Proverbs 25:20; 1 Peter 2:24 *Christianisms: Time Heals All Wounds*

***Iron Mike***Mike Ditka is a man’s man. A Hall of Fame football player, he was the 1961 Rookie of the Year and won a championship with the Chicago Bears in 1963. Five times he made the pro-bowl and five times he was chosen as the NFL’s first team All-Pro tight end. When his playing days were over he moved into coaching, eventually becoming the hard-nosed head coach of the Monsters of the Midway.

He coached the Bears for 11 years, living up to his nickname of “Iron Mike” with a blunt style of speaking to the press and a fiery demeanor on the sideline. He won the championship in 1985 with the “Super-Bowl shuffling” team of Walter Payton, Jim McMahon, Mike Singletary, and William “the Refrigerator” Perry.

With a blue-collar personality, Ditka was beloved in Chicago. He inspired a recurring **Saturday Night Live** sketch in which portly men with broombrush mustaches would sit around a Chicago sports bar and extol the virtues of “da Bears!”

Like I said, he was a man’s man. And for many, he symbolized old school football, where the game was a miniature version of war with men playing through injuries and engaging in personal combat play after play. Mike Ditka was tough.

But on January 5, 1993, after the Bears had finished a disappointing 5 and 11, Mike Ditka was fired. And as he stepped to the podium at the press conference where his termination was announced, **Iron Mike Ditka was visibly upset**. With tears in his eyes and a shaking voice, he said: "I'll try to do this with class. Scripture tells you that all things shall pass. This, too, shall pass."

Suddenly, sportswriters from all over Chicago were scrambling for their Bibles, searching their concordances so they could accurately quote the Bible verse Ditka was citing. But the thing was, nobody could find it, because the phrase “This, too, shall pass” is not in the Bible.

***Looking For Something To Say***Let’s consider another scenario, one I suppose we have all found ourselves in: Let’s say that you are talking to someone who has just experienced grief. Maybe it is someone like Coach Ditka, who has unexpectedly lost a job. Maybe it is someone who has just had a relationship end: a break-up, or a divorce, or trouble with a child. Or maybe it is someone who has just experienced the passing of a loved one: a parent has died, or a spouse, or a child.

Whatever the case, this person you are talking with is obviously distraught. The grief is heavy, the sadness is evident. And you want to be of some comfort. You want to say something that will lighten the load and ease the sorrow.

But you don’t know what to say… All your words seem clumsy... Nothing seems good enough. Your friend keeps saying things like “I don’t know if I will ever get over this” or “I don’t see how I can go on.”

You want to be helpful, so finally, you lean in and you give a half-hug and you say something like:

* “Just give it time…”
* or “Things will get easier…”
* or, even like Coach Ditka, you say: “There, there. This too shall pass.”

***Singing Songs to a Heavy Heart***Today is our second week in a series of sermons I am calling **“Christianisms.”** The sub-title for the series explains what we are doing: “Things that we think are in Bible, but are not.” My goal is to look at some phrases and proverbs that we tend to say quite often, especially within Christian circles; so much so that we assume they must be scriptural. They are ideas and ways of looking at the world that we have heard repeated so many times that we just accept them as truth.

These phrases are clichés. They are phrases that are so overused that we stop thinking critically about them. To quote a Rich Mullins song, my hope is that we will not make “cheap clichés out of timeless truths.”

And this week, I want to consider a whole range of clichés that we tend to use when we don’t know what else to say. In the scenario I described earlier, with a friend dealing with grief, we have a tendency to start talking about the passage of time. “This too shall pass,” we say. “Give it time, things will get easier.” Or this one, which I’ll let stand for the whole idea: **“Time heals all wounds.”**

The assumption seems to be that if you skin your knee, eventually it gets better. Give it enough time, and eventually your knee will scab over and then new skin will appear and after so long—maybe three weeks or so—you won’t feel it anymore. In the same way, supposedly, if you have a broken heart, just give it time, and eventually it will get better.

It’s almost like a **mathematical formula**: wound, multiplied by time, equals healing. Theoretically, you can even alter the formula**: the deeper the wound (y), the more time will be necessary (x), in order to achieve** healing. But the idea is still the same: given enough time, all wounds will eventually be healed.

It’s a nice enough thought. And, in its own way, I suppose it gives a measure of hope. But, just to be clear: “Time heals all wounds” is not in the Bible. Neither is “This, too, shall pass.” And ultimately, I think phrases like this do more harm than good.

**Proverbs 25:20** says this:

**20**Like one who takes away a garment on a cold day,
    or like vinegar poured on a wound,
    is one who sings songs to a heavy heart.

If it’s cold outside, and then you come by and take away my coat, that’s not gonna help me. Likewise, if I have an open sore, and you come by and throw vinegar on there, that’s gonna hurt me worse.

In the same way, if I am stricken by grief and you come to me with empty platitudes and cheap clichés like “Time heals all wounds;” that’s just not that helpful. It’s singing songs to a heavy heart.

Our goal today is to look at this Christianism. Like last week, I have three questions: 1) “Is there any Biblical truth?” 2) “What’s wrong with the statement?” And, 3) “Is there better news in the gospel?” Then, at the end, I’ll give some suggestions for how we might be more helpful with our friends in grief.

***Our Times are In His Hands***Let’s start with: **Is there any Biblical truth?** Is there anything about this statement that matches up with Biblical teaching?

And the answer is: not really. The idea of time healing wounds is just not in the Bible.

As with “God helps those who help themselves” the origin of this proverb is thought to trace back to Ancient Greece. I playwright named Menander, who lived about 300 years before Jesus, is credited with writing the line “Time is the healer of all necessary evils.” In English, Geoffrey Chaucer, from the 1300s, wrote that: “as time him hurt, a time does him cure.” From there, “time heals all wounds” just seems to have become an accepted proverb. Stephen Colbert even used the line to open his Late Show monologue this past Wednesday night.

But if you look at what the Bible says about time, you really cannot find this idea. The Bible’s view of time is that it is under the control of God. A representative verse is **Psalm 31:5:**

**15**My times are in your hands;
    deliver me from the hands of my enemies,
    from those who pursue me.

The idea is that God determines the number of days that we have to live, that He knows the plans He has for us during that time, and that He wants us to make the most of the time we have. **Psalm 90:12** expresses the attitude that we should have towards time:

Teach us to number our days,
    that we may gain a heart of wisdom.

The better we understand that God controls our time on earth the better use we will be able to make of the time we have.

That’s what the Bible says about time. But on the question of what the passage of time does for our pain, the Bible says nothing.

The other statement, the one that Mike Ditka attributed to the Bible, actually comes from a Persian legend from about 800 years ago. The story goes that a king called all his advisors and wise men to him and asked them for one true statement that could be applied to every situation. The wise men consulted with each other and threw themselves into deep contemplation before finally returning to the king with this phrase: “This, too, shall pass.” Supposedly, the king was so impressed that he had it inscribed on a ring.

It’s actually a very Zen idea. The point is, no matter what situation you find yourself in, you should remember that it will eventually came to an end. So if you are having a great time, if you are experiencing the greatest joy you have ever experienced, don’t get too carried away, because it will pass. And likewise, if you are having a terrible time, if you are caught up in grief, don’t get too sad, because it will pass. As another non-Biblical saying has it: nothing lasts forever.

Ditka probably confused the saying with a Bible verse because the language sounds like something in the King James Bible. The King James often uses the phrase “and it came to pass.” But “this, too, shall pass” is not in the Bible, and the idea it expresses of not getting too high or low isn’t really in the Bible either. The closest we get is **2 Corinthian 4:17-18:**

**17**For our light and momentary troubles are achieving for us an eternal glory that far outweighs them all. **18**So we fix our eyes not on what is seen, but on what is unseen, since what is seen is temporary, but what is unseen is eternal.

This verse conveys the idea that the things of this life only last for a while. But instead of the Buddhist notion that we shouldn’t get too attached, the Bible comes from the perspective that says the experiences of this life are preparation for an eternal glory in the next life. It’s not about waiting things out down here so much as it is keeping our eyes fixed on our coming hope.

Our first question, then, is: Is there any Biblical truth in the phrase “Time heals all wounds”? Our answer needs to be: “very little.” This is really not a Biblical idea.

***Waiting for a Flat Tire to Reinflate***Which leads to our second question: **What is wrong with this phrase?** Where does it go off the tracks?

As I studied it this week, the thing that stood out to me is that nobody likes this phrase. As common as the saying is, as often as we hear it, there is no one on the internet—Christian or non-Christian—defending it as helpful.

For one thing, it is empirically false. As one commentator points out, if the saying “Time heals all wounds” were true, then adults would be demonstrably more joyful then children. That is to say: adults have had more time to experience hurt, but they have also had more time to be healed from that hurt. Children, on the other hand, have barely had any time to recover from whatever wounds they have experienced, and so we should expect them to be more heavily weighed down. Since that is not our usual observation—since, in general, children are more joyful than adults—it should call into question the idea that time is the key factor in our healing.

Moreover, the phrase is just not that helpful. If you have ever experienced significant grief and someone has told you: “it will get better with time” or “just give it time” you know that raises all kinds of questions: How much time? And if a significant amount of time has passed, and you still feel the pain, does that mean something is wrong with you?

The notion that “time heals all wounds” really implies that when we are in grief we will be allowed a certain amount of time to be sad, but after that (and nobody says just how long) the implication is that we should “get over it” or “snap out of it.”

Rose Kennedy, the mother of two sons who were assassinated (John F. Kennedy and Robert F. Kennedy), is quoted quite a bit on this subject. **She said:**

It has been said ‘time heals all wounds.’ I do not agree. The wounds remain. In time, the mind, protecting its sanity, covers them with scar tissue and the pain lessens. But it never goes away.

The passage of time can distance us from our hurts, it may soften the pain that we feel, but time is never enough to heal our wounds.

Secular psychologists remind us that grieving is an active process. In any other part of our life, we do not simply sit around and expect the passage of time to make everything better. An article in *Psychology Today* gives these examples:

we have to *look* for a new job, *search* for the right house, *study* to get through school. Even if we want to win the lottery, we still have to *buy* the ticket. We have to take the initiative to do something to cause something else to happen. Is grief different? Can it really be true that time alone is enough for grief to go away? I don’t think so…

Another article I found gave the example of a flat tire. If you go out to the parking lot after service and find a flat tire on your car, will you just stand there and wait for it to reinflate? If you do, you’ll be standing there for quite a while. Instead, you will do something. You will call a mechanic, get an air tank, put on the spare. You’ll take some initiative. The Psychology Today article goes on:

The point here, though, is that time does NOT heal all wounds. A more apt saying is “IT’S WHAT YOU DO WITH THE TIME THAT HEALS.” Like any other aspect of life, mourning is an active, working process, not a passive one. <https://www.psychologytoday.com/us/blog/the-journey-ahead/200804/time-heals-all-wounds-or-does-it>

I think that is both true, and helpful. From a non-Christian perspective, the best way to find healing in grief is to engage the grieving process. Don’t just wait for the passing of time, work through your feelings.

But is that it? Is that all the hope we can give?

***The Wounded Healer***This leads directly to our third question: **Is there better news in the gospel?** If we reject the idea that time is the healer of all wounds, does the Bible offer something better?

The answer, of course, is “YES!” The Bible does not tell us to look to our clocks or calendars for healing, but to look to God. **Psalm 147:3:**

**3**He heals the brokenhearted
    and binds up their wounds.

One of the most important things we can do to work through our grief is bring it to God. It is His grace and love that can remove some of the heartache that we feel. Yes, time can be a factor in receiving the comfort of God, but through God’s grace we can find the ability to rejoice in both the good times and the bad.

Quite frankly, I don’t even know if “healing wounds” is the correct language to be using. I lost my father 8 years ago, at an age that I consider to be too young. And I don’t know if I want to say that I am over it, or that the wound has completely healed, because to say such things would feel like I am saying that I don’t miss him, or that he has somehow ceased to matter to me. Those things are not true. I feel like I will carry the pain of losing my father for the rest of my life.

But, at the same time, I know that God is walking through that pain with me. Let me give you another verse, this one from Isaiah 61. This is a passage that Jesus quoted at the beginning of His public ministry. In some ways, this passage is what Jesus identified as His purpose statement, **His reason for coming into the world**:

The Spirit of the Sovereign Lord is on me,
    because the Lord has anointed me
    to proclaim good news to the poor.
He has sent me to bind up the brokenhearted,
    to proclaim freedom for the captives
    and release from darkness for the prisoners,
**2**to proclaim the year of the Lord’s favor
    and the day of vengeance of our God,
to comfort all who mourn,

Notice those lines: “to bind up the brokenhearted” and “to comfort all who mourn.” Jesus came into the world to walk with us in our times of grief. He came to support us in our pain. For me, I’m not looking to “get over” my Dad’s death, but I take great comfort in the fact that Jesus is there to support me.

I found an article Billy Graham wrote on healing in grief. He said:

If there is something we need more than anything else during grief, it s a friend who stands with us, who doesn’t leave us. Jesus is that friend.

Another scripture. In **1 Peter 2:24**:

**24**“He himself bore our sins” in his body on the cross, so that we might die to sins and live for righteousness; “by his wounds you have been healed.”

The good news of the gospel is that Jesus came to identify with us in our pain and grief. This verse is a quoting from Isaiah 53, which also tells us that Jesus was “a man of sorrows” and “familiar with suffering” (Isa. 53:3). And the reminder, here, is that Jesus heals our wounds through His own woundedness. He is not an impassive observer of our pain, but He has experienced pain Himself.

I found another blog, this one written by a Christian radio broadcaster in Australia named Chris Witts. He says:

When we tell people time heals all wounds we discount a wounded Healer, who came to restore the deepest parts of our stories. We look to time to save us instead of a God, who so graciously already did. He sent Jesus Christ into our world. He suffered and died for our sins. He knows about being wounded. We look at our clocks and ask them to wipe our tears away when we have a Savior, who promises He will. Time can’t heal me. Time can’t make me better. But there is Someone who can. I can’t keep putting my hope in time. It will continue to fail me and continue to rip open the tender places in my heart. But I do believe in a God who was wounded so He could heal me. That is something that won’t disappoint. <https://hope1032.com.au/stories/faith/2016/time-heal-wounds/>

Your wounds may be a couple of days old, or a couple of months, or a couple of years, or even a couple of decades. However much time has passed, it’s possible that those wounds still have the potential to hurt as much as the day you first received them. Time is not the determining factor here.

But the good news of the Bible is that Jesus knows about your pain. He wants to walk with you through it. He knows what it is like to be wounded. He is the friend who stands with you. He is the friend who won’t leave you.

So here’s the main point of the message today, **here’s the one thing** I want to make sure that you take home with you:

 Time does not heal all wounds; but Jesus, the wounded healer, does.

Take your pain to Jesus. Just like you wouldn’t stand around waiting for your tire to reinflate, don’t sit around waiting for time to numb your grief. Instead, take it to the one who was wounded for your healing. Take it to the one who came to bind up your broken heart.

Your pain you might always have with you, but Jesus wants to walk with you and help you carry that pain.

***What to Say***Finally, I want to go back to the scenario that I described at the beginning of the message. I talked about the times that we find ourselves attempting to comfort someone who is dealing with grief. If you’ve been in that situation, you know it is sometimes difficult to find the right words to say. It’s often in that awkwardness that we say something unhelpful like “time heals all wounds.”

So, if we don’t want to “sing songs to a heavy heart,” what do we do? How can we be a source of comfort in the midst of sorrow?

As I was researching this week I came across a blog post written by Victoria Strong. When Victoria’s daughter, Gwendolyn, was 8 weeks old she suddenly began struggling to breathe. It turned out that she had Spinal Muscular Atrophy (SMA), a genetic condition that meant that she was essentially paralyzed. Gwendolyn lived until the age of 7: never able to walk, never able to talk, never any hope of a long-term cure. Her parents set up a foundation and advocate to this day for SMA research and support.

The blog post addressed the myth that time heals all wounds. And in it--speaking as a mother who has endured the greatest of tragedies, the loss of a child—Victoria Strong suggests some ways that **we can come alongside of those who are grieving**. I thought it was helpful, so here are three things she suggests:

**1) Say names**. Sometimes, we are reluctant to bring up someone who has passed away because we are afraid we will re-open old wounds. We think that by not mentioning the names of those who have died we are sparing our friends the pain of thinking about them. Victoria Strong writes:

Whether it has been 1 month, 5 years, 10 years - speak of them. You aren’t bringing up a sensitive topic or bad memories. There will never ever be a day our child is not on our mind. Parents may cry hearing their child’s name spoken aloud, but these types of tears are fresh glue to a broken heart that will never be fully mended.

Personally, I welcome it when people want to talk about my Dad. When I hear memories that others have of him, or find out that somebody else misses him too, that brings me comfort. Even when I am talking with someone who never knew him, it is nice when they acknowledge that I must miss him.

**2) Remember dates.** On holidays, anniversaries, birthdays, the date of death. When you know that these days are going to be hard, when you know that a person is going to be especially missed, say something. Again, there is enormous comfort in knowing that someone else is aware of our pain. It is so meaningful to know someone else is thinking of us as we are thinking of those who are gone.

You are not reopening old wounds. Those wounds are going to be there, that loved one is going to be on that person’s mind. Acknowledge it. Let them know you care.

And**, 3) Be there, with no expectations.** As Billy Graham said, the thing we need most during grief is a friend who will stand with us and not leave us. Ultimately, that friend is Jesus. But He has given us, as His followers, the opportunity to stand in for Him, to represent Him to one another. So be there. Even if you don’t know what to say. Be there.

Victoria Strong writes:

Grief is exhausting, bone-tiring. But calls, texts, emails of support matter. Don’t get offended if you get no response or if the parents don’t want to be social. It isn’t personal. Sometimes words need to soak in and linger to be soothing. Sometimes the simple act of responding to outreach feels completely overwhelming. Know your outreach reminds us we are not alone. That our child is remembered! When you are together, let your friend cry and cry with them. You don’t need to be strong for them. (Even in their weakness, they are already stronger than you could ever possibly imagine.) Get comfortable with being uncomfortable and not being able to fully understand. Share empathy - not pity - for what you can imagine. We need you. <https://www.huffingtonpost.com/victoria-strong/time-does-not-heal-all-wounds_b_9732158.html>

Walking with someone through grief is one of the most helpless feelings any of us can have. We just don’t feel adequate to the task! But we don’t have to leave it to time to make things better. We know the wounded healer, and on His behalf we can walk with one another through our pain.