

Grief

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Lou Priolo, series editor

Grief

Learning to Live with Loss

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Printed in the United States of America

ISBN: 978-1-59638-203-9

It has been my experience over the years, when talking to those who have lost a loved one, that most of the guidance they received to process their grief mimics that of the world. Far too often Christians are confused and do not handle grief well. Our thoughts about grief have been greatly impacted by the world.³ As a general rule, the local church has not sufficiently prepared believers for grieving. Christians are attached to life in the body. Our focus is too often not on things above. Too often our eyes are not fixed on Jesus (Heb. 12:2). We may sing “This world is not my home, I’m just passing through,” but the reality is that we want to experience life in the body as much as possible, as long as possible, and as deeply as possible.

In the original languages, the Bible uses several different words that we translate as “grief” or “grieving.” When I studied these different words, it quickly became apparent to me that the key to understanding the biblical role of grief is not going to be discovered merely by an examination of word usage.

But God has not left us without instruction on this important dimension of life that sooner or later becomes the experience of every one of us. Until I was fifty-two years old, I did not lose anyone close to me who was not at the end of a good life and had not reached the biblically allotted threescore and ten. Then my best friend died of cancer at forty-eight. It was a traumatic experience. He spent most of his adult life overseas flying for Wycliffe Bible Translators. He was called back to the U.S. to take up an administrative post. We were both excited at the prospect of getting to see each other frequently and going on hunting expeditions together, as we did when we were teenagers. However, before our plans could be realized,

3. A small group leader in our church called me for guidance in dealing with a member of the group. It seems that during a Bible study this member blurted out her anger at God over the fact that she had recently been diagnosed with MS. “I don’t understand why God is doing this to me!” she exclaimed. She was grieving the loss of her health. Rather than processing this tragic reality through the biblical perspective of the love of a sovereign God who had given her the promise to “work all things together for good,” she was following the pattern of the world by slipping into anger.

he was taken from me, and I knew for the first time what it felt like to lose a loved one prematurely. My mother, on the other hand, lost seven children. Four of them were late-term pregnancies before she turned twenty-one. Your loss is your reality, just as my loss was my reality. Most of us would think of my mother's losses as almost intolerable. But they were her losses—and they were tolerable.

So, what is grief to us as believers? How do we define it? How do we describe it? As I did the word study mentioned earlier, I found a common element in the references I consulted. It is this: pain! It is felt physically. It is felt emotionally. It is felt spiritually. Sometimes our bodies hurt as our souls agonize. Sometimes we feel like we will burst from the pressure of our emotional turmoil. Sometimes we feel spiritually numb—as though God were not there. Grief is a complex of experiences. It cannot simply be characterized as a series of predictable stages. It is impossible to order the dimensions of the experience in a linear fashion. For example, a person may not experience anger at the loss of a mate immediately following the funeral. However, nine months later, when certain tax irregularities cause serious complications with settling the estate, anger may become a real issue. We cannot simply move from one stage (denial) to another (anger), proceeding through the sequence. Grief is an individual experience, not a predetermined psychological maze through which everyone necessarily passes. It is not a social phenomenon. It is a uniquely complex experience, not a routine series of simple steps.

Well, then, how is the Christian to experience grief? I would like to walk you through the Scriptures and sketch for you the elements of Christian grieving.

To do this, we begin with the church at Thessalonica. This is a church that Paul planted. Paul writes to them—commending them, encouraging them, and answering questions that they have raised about the Christian life. One of those questions has to do with those who have fallen asleep—that is, died (1 Thess. 4:13). Paul begins with the reality: the Thessalonians will no longer have

them in their lives. He affirms their grief, but he limits it, “so that you will not grieve as do the rest who have no hope” (4:13). Next he outlines the reason for not grieving as the rest grieve. Paul writes: “For if we believe that Jesus died and rose again, even so God will bring with Him those who have fallen asleep [died] in Jesus” (4:14). He ties the limits of our grief to our own personal faith. In other words, if we are believers, then our grief is limited by our faith. Since I believe that I and all other believers will be raised from the dead, then I cannot allow my loss to encumber my life with crippling pain and sadness. In other words, through the indwelling power of the Holy Spirit, I must choose to limit the effects of my grief. As in all other aspects of life, in dealing with grief Christians do not appropriate the power of their faith with the same spiritual dexterity. However, the message of the apostle Paul is that we do not have to experience grief in the same way as those who have no hope. We know that Jesus has removed “the sting of death” and replaced it with eternal life (1 Cor. 15:54–57). We also know that he has given to us the Comforter. Hence, we have confidence regarding our loved one, and we have solace for our souls as we adjust to our loss. It is now a matter of appropriating these spiritual verities in our lives.

If our loved one was not a believer, what then? How do we process the grief? I believe that we rest in the sovereignty of God (see Ps. 139:14; Rom. 9:1–6, 18–21). Ultimately each individual is responsible to believe the Gospel message. In John 1:12, Jesus said, “But as many as received him, to them gave he power to become the sons of God, even to them that believe on his name.” In John 6:44, this same Jesus said, “No man can come to me except the Father which sent me draw him” (KJV). So when we lose a loved one whose relationship with God is questionable, we must accept the reality that his or her eternal destiny is dependent on one side upon the reception or rejection of Jesus, and on the other side upon God’s initiative to draw him or her to himself.⁴

4. Two days before my father died, I stood at the foot of his bed while he rested in a semi-comatose state. I prayed, “Father, I am hopeful that in his closing hours of