had pictures of all the presidents at the top of my wall all the way around my room, sort of presidential crown molding, right? In the day, that was just fine, but then at night, sometimes, all those presidential eyes staring down at me would creep me out sometimes, especially William McKinley; super terrifying William McKinley. So when that happened, I would pray, "Oh God, please protect me from Pres. McKinley. Amen." Then I'd put the pillow over my head to help God out to answer my prayer, because after all, God helps those who help themselves, right? Wrong. God does not help those who help themselves mostly because they don't think they need His help. They think they are sufficient to the task without God. Instead, God helps those who know they need His help and have the guts to admit it.

Now, we're still involved in the process. God, the fact that God is working through us doesn't mean we just sit back and let God do everything. No, no, no. We're still part of it. But if we know that it's God who is empowering us, we will have God-sized vision and God-sized courage. Gideon is terrified because he's only thinking about what he can do in his strength. God is going to make him brave by showing what he can do with God's strength. This COVID thing has shown us that our strength is pretty limited. For all of our technology, for everything that we know, one tiny little strand of RNA has brought the world completely to its knees.

So one of my prayers is, "God, can you use these losses? Can you use the sense of inadequacy that we're all feeling? Can you use this sense of powerlessness that we're all feeling? Can you use that so that in new normal, when we go back to that, God, we will lean on you and moving your power and lessen our own power?" which brings me to another reason why some, not all, but some of our losses are necessary because they show that God is bigger. See, we don't have to pretend that the loss doesn't hurt. It hurts. We don't have to pretend that the loss isn't big. It's big. We just need to acknowledge that God is bigger. A significant relationship is a mess. That's big. But God says, "I'm bigger." The doctor gives you bad news. That's big. But God says, "I'm bigger." There's a global pandemic and economic disruption. That is big. That is the biggest thing in my lifetime. But God says, "I am bigger still." That's what Gideon is discovering as this story goes on.

So as the story moves on, Gideon asked for a bunch of signs from God so that to prove that God is God and all of that. That's a whole different sermon. Not going to talk about that. But after all the signs, before God sends Gideon to defeat the Midianites, He gives him a warm up exercise. God says to Gideon, "Tear down your father's altar to Baal and cut down the Asherah pole beside it. So Baal and Asherah, those were two false gods that the Israelites worship, Bible calls those idol, and God wants those idols cut down and Gideon obeys but the text says, "Because he was afraid of his family and the townspeople, he did it at night rather than in the daytime." Mighty warrior that he is, right? "I hope nobody sees me doing this." Sure enough, though, the next day townspeople are furious because they've lost their idols, which is another reason some losses are necessary. Because sometimes that loss you feel is the sound of your idols dying. Not always. Some of the things we lose are good and we should hope that they return and pray for their return, but other times the loss you feel is the sound of your idols dying.

What is it that makes life okay for you? What is it that helps you relieve anxiety or fear or loneliness? What lost is it that makes life electric for you? Those are substitute gods. Those are idols. One of the things that God is doing in my life right now through this COVID thing, and maybe one of the things He's doing in your life is He is stripping away my idols, which is a loss, but it's a necessary loss. If we cooperate, God's going to separate out the good things, the things that we want that are good and that we should hope will return, He's going to separate those out from the idols that we should let stay dead.

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So let me give you a for instance. For instance, I am not loving this whole talk to an empty room and a camera thing in preaching. This is not why I got into ministry at all. I miss you, guys. I like preaching to people. I know you're there, but I like to see your faces. I miss you. You're an awe-some church. I love you. I wish you were here. To be honest, this is a deeply painful loss for me. In this season right now, this is right up there with losing my mom, is not being with you guys. Like it is deeply painful to me. That is a good thing. That is not an idol. That is a God thing, to long to be with my flock and my community. That's a good thing and I'm praying for the ability to do that again.

However, however, there's also maybe some idolatry mixed in there. Possibly, probably, maybe even certainly? So I am praying a lot through this loss of all of you, being able to see all of you. I'm praying to this loss, thinking, "God, is some of this grief I feel, is it idolatry. Do I just need the immediate feedback in preaching? Do I need to hear them laugh, which is kind of hit or miss anyway so maybe that's not a loss? But is there ego? Do I just need ...? God if there is, if there is, would you tear down that idol?" So how do we figure it out then? How do we figure out what's good and what we should long for and hope for and pray for, and how do we figure out what loss is an idol?

Well, scripture defines that for us. Other people can help us figure that out. But, really, the most important thing is prayer. Prayer. So just keep praying, "God, use these losses to separate out the good things that I've lost that I want to come back, and they're good, and I should want them to come back from the idols that I've lost, that I should let stay dead." Because they're intertwined, right? It's not like all the good stuff's over here and all the bad stuff's over here. They're inter-twined. It's like a tumor that's wrapped around healthy tissue and we need to ask the Holy Spirit to do some surgery and remove the idolatries while preserving the healthy tissue.

I think that this is probably one of the most important spiritual tasks we have in this COVID season. "Lord, cut away my idols." I want you to notice, I want you to notice, Gideon tears down the idols at night because he's afraid, he's half-hearted, he's reluctant, which means you don't even have to do this perfectly. You may be giving up your idols reluctantly. Usually, that's how we give them up, reluctantly, but God doesn't chastise Gideon. He says, "I can work with you, Gideon, even if you are reluctant." You don't have to hit a home run on this thing. You just need to be in the ballpark of asking, "God, use these losses to tear down my idols." The baseball metaphor maybe makes you miss baseball like I do, I don't know. Maybe that's an idol. Pray about it.

Okay, so once Gideon is warmed up by tearing down the idols, he calls together an army of 32,000 people to go defeat the Midianites. Then God does something that makes no sense at all. The text says, "The Lord said to Gideon, you have too many men. I cannot deliver Midian into their hands or Israel would boast my own strength has saved me." This is like God saying, "Your grades are too high to get into college, I need you to get a D." Like, it makes no sense at all, but here's the other cool thing about losses: When God wants to give us courage, He reduces our resources. You heard me right. To give us courage, God will often reduce our resources, not increase them, so that we see what He can do through us, not what we can do on our own, in our own strength. So God says to Gideon, "Announce that anyone who trembles with fear may turn back and leave." So 22,000 men left while 10,000 men remained.

I love that: "If you're afraid, you can go home." "Oh. Well, since you say so," run away. Almost the entire army, right? Then God says, "The army is still too big," so He comes up with the weirdest test ever. He says, "Take them down to the river and separate those who lap the water with their tongues as a dog laps from those who kneel down to drink." 300 of them drank from cupped hands, lapping like dogs; the rest got down on their knees to drink. The Lord said to Gideon, "With the 300 men that lapped like dogs,

I will give the Midianites into your hands. Let all the others go home." Okay, weirdest test ever, right? Like, Gideon, so all Gideon ends up with, out of 32,000, he ends up with just 300 dog drinkers to go up against a whole entire nation. Makes no sense at all. It's a loss. It's the loss of most of his army, but it's a necessary loss because it's going to show every-one what God can do through us, which helps us trust Him more than next time when we see what He can do through us, helps us trust Him more than next time, which makes us braver.

So then the text says, "Dividing the 300 men into three companies, Gideon placed trumpets and empty jars in the hands of all of them with torches inside." Okay, again, this makes no sense. Candles in jars, like basically glassy babies. Like this is the pottery barn strategy of battle. We are going to attack them with our glassy babies. They can take our lives, but they cannot take our glassy babies. Then Gideon tells them, "Okay, on cue, I want you to smash the jars and blow the trumpets," which all 300 of them do.

Okay, so here's what's going on. Here's what you got to understand. In battle, you need your hands free to use the weapons. So in an army back then, only a few people would have torches and only a few people would have trumpets. So when the Midianites saw 300 trumpets and torches, they assumed that the army must be huge, they freak out, they get confused, they start killing each other. Gideon wins the entire battle without lifting a single finger. Because, see, sometimes our losses show us that what you don't have is your most powerful asset. Sometimes what you don't have is the best thing you've got because, see, Gideon didn't have a huge army, which forced him to a creative strategy. If you had a huge army, he probably just would have fought a huge battle and there would have been a ton of casualties for his men. It's what he didn't have that led him to the winning strategy.

Sometimes what you don't have is your greatest asset. For instance, when someone sees that you don't have it all together, like your grades aren't perfect and your house is a mess, and you're not always the best parent, when they see that, what you don't have often makes other people feel comfortable to finally open up and let people know that they don't have it all together either, which builds community and creates mutual support, which is a good thing. It's when you lose one job, but God guides you to a better job that you never would have found had you not lost the first job.

One of the most significant spiritual moments for me, a real kind of aha moment was back in my former church one Sunday when I had preached. We had a guest singer there who, years before, one night had fallen out of bed randomly and became a quadriplegic from falling out of bed. I mean talk about loss, right? Random, senseless, meaningless loss. She went through a period of depression and anger because I mean, who wouldn't right? But eventually she came out of it and she started a singing career. I was talking to her this Sunday and she said, "Scott, do you want to know what the best thing is about being quadriplegic?" I said, "I can't imagine that there's anything good about being quadriplegic." She said, "Well, here's what it is. I'm really not that great of a singer and I'm not super smart. Prior to this, I was kind of a shallow party girl, but being quadriplegic, people listened to me. They have to. When I say that God is good, they have to listen to me. They don't believe it when you say it, Scott. You're just the preacher. Nobody listens to the preacher. But because I'm in this chair, when I say that God is good, they have to believe that God is good."

Now, let's be clear. It is good and right for her to grieve the loss of so many things, devastating, tragic loss. I don't think you ever get over a loss like that. It is good and right for her to long to be restored to full mobility either in this life or in the life to come, but it's also true that what she doesn't have is her greatest asset.

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Got an email a while back from a woman at our church who I will call, Julie, since that's her name and I have her permission. Julie said that in her senior year in high school, she took one of those career inventory tests, like to tell you what career you're supposed to have. She loves those test. She said, "I remember the thrill of opening up the results, being prepared to find out my life's destination." She said, "But the thrill quickly vanished when I saw that the career that fit me best was clown." Can you imagine? Like, can you imagine? Like, "Oh, I'm going to be a doctor. I'm going to be a ... Clown? What do you mean clown?" She said, "I just felt like I was so much more important than a clown." She said that her best friends and she, they were all going to prestigious universities. She said, "How can I be destined to just be a clown?" That's a loss, right? Loss of who you think you are, loss of a little bit of pride.

Well, fast forward 10 years, and she was married and on a BelPres mission trip to Guatemala in a village called Parramos. She and her husband were there to help out with a team of doctors and nurses who were there to help people who need it. The line was really long of people wanting to see the doctors and the nurses, super long. Julie said, "I remember angrily wishing that I had something to offer, and I remember thinking, 'If only I was a doctor or a nurse, then God could really use me here.'" So another loss of feeling useful, a loss of feeling needed. She said, "But then is when it happened." She said, "Someone handed me a clown costume and encouraged me to entertain the children."

This 28-year-old from Bellevue transformed into a clown. "And with a silly whistle and with my clown costume and some face paints and balloons, the circle grew around me as I spent the after-noon pantomiming and dancing with kids of all ages laughing until it hurt, and I realized I did have something to offer. God could use me to brighten the lives of kids who had very little to smile about." She said as the week went on, they went to other places. They visited a hospital, visited another village where BelPres, where we had built some homes for families. She said, "I just kept the clown costume and found that the clown allowed me to make connections with people through laughter even though we spoke different languages." Julie said, when she got home, she took a picture of that day where she ... first day that she was a clown and blew it up and made a poster out of it and hung it in her house to remind her that God can use her even in surprising ways.

Well, fast forward another 20 years to now, to this year. She says, "I'm still not a clown by trade, but this year on Career Day 2019, I proudly pulled out my clown costume and shared this story with my students." She said, "And I met Carlos, who was a new student that, that very day had come from Guatemala, and he was a new student that very day. His eyes lit up because Carlos was from Parramos, the same village where I learned that God could use me to bring joy into the world." Julie said, "We shared stories of the village of Parramos." She said, "The next day in our math class, Carlos brought me photos of Parramos, and I showed him some of my photos." She said, "When I was 18, this career path wasn't enough for me. But I learned that God can use me, not as a doctor, not as a nurse, but God can use me as a clown and He is using me still."

So in high school, she felt lost to be told that she her life's destiny was clown. That was a loss for her. On the mission trip, she had a sense of loss, like not feeling useful, not being able to help. But what she didn't have, the impressive sounding job that she wanted in high school or the ability to help the doctors and nurses on the mission trip, what she didn't have opened her up to what she did have: the gift of bringing laughter and the gift of bringing joy. She saw what God could do through her was so much greater than what she could do on her own. The losses were necessary for her to be her true self, and what she didn't have was actually her greatest asset.

So this week, BelPres, this week, cooperate with God as He uses losses in your life to transform you and to transform me. Be praying constantly, "Lord, show me which of these things I'm longing for that I've lost

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are good things that I should want to come back and which are idols that I need to let stay dead," and trust that some of your losses right now are hard, but they are necessary losses to help you grow, because here's the thing: You see today, but God sees tomorrow. You see the moment, but God sees eternity. You see sickness, but God sees the healing to come. You see loss, God sees found. You see no hope, but God sees the victory that is just on the horizon. God says, "I am with you and I will redeem these losses and I will use what you don't have to give you more than you ever could have imagined."

So Jesus, thank you that, that is true. As we go, all of us, through a season of loss, Lord, help us to hear from you what things are good things that we miss that we should hope come back and what are the losses that are idols that need to stay dead. Lord, we bring you our loss. We bring you our grief. We bring you our pain. We know that you are the one who can transform all of those things. Lord, thank you that you are with us. Thank you that you will redeem this time, and thank you that you are using this to make us more like you. We pray this in your name, Jesus. Amen.

Discussion Questions: Read Judges 6 and 7

1. How would you describe Gideon? What changes do you see in him from chapter 6 through 7?
2. What words would you use to describe God's response to Gideon throughout this story? What does it tell us about God? What does it tell us about us?
3. Why do you think God whittled Gideon's army down to 300? How would you have felt? What were the results?
4. What part of Gideon's story resonates with you and why?