

Episode 178 “Beautiful and Terrible Things”

This transcript has been edited for clarity and space.

Christian Brady

I'm Christian Brady, the T. W Lewis, Dean of the Lewis Honors College and Professor of Ancient Hebrew and Jewish literature at the University of Kentucky.

David Capes

Dr. Christian Brady, Christian, good to see you. Welcome to The Stone Chapel Podcast.

Christian Brady

It is a privilege and honor to be with you. Thank you, David.

David Capes

You know, my signature question. So, who is Christian Brady? Let's start with that.

Christian Brady

Well, oftentimes through my career as a scholar of Rabbinic Judaism, the question has been: what's a nice Jewish boy like you doing with a name like Christian? I'm a scholar of Rabbinic Judaism. That's where my field has been. I am not Jewish. I am Christian. I grew up in an evangelical household. I'm the husband of Elizabeth, the father of Izzy and Mack. I'm a scholar of biblical literature, and a minister in the Episcopal Church.

David Capes

Wonderful! We are grateful for you being a part of this. And that's got to be a little bit of a different road for you because you went to Wheaton College, but you probably didn't get all the rabbinic studies that you needed at Wheaton College, I don't imagine. You had to go on and do other studies elsewhere. In fact, you have been at our place in Oxford, Yarnton Manor, when it was the Oxford Centre for Jewish Studies.

Christian Brady

Absolutely. That was where my wife and I spent our first year of marriage. I was an undergraduate at Cornell University. I did both a major in near eastern studies and in history, specifically medieval history. I went to Wheaton and then went to Yarnton and did a graduate diploma in Jewish Studies at the Oxford Centre for Hebrew and Jewish Studies, which was housed at Yarnton at the time. And I stayed and did my doctorate, working on something called the Targumim.

David Capes

Well, today, we're going to be talking about your book that I had a chance to pick up and read in the fall. And it's entitled *Beautiful and Terrible Things: A Christian Struggle with Suffering, Grief, and Hope*. And our friendship has been initiated through Gary Rendsburg, but also finds itself in a bit of a tragic circle, doesn't it? A lot of the people who listen to this podcast will remember that my son, Daniel, died four years ago, of a very aggressive and rare form of cancer. But before that, you and your wife and family suffered the loss of your son. Tell us about Mack.

Christian Brady

Mack was just a great little boy. He developed a passion early on for soccer, but in particular, to be a goalkeeper. Which is not something the coaches usually want, the little kids to be in the goal. Or any specific position until they're 11 or 12. He loved it. He wasn't the greatest student at that point. He was eight years old. He was just two weeks shy of his ninth birthday when he passed away. He always had a smile. He was silly and fun and funny. He and his sister, Izzy, who's six years older, loved to travel. We all traveled together often to conferences of Biblical Studies and things like that.

So just a wonderful, vibrant kid who frankly never had a sick day in his life. And then just after Christmas, just before New Year's [Day], we went sledding with his buddies. And the next day, we called up to see about sledding again, and one of them had the flu. Later that day, Mac came down with the flu. Or so we thought. That's what the doctors thought and everybody else. And it turned out it was sepsis. It was a blood infection. And then in about 30 hours he was gone. We will

talk more about understanding and coming to terms with all of that. But from that very first moment, Elizabeth and I, my wife, recognized the blessing we had had of almost nothing but health and joy all the way through, aside from those last few hours.

David Capes

He sounds like a remarkable boy. And because of the time that we're recording this, which is in the first part of 2024, a very hard anniversaries came up, the anniversary of his passing. How long has it been now?

Christian Brady

Eleven years as of New Year's Eve. I mean, this is the blessing and the challenge. Right. Mack's birthday is in January, January 16. He died New Year's Eve. And of course, then you have Thanksgiving before. We'll talk more about grieving and how we cope and how we understand it theologically, but personally as well. In some ways, it's kind of good. Good is not the right word, but let's just say from about middle of November, to the end of January, we're just heads down, moving through as best we can. And in some ways, that's kind of a blessing that it's concentrated in that period. But of course, the truth is, anybody who's lost a parent or a child knows we think about him every day, We think about those who have left us every single day.

I didn't even think about the fact that it was New Year's Eve. I called up the President who was my boss who had hired me at Penn State University at the time and our son was being life flighted to Hershey Medical Center which is part of Penn State. Whatever we could do. Can he help me make sure that Mack is being taken care of? As it happens, he died on the plane, but the President was at a party, and I didn't think about it being New Year's Eve until I heard it in the background. And so, every New Year's Eve, we make sure to spend some time together as a family. But also to get out of ourselves a little bit. We went to the Kennedy Center this year. And so, we find ways to grieve in a healthy and holy way. That's our goal.

David Capes

Let's talk about the title here. I was fascinated by the title when I picked the book up and I wondered where it came from. But then you read a little bit into the book, and you realize, okay, that's where it comes from. The title is *Beautiful and Terrible Things: A Christians Struggle with Suffering, Grief and Hope*. I should say it's published by Westminster John Knox Press. Where did that title come from Christian, "Beautiful and Terrible Things"?

Christian Brady

I've got to give you a slightly longer story. David, if you don't mind. As a dean of an Honors College, I give graduation speeches, ceremony speeches, and you look for quotes. And I found this quote. I knew the name of Frederick Buechner from Daniel Amos of all things, a group Terry Scott Taylor. The album is called "Mr. Beginner's Dream". But I never read anything of Buechner. And I saw this quote, "Here's the world, beautiful things. Beautiful and terrible things will happen. Don't be afraid." Well, that's really beautiful, powerful, perfect for a sending out of students at graduation. So, as I was writing it just kept coming back.

Mack's life was full of beautiful and one terrible thing. Life around us is full of beautiful and terrible. Is there a better synopsis or summary of Scripture? Here's the world full of beautiful and terrible things. Then I thought, well, I've got to look it up in context. I've got to find it in context. And I'll read the full context here. But once I read it, I realize Fred was just defining the grace of God. I laughed, because I realized how many of the scholars who I had read using that in speeches who are irreligious at the best would be mortified if they knew what they did. But then I read it. And as I read it to you, you can hear on some level why I thought, what you're going to do is go reflect on this for about a month or three. You don't need the book.

This is what Frederick Buechner says, "The grace of God means something like, here is your life. You might never have been, but you are. Because the party wouldn't have been complete without you. Here's the world. Beautiful and terrible things will happen. Don't be afraid. I am with you. Nothing can ever separate us. It's for you. I created the universe. I love you."

David Capes

Amazing. Buechner was a powerful writer. Extremely powerful. And I'm moved every time I hear that now. So, was that the inspiration for the book? When did you know you had to write about this?

Christian Brady

The inspiration really came within days, or weeks after Mack dying. I've had a blog for years and years and a website, targum.org. I posted that Mac had died. And people said all sorts of wonderful and gracious things. After I wrote saying that Mack was the best boy in the world, one person challenged me and said, "no, he wasn't. And you're being selfish. If you truly believe in Christ, if you truly believe in the afterlife, then you should be grateful that your son is not having to suffer in this world." And many people jumped to my defense in the comments, thank goodness. And I said, look, I agree with this gentleman. I'm absolutely being selfish. I want my boy back. And I know he's absolutely better off with Christ. So, it began with people saying these well intentioned and well-meaning things. Like "God needed an angel. Or God has another angel. God needed Mack more than we needed him", and so on and so forth.

David Capes

Yes, we heard those kinds of things too.

Christian Brady

Yes. You know, an incredibly close friend, one of my oldest, dearest friends, who is a hardcore Calvinist. And I say that with a smile. But he made the trip to come and be with us, and hugged me and held me. And he said, "I know you know this but God took Mack for a reason. We don't know why it is. But God took Mack for a reason, and it'll be okay." And I love that friend of mine. And I love all those people who hold to that, but I just don't think that's true theology. I don't think it's true teaching of Scripture.

And I have found a lot of people for whom that has hurt them and pushed them far away from the community of faith. I won't say it's pushed them necessarily further away from God because God's stronger and more important than that. But I was on a sabbatical as interim rector of a parish in Nashville, and ministered

and met with or I was ministered to by a number of families and couples who had lost loved ones themselves. Many of whom were coming out of communities that were really rigid in this kind of teaching. And I want to be careful with labels because I don't want to cast aspersions on any particular tradition. But those who really try and make that argument that God ordains every jot and tittle and so when a loved one dies, it is because God took them for a reason. That God was active in the taking. And many of those people had left other churches where they were being taught that, to come to this parish, that was just more open about saying, we don't know, we don't know where all of this suffering and hurt comes from.

But what we know is the presence of Christ, God being with us. So, it went very early from being on more academic study of what the Bible says about suffering, and I've got oodles of notes that got nowhere close to this book. There's a tremendous book by a scholar named Rambo. That's over 900 pages on suffering, biblical, scriptural understandings of suffering. And I realized that a book like that was not going to minister to very many people. And I wanted something that would really reach out and touch their hearts and provide comfort to people in grief.

David Capes

And you do dialogue through a number of the passages in Lamentations and Psalms and Job. And other of the books that really do wrestle with this. And I've taken consolation at times in the recognition that Israel's name is really about "he who wrestles with God". That, in a sense, what this life is about is not enjoying the garden every day. But there are beautiful and terrible things that do happen in this life. And in Mack's case, it was one terrible thing.

And part of what my wife and I have talked about, is how my son was 36, when he died, and that, by and large, he had a healthy life too. And he had a lot of good things. He had some hard things as well, as most people do by the time they reach adulthood. But by and large, the only bad thing that really happened was the worst thing; this cancer that struck him and took his life. We can sometimes freeze people in that moment. And I think that's part of the thing that we did at first, is that when these things happen, we talked about earlier, this loop

that replays in your head. That you think through these things over and over again. You analyze them over and over again. And then at some point, you've got to get out of that. But by realizing, as you did early on that Mack, that Daniel had all these great years, and then one terrible thing. All these beautiful things, and one terrible thing.

And I found this book amazingly helpful. I did as a parent who's lost a child, and I'm going to be recommending it to a lot of people. I think it is a terrific book. Because the way that you lay things out, I appreciate the struggle. Because with you, I don't think everything that happens in this world is the will of God. Or that God planned things this way, that sometimes tragedies do happen. And that doesn't detract from God's sovereignty. You can still say at the end of the day, God is sovereign. But that doesn't mean that everything that happens is the will of God. Or else why would Jesus say, pray every day that God's will would come on Earth?

Christian Brady

That's absolutely it. There's a section on sovereignty in the book too. And to give a sense of the framework of the book and the major goals. One is, it's a lament. Nicholas Wolterstorff, brilliant philosopher, his son Christopher died in a climbing accident, and he published *Lament for A Son*. And he talks about the kind of suffering that we have and it's not God punishing us. It's not the result of sin, ours or somebody else's. It's not a lesson. It's what he calls "the remainder." The remainder is actually the greater amount.

And what I've tried to shape and share in this book is it is not only allowable to be angry at God, it's appropriate. It's divinely appointed. We have more than half of the Psalms that are laments. God's big enough that he can handle it. And we've got to get it out. We've got to work through it. Let's walk ourselves through lament and understand what the biblical notion of lamentation consists of. And one of the very first thing it consists of is calling out to God and saying, "God, what on earth is going on? How could you let this happen?" And it ends with a recitation and acknowledgement of all the great things that God has done in our lives and in the lives of his people, and that we will yet praise Him. But then the book of Lamentations still ends saying, yeah, but this really is horrible.

And then that's the other main thing I wanted to get across to folks. I love the fact that you bring Israel's name into it. That would have been a great thing to bring to the book. That is the nature and I think that's what the message of the Bible is. It's not that we say, God ordained absolutely every jot and tittle, every little thing that happens in life, therefore we must celebrate and rejoice every tragedy. But rather that we are still called to be appalled by the suffering and sin in this world. We are called to be appalled by the hurt. And we are called to be with those who mourn and with those who grieve. And as a mourner, and as somebody grieving, or somebody's hungry, and somebody thirsty, we're allowed to call out and say, "This hurts. I need help."

And so, providing that space in the room, all while saying, this is founded, and rooted in our faith and in the Scripture, that has been given to us by God. Because what really grieved me was seeing how many folks were confronted by whatever theology that was. That was not comforting to them. And then they looked and said, then I guess I don't believe in God, and I don't believe in Christianity anymore. So lament, and all that that entails, which includes being honest with God, being honest with ourselves, and allowing some elbow room to question, to wrestle. Job never got an answer, other than I am God. And I am here. I hope that's some of what can come through, is it's not just that beautiful and terrible things happen. But that latter part of the quote, I am with you. Nothing can separate us. Don't be afraid.

David Capes

Lovely. Christian, thank you for being with us today. It's a terrific book. We're going to be talking about it again and again, I'm sure. And we're hopeful that the parents and loved ones of those who are hurting and grieving might find it and might find their way to lament well, and to remember God's presence. God bless you. Thank you so much.

Christian Brady

And thank you.