

Series: SEASONS OF THE SOUL—April 16, 2006

WINTER HURTS...BUT NEVER WINS

John 12:23-29

I. INTRO

A. When you're in the middle of winter, you've just had to shovel your driveway, your shivering in your car, feet soaked and frozen—it's hard not to see winter as evil and unnecessary! I find that once I've had snow on Christmas, the rest of winter really seems pretty pointless!

1. Last week we had some very brave people who stood up for what they believe and said that winter was their favorite season. I paid them in fudge for their honesty and bravery. So, let me ask you brave, tough winter people a question: Have you ever met someone who has spent their working career living in Florida or Arizona, then retired and moved to Timmons?

-One author I read said this: Some people say, "God made the winter, so it must be good." I'd say this. There is no mention of winter in the Bible before the Fall." It's true! Read the book. Before the Fall, the world was filled with lush vegetation, constant fruit-bearing--people didn't even need to wear clothes. We don't know where the Garden of Eden was--but we **do** know that it wasn't in Toronto.

2. I actually do enjoy **all** the seasons. Just like you--I dream of a white Christmas and a **green** January. Of course, every February 2 we ask a big stupid rodent whether or not spring is here—or if we'll have to wait. As if we didn't know!

This morning I want to talk to you about a different kind of winter season--a winter season of the soul. You can fly south, move to Hawaii, visit tanning salons and use other forms of escapist behavior to deny winter in Toronto--but there is no place on earth where you can escape the winter season of the soul. The winter season of the soul is almost perfectly symbolized by the Saturday between Good Friday and Easter Sunday. It's when all hope has died a brutal death and buried behind a massive, immovable stone. Winter is when you feel the pain of failure—or you feel abandoned. It's when you lose your sense of purpose—you lose your place in life—you lose people you love—and the sun seems to shine very little.

-Last week we started on a journey through the last week in Jesus' life—a time that captures all four seasons of the soul in the lives of those who went through it. It's a snapshot, not just of the seasons of the soul, but what God does in the middle of them. These seasons of the soul started with Palm Sunday, the ultimate summer day of the soul when Jesus reached the height of his popularity. But within days, the season changed to Fall, a time of change, fear, transition and uncertainty.

-It ended with the worst winter of the soul ever experienced on this planet--followed by Spring--a new life that would change the entire infrastructure of the world and bring life to everyone who would receive it.

II. THE DEAD OF WINTER...

A. As you know, fall ends with all the leaves blown off the trees—and one day, you wake up under a load of snow. And that's how fall ended with the disciples. At the Last Supper, it seemed like the last leaves fell—and was this ominous sense that things would change forever.

1. The winter season of the soul hit Jesus and his disciples full force in a little grove of olive trees outside Jerusalem called Gethsemane where Jesus went to pray after supper. I know that because Jesus said to his three closest friends, ***My soul is crushed with grief to the point of death. Stay here and keep watch with me (Mark 14:34 NLT.)***

I can only guess at the terror created in the hearts of Peter, James and John—to see someone who ***always*** knew what to do and was fearless when they were scared to death—now crying, broken and asking for ***their*** help. I would be a mess if I were in their shoes.

Let me tell you what happened in a span of 24 hours. Hours before Jesus had fearlessly stood up to the religious authorities and confronted them on their hypocrisy. At the Passover Meal that night with his disciples—Jesus makes it clear that one of them—Judas—would betray him. He then spent a significant amount of time telling them what would happen—and how this would launch a whole new era in their lives and in history. But it's when Jesus gets to this garden of olive trees that he just seems to almost fall apart in this battle with spiritual darkness that left him sweating blood.

-What happened next defied imagination as Jesus is hauled off by the posse Judas brought with him into a kind of kangaroo court, then almost beaten to death—and finally sentenced to die by a Roman governor who's afraid of losing his job.

2. I've been through this winter season of the soul, and one of the first things to drain out of your heart is courage. All that's left is fear and dread. That's precisely what happened to these disciples. I think they drew strength from Him—just like we do. When they saw him crushed, broken and crying, I think that scared them to death—and they had this surreal experience of running in terror into the darkness when they'd all promised they'd stand by Jesus to the very end.
3. In the hours that followed, to their horror, Jesus was shoved around, slapped across the face, smacked in the head with sticks--tortured, and humiliated. This trail of blood ended at the cross. Roman soldiers, experts in creating pain, drove heavy, square wrought iron nails through his wrists and feet and pinned him on a cross where he would hang until he died of blood loss and asphyxiation.
4. As Jesus hung on that cross--He no longer looked like the Son of God. He looked like every other Messiah wanna-be that the Romans had crucified. As the life drained, drop by drop, from Jesus body—hope drained from their souls. They'd staked everything on Him.
5. The disciples weren't the only ones who went through winter; it hit Jesus' soul too. Full force. It was in this place named "Gethsemane"—or ***olive press*** that the life was being squeezed out of Jesus. He describes his soul as ***overwhelmed with sorrow to the point of death***. Not only did the pain grow worse, His sense of isolation was profound. Right before he died, Jesus cried out, ***My God, My God, why have YOU forsaken me!***
-I don't think it was the physical suffering the created such agony for Jesus. I think it was the spiritual suffering—and the unthinkable happened. Jesus took on

himself the guilt and shame of something He'd never experienced as the Son of God. Sin. Ever felt the shame of sin and evil in your own life. The inner guilt of having hurt others, done something stupid.

-Imagine experiencing the full weight of guilt of a world that has Jeffrey Dahmers, Paul Bernardos, Hitlers—the inner torture of every mass murderer, child molester, thief—and having that all rest on a soul that's never even *imagined* evil. That's why Jesus said, "My soul is being crushed! Overwhelmed!" That's why He cried and said, "If you can do this another way, Father, please do it that way."

6. It's strange. After Jesus stiffening body was pried off the cross and buried, the Bible account is totally silent about Saturday. Saturday must've been the darkest day in history. It appeared to everyone like even God couldn't stop evil. In these disciples, you see the classic signs of the winter season of the soul. It's like the shock of losing someone suddenly in an awful accident.
 - a. Winter is a time of pain. Sometimes that pain is physical—but it's mainly emotional and spiritual pain. It's many times the gnawing pain of inner shame—shame that you broke your promise, shame that you did what you said you'd *never* do.
 - b. It's also a time of fear. Sometimes fear of everything. Sometimes you can't even explain what you're afraid of.
 - c. Sometimes you feel exhausted and overwhelmed.
 - d. Winter is a time when what is good and fair and right seems to disappear.
 - e. And in the winter, there is this desperate longing to escape and hide. Even Jesus faces this urge. Remember his prayer? **Father, is there ANY OTHER WAY...?**
- B. Some of you this morning either have gone through or are going through a winter season of the soul. Spiritual winter is that in-between time. A time of deadness. When someone or something--maybe some dream--has died. It's gone, and it may never return--and nothing new has arisen to take its place, and you're not sure that it ever will. That's winter.
 1. People all through the Bible experienced this winter season. Everybody, if they live long enough, experiences winter. There are a lot of things that can bring on this season. A positive test result from the lab about your greatest fear--cancer--brings winter. All of a sudden, your whole future is in jeopardy. Maybe someone you loved and prayed so hard for--died. Sometimes it's character traits in yourself that you loathe and fight with—but can't conquer. But the gap is widening between the person you'd always wanted to be, and who you really are.
 2. But what makes the winter season of the soul even more awful is that sometimes God seems to be silent. Absent. At a time when you have more questions than ever, like, Why? Why this? Why me?--there are seemingly no answers. Jesus shouted from the cross, **Why have YOU forsaken ME?** No answer--his voice echoed off the rocks.
 3. Know what question a lot of people have about winter? Is there a way to navigate life so that you can make it winter-free? Like 10 easy steps to winter-avoidance.

There are some people who think that if you're just positive—or spiritual enough, or strong enough—or *rich* enough—you can live in perpetual summer of the soul.

- a. Sometimes Christians teach—and people believe--that suffering and sickness and sadness isn't supposed to happen to Christ-followers; that if you pray enough, have enough faith, are sincere enough or do enough, life can be an endless summer. God wants his children to live in a constant stream of blessing! That's a great thought, but it's not biblical. This kind of teaching doesn't create less difficulty--it just isolates people at a time when they need community the most. Who wants to admit to friends who believe this that they forgot to winterize their soul?
-The clear teaching all the way through the Bible is not about winter-avoidance—it's that **God uses winter!** It's not useless suffering.
 - b. In the winter seasons of life, I've learned something critical. I'm not running the show. It's very easy in life to think that if I'm smart enough or wealthy enough or successful enough—or spiritual enough--I can just make life turn out the way I want. I can't--because I'm not God. In the winter, I know that.
4. Anyone know what some animals—particularly cold-blooded ones--do in the winter? They hibernate. They stuff themselves full of food, crawl into the mud or into a cave and say, “This is too much of a hassle. Wake me up in the Spring!” Anyone here ever been tempted to hibernate? Hide in the darkness. Isolate yourself. That’s okay for frogs—but not us because winter is when we need others most.
- a. Author, John Ortberg talks about a study done years ago on depression. And there was one group of people who experienced significantly less depression than any other group. Can any of you guess who it was? It's the **Amish**.

Apparently, researchers had trouble even diagnosing bi-polar disorder, which usually shows itself in extreme highs and extreme lows. The only way they could tell someone was experiencing one of the extreme highs was when they started giving extravagant gifts or driving their buggy too fast. “Bring the lithium. Obadiah’s got the horse all lathered up again!”
 - b. Now, do you know why the Amish experience less depression? It's because people with a strong **sense of community** are less vulnerable to it.
 - c. You **need** strong relationships in your life; close friends you do life with who will walk with you. And you need to be in community with others **before** winter hits. This is not an add-on in life—this was how God **intended** us to live safely in a world that can be very unpredictable.
-It’s funny. Every year in December when the first big snowfall hits, there’s a snow shovel/snow blower crisis at Canadian Tire. It’s like people are saying, "Gee, it's December in Toronto and we got snow. Who would've ever guessed **that** would happen?" Winter **will** come.

-What are you doing now that is so doggone important that you can't take time to build deep, sustaining friendships into your life? So take the step now. Don't do winter alone.

- d. Now. How many of you know someone who's going through winter? Know what the Bible says to do? Anyone? Let's do a multiple guess quiz:
- 1) Explain to them **why** they're suffering
 - 2) Tell them how much more you've suffered to make sure they don't feel sorry for themselves
 - 3) Stay away so they don't make you sad
 - 4) Try to fix them quick before they screw up your view of how God works
 - 5) Stay close, and mourn with them without saying a lot or trying to fix them.

Anyone know the answer? **Mourn with those who mourn.** You don't need to say anything--so don't. When Job hit winter, he had 3 friends who just came and sat with him in mourning for a whole week. They didn't screw things up until they started trying to explain to him why he was suffering and then fix him!

- C. One more thing about the winter season of the soul you need to know. You can't let go of hope. Jesus said:

The hour has come for the Son of Man to be glorified. I tell you the truth, unless a kernel of wheat falls to the ground and dies, it remains only a single seed. But IF IT DIES, it produces MANY SEEDS (John 12:23-24 NIV).

1. Do you get what Jesus is saying here? The winter seasons of the soul are not just useless, pointless suffering. This God who sometimes seems distant and quiet during those times is actually working in very profound ways. I've asked this a lot—I'll ask it again. How many of you would say you've grown most in summer--when life has been *hunky dory and okey dokey*? **How many of you, though you hate to admit it, have grown most in winter?**
2. Anyone know what that most-asked question is in winter? ***When will it be over!*** It's the only season we're anxious to see end—unless you're a snow-boarder or have a snow-plowing business.

-So, maybe the biggest quality you need besides hope is patience. See, things **are** happening. It's like Jesus' grave. On Saturday--it looked like any other tomb. It was quiet. We now know that even then something amazing was going on--and Spring was hours away. See, God is powerful enough even to redeem the most awful suffering. Winter hurts, but it **never** wins!

III. WINTER...ALWAYS MELTS AWAY INTO SPRING

- A. The story of Jesus torture, death, burial, and resurrection is the story of how the hardest, most brutal winter of the soul ever melted away to the most amazing, fruitful spring--ever!
1. The first signs of spring were more puzzling than anything else. It was actually a group of female disciples who first had the courage to come out of hibernation.

When they showed up with all the stuff to further preserve Jesus' dead body, the scene was **really** upsetting. The grave was open and Jesus was gone. First two angels show up—and that's when Jesus just...**shows up**. They didn't recognize him at first, but it was him all right.

Then Peter and John race each other to the tomb. They find it empty too—and stand there scratching their heads. Something happened—they just don't know **what**. That evening, they're back in this locked room, trying to fit the pieces of the puzzle together—when Jesus walks in. Without opening the door. He eats some bread and fish to prove that he's not a ghost—and then says, **Peace! Receive the Holy Spirit.**

—When Spring came, the Disciples found out that **death--the worst enemy of the human race, the one that cancels plans and sabotages dreams couldn't keep Him down!**

2. One of the things we do around our place in the Spring is check for the damage that winter's done. You know—for stuff that's been buried under the snow—for rust on the rocker-panels on the car. Cottage owners drive up north to check their cottages.

You know, make sure a tree hasn't taken out the roof—and that the ice hasn't crushed the dock.

—What I love about Jesus is that he does damage control on his guys. Doubting Thomas gets a chance to say, "I believe!" Peter, who'd blown it big time, gets a chance to say, "I love you" for every time he'd denied even knowing Jesus.

3. Know what is **most** characteristic of this Season? **Joy**. Spring weather can be mucky, rainy, unpredictable, fragile. Sometimes it snows-or floods. But the prevailing emotion is joy, cause **winter is over!**

—It is so important to understand that if, in 33 A.D., there was just a cross and no empty grave, no resurrection, no Spring, no Easter--there would be **no Christianity**. It would be like Narnia—always winter and never Christmas. Jesus would've been like every other person who's come along, making big promises—who ends up dead—powerless to actually pull them off.

But He **did** rise, Spring **did** come after that awful winter--and the promise for all eternity is that no matter how awful the winters get for the people of this planet, there will **always, ALWAYS, ALWAYS** be Spring. Count on it!

- B. Some of you, this morning, are right in the middle of Spring. Spring is this surprising time of the soul when God redeems the suffering of winter. It's this time when all of a sudden, relentless suffering--relents. For the parent of a toddler, it's when they **get** toilet-trained.

For a person who's gone through major depression, it's when the darkness cracks, and the sun shines through.

—Spring time is when an alcoholic finds the power of a community to help him say in a shaky voice, "**No!**" and walk away from a drink. Spring is when an alienated parent and child reconcile with tears and "I was wrong. Please forgive me." It's when an angry

person gives up the grudge, the hatred that is eating them alive and weighing them down—so that they can heal and love again.

1. One of key characteristics of Spring is that you start feeling good again. Exceptionally good. Have you ever had the stomach flu? First you're afraid you're going to die—then you're afraid you're going to live. There's that moment when, you have this sudden feeling that you're a little shaky—but you're hungry for crackers. Then soup. Never has feeling good--felt so good.

-In fact, depending on how severe the winter's been, there's almost a giddiness. I remember waking up early one morning in Spring when we lived in Pennsylvania, and seeing two fawns running and jumping around on our back lawn. Spring!

2. Let me just make a few observations about the Spring season of the soul.
 - a. First, in the spring season of the soul, you are still pretty fragile. Shaky. The new growth and new life needs some protection. Any parents remember seeing your newborn baby under the lamps in neo-natal care? Fragile—but very much alive, and knowing exactly how to get what they need! New growth is tender.
 - b. Another interesting thing about Spring. It's wet from thawing snow and rain. Sometimes when God is doing something new in your heart--you feel close to tears. Some of you who pride yourselves in being tough need to know that it's **okay** to cry. Tears soften the heart.
 - c. Surprisingly, another characteristic of this season is a kind of shaky fear. If you've ever talked with someone who's gone through clinical depression—which is one of the darkest winters of the soul—most will tell you that they have this shakiness inside—this fear that they'll slip back into the cold, lonely dark place they've just escaped. If a person's been through the loss of a marriage, there's the fear of getting close. "What if it happens again?" -If that's true for you, you simply have to make this fear your friend. This fear can keep you from recklessness. This fear can be the fence that keeps you away from some kind of substance abuse that brought on winter. If you make it a friend that is there to protect you—the fear will go away over time as you move into the confidence of summer.
 - d. You may have to check your life over for some of the damage from the winter season. Your self-esteem takes a major hit in dark times. Sometimes relationships suffer. Know what the truth is? Sometimes you can get quite comfortable with winter—because it releases you from responsibility, and people are calling you and bringing you hot soup. -So, don't hibernate—come into the sunshine. And remember that Jesus is tender with people who have found themselves wounded and scarred by life. So, identify the damage, stay in the sunshine, give yourself some time--and remember, summer is just around the corner. And remember that the seeds for what God does are planted in the Fall—the season of change. Somehow winter moistures them and prepares them to sprout and grow. And you don't want to miss that!
- C. I have one final thing to say about winter and spring. It's this. It's **why** Jesus went through the winter—the most horrible one imaginable. It was so that you can I could move into an eternal Spring. It's interesting. Jesus says, **The hour has come for the**

Son of Man to be glorified. Why did he say that? We know he dreaded what was coming. In fact later he said, **Right now I am storm-tossed. And what am I going to say? 'Father, get me out of this'? No, this is why I came in the first place. I'll say, 'Father, put your glory on display (John 12:27 Msg.)** Without the cross the resurrection, we'd have been trapped under the snow in an eternal spiritual winter.

1. Without the work of God, every single human soul is dead—like a shriveled seed on a shelf or frozen by winter, covered with a blanket of snow. Our souls are frozen by sin.
2. The biggest myth in the world is that you and I can bring Spring and eternal life to our own souls.

That's simply not true. Without the work of Christ, completed on the cross—and the thaw that came on Easter when He rose from that grave--our souls would remain dead--buried under the snow.

- a. Know what God wants more than anything else this morning? To bring Spring thaw to human souls--maybe your soul. See, you can't do this yourself. You can bring in blow torches, go live in the Caribbean, sleep under sun lamps. You can listen to great music, try to contact spirit guides, say mantras, eat special food, go through religious rituals--and your soul will stay hard, frozen and unproductive--and eventually die without ever blossoming.
And that's why Jesus died. He paid for our sins; paid for the stuff that puts everyone in the deep freeze. When we reach out to him, His Spirit comes to live in us, pulls the plug on the freezer, and washes away our sins.
- b. And then all the potential God built into our souls when He made us begins to grow. It is so revolutionary, so radical, Jesus called it being born all over again.

-See, that's why Easter is symbolized by baby bunnies, peeps, eggs, flowers, lilies--new life! And today, right now, this Easter, Jesus offers to bring Spring to **your** soul. All you have to do is ask.

- c. Jesus said, **I tell you the truth, unless a kernel of wheat falls to the ground and dies, it remains only a single seed. But if it dies, it produces MANY seeds (John 12:24 NIV).** Jesus wasn't buried, he was planted. And that best part of life, the eternal part, is yet to come.
3. Some time ago I read a story about a woman who had been diagnosed with cancer and had 3 months to live. Her doctor told her that if she wanted to make any preparations for death, she needed to do it.

When the pastor came to visit her, she had already made all the plans for her funeral. She laid out the songs she wanted sung, the passages from the Bible she wanted read, how she wanted to be buried with her favorite Bible--everything.

Then she said, "There's just one more thing." And he asked her what it was. She said, "This is important, so pay attention. I want to be buried with a fork in my right hand." The pastor didn't know what to say--he'd never had **anyone** make that request before. He asked why.

She explained, "In all my years in going to church functions, whenever food was involved my favorite part came when whoever was cleaning the dishes off the table from the main course would lean over to me and say, 'You can keep your

fork.' It was my favorite part because I knew something great was coming. It wasn't Jell-O, it was something with substance--cake or pie--you know, biblical food.

So I just want people to see me there in the casket, with a fork in my hand after I'm gone, and I want them to wonder, 'What's with the fork?' And then I want you to tell them, 'Something better is coming. So, keep your fork.'"

This pastor hugged her goodbye and within days, she died. And at her service, people saw all the things she wanted them to see. The dress she had chosen. The Bible she loved, the songs and scriptures she had picked out--but they all kept asking the same question, "What's the deal with the fork?"

And he explained to them that she wanted everyone who loved her to know that, for her, for anyone who chooses to love and follow Jesus, this is not a day of defeat. Something better, far better is coming. Sorrow may come in the night, but **joy** comes in the morning.

IV. **CLOSING**

- A. This morning, I have some homework for you--especially if you're in the winter season of life. This week, every time you take a fork, one of these, in your hand--I want you to look at it for a moment. Let it just become a little illustration for you. Remember the woman who was buried with one of these in her hand--and remember the promise of the fork. Something better is coming. Remember to **hope**. No matter how dark things may get--winter hurts, it is sometimes hard, and it's usually unavoidable. But it's not final. Spring comes when God resurrects dead stuff and brings back joy, if not now, some day in eternity. That's our promise. That's why we celebrate Easter.
- B. Some of you this morning need the thaw that only Jesus Christ can bring. Some of you have never come to Him. Spring, new life, has never come to you. Some of you have souls that once felt new and alive--but they're frozen by years of neglect. Why don't you let the Spirit of God bring Spring to your soul. It could happen—today. This Easter.