

# Grief / Church of the Open Bible / 05.15.16

[Much of this is taken from counseling guidance from Insight for Living]

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## Introduction [following the Skit Guys video “Mourning Booth”]

† This will not be one of my more playful sermons. We will not struggle to understand complex theology or define any Greek words. What we have today, is an opportunity to think scripturally about an issue that affects all of us sometime, and has affected most of us in recent years. Let’s ask for comfort and guidance, and then we will look at some scripture. . .

† In the Bible, we find several causes for grief.

- Sometimes we grieve over our own sinfulness. Talking about his sin, David said, [**Psalm 38.6 NASB**] **I am bent over and greatly bowed down; I go mourning all day long.**
- We might grieve about our life circumstances. Approaching his crucifixion, Jesus told three of his closest disciples, [**Mark 14.34 NET**] **“My soul is deeply grieved, even to the point of death.”**
- We grieve for the suffering of others. When Saul threatened to kill David, [**1 Samuel 20.34 NASB**] **Jonathan arose from the table in fierce anger, and did not eat food on the second day of the new moon, for he was grieved over David because his father had dishonored him.**
- We grieve about the sins of others; as a pastor, this is a big one for me. One day in synagogue, when Jesus knew the religious leaders were more interested in rituals than in healings he was [**Mark 3.5 NET**] **grieved by the hardness of their hearts.**
- About sin, even God grieves. Speaking of Israel turning away from God, Isaiah wrote, [**Isaiah 63.10 NIV**] **Yet they rebelled and grieved his Holy Spirit.**
- Because we understand salvation, we grieve about the lostness we see in others: Realizing most of his people in Israel did not believe in Jesus as the Messiah, Paul wrote, [**Romans 9.2 NASB**] **I have great sorrow and unceasing grief in my heart.**
- We experience an especially acute grief for our loved ones who go astray. **Proverbs 17.25 NASB: A foolish son** [which in the Bible’s wisdom literature is one who walks apart from God] **is a grief to his father and bitterness to her who bore him.**
- We grieve for broken relationships: When he was estranged from his son, Absalom, [**2 Samuel 13.37 HCSB**] **David mourned for his son every day.**

† I am sure there are other reasons we grieve and mourn. Most often we associate grieving and mourning with the death of a loved one.

- In 2013, 0.8% of the US population died; that’s 2.6M people, one death for every 125 residents. In our church, in the last three years, at least half of our families have had a beloved friend or relative die. Some of us more than one.
- Matthew wrote that the disciples [**Matthew 17.23 NASB**] **“were deeply grieved”** when they heard Jesus would have to die.
- Jesus wept at a funeral [**John 11.35**], though – since he knew he would raise Lazarus from the dead – I think he wept over the sin which death represents and in compassion for his sorrowful friends. No doubt Jesus had loved ones die before that day, and experienced human grief.

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## What to expect

- † Our grief experiences can vary, but most people experience recognizable stages of grief. Often we start with denial. It's not that we intellectually deny that our loved one has died, but emotionally we are in shock, detached from reality.
  - This is a coping mechanism to avoid the severity of the pain. It helps us get through the tasks of burial and estate settlement; it is less dangerous than coping mechanisms like getting drunk.
  - On the other hand, it is a form of self-deception and it delays the healing process, so we need to move past denial, to allow ourselves to hurt over our loss, as soon as we can stand it.
  
- † Once we start emotionally processing our loss, we often feel anger. This is normal, and in a safe context it is ok to express aloud your anger at God, at the deceased, at others involved in the death, or at the world in general. In time, to be healthy, we have to forgive and let our anger subside.
  - David would cry out angrily at God, about the causes of his pain and about God's lack of intervention on his behalf. But in these "lament psalms," as they are known, he would conclude with statements of praise and expressions of hope about God's comfort and deliverance.
  - Psalm 22, for example, begins with David crying out, [**Psalm 22.1 HCSB**] **"My God, my God, why have You forsaken me?"** But not long after, he says, [**Psalm 22.23 HCSB**] **"You who fear Yahweh, praise Him!"** and he finishes the psalm with praise and hope.
  
- † Whether or not you go through denial and anger, almost always grief involves great sadness which can feel like depression. This is a normal part of our healing process which will ease in time.
  - Most of this discussion relates best to grief about death, but any cause for grief can lead us into these emotional stages. I had surgery last year on my left shoulder. This year, while rehabbing my left shoulder, I hurt my right shoulder; and now my back hurts. As I was preparing this sermon, I realized I went through denial and anger, and I am depressed about the ongoing pain.
  - As we turn to God in our sadness, God empowers us to find emotional closure and recovery. If we honestly express our grief to God, then we will heal more quickly and thoroughly. God designed us to need him and each other, so – though our instinct when grieving is to isolate – we should allow God to work through the body of Christ to help us heal.
  - It is common to feel guilt with the sadness. Sometimes we feel guilty that we were not kinder or more attentive to the deceased; I have struggled a lot with that. Sometimes we think we deserve some blame, but keep in mind that death comes to all in this fallen world, and this is because of the curse associated with the original sin, not with anything we have done. Under the New Covenant, with Jesus already having paid the penalty for our sins, the death of a loved one cannot ever be a sign of God's anger specifically toward us. Let that truth comfort you.
  
- † Eventually, if we avoid guilt while allowing ourselves to feel the pain, we will come to acceptance, coming to terms with the truth of the situation and learning to go on in life. We will start to have moments of joy and peace again, and be more ready to invest energy in life and in those still living.
  
- † As we go through this, there are four basic steps to overcoming grief. At first, we focus on accepting the reality of the loss. Then we work through the pain of grief. Third, we adjust to the new situation of living without the deceased or with whatever other tragic circumstances brought on the grief.

- Then we learn to move on with life. We stop asking why this happened and start thinking how to go on. This does not mean we forget or stop caring about the deceased, just that the pain softens enough so we can accept the loss and reinvest ourselves into those still living. Healthy grieving allows for both old memories and new dreams, remembering fondly the events and people of our past while continuing to have new relationships and new experiences.

† You might have recurring periods of sorrow in the following months, even years.

- You will think of your loved one when you see something s/he would have liked or something you would have shared together. Every day for twenty years, I looked down for my cat, Bandit, as I entered my home, because he sometimes would try to escape. Years after his death, I sometimes would still do this, and then I would hurt a little. It was the same when I would find articles my grandparents would have liked to read.
- These painful moments should diminish in duration and intensity, but improvement might not be steady, so don't become discouraged. Continue to process your thoughts and feelings with God, allow yourself to cry and cry out, and be confident that God is at work healing you.
- When the intense grieving is over, it is helpful to have a support group for this longer phase of the recovery process. A grief-care group, your church small group, or select relatives and life-long friends, you can gather with whomever you like, but find people who will listen, pray, and be available to you. Fight against the instinct to isolate.

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### Why we grieve

† Let's talk about why we grieve. About death, we rightly grieve for good reasons.

- Death is not part of God's created order, it is the sad result of sin and brokenness in the world. When Adam and Eve first sinned, God said it would bring them physical death, and since that time death has been inevitable for all living things.
- Even if the deceased is now at peace in Heaven, we are left behind to suffer on without our loved one, experiencing the emptiness and agony of having someone we love be taken from us.
- When Jacob mistakenly believed that his son Joseph was dead, [**Genesis 37.34-35 NET**] **Jacob tore his clothes, put on sackcloth, and mourned for his son many days. All his sons and daughters stood by him to console him, but he refused to be consoled. "No," he said, "I will go to the grave mourning my son." So Joseph's father wept for him.**

† Another reason we grieve – which Jacob might not have understood – is that this is God's way of bringing us healing and closure. Jesus, who has the heart of God, felt compassion for a grieving mother in Luke 7.13. He understands our grief, and cares about our pain, as does God the Father.

- **2 Corinthians 1.3-4 NIV: Praise be to the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of compassion and the God of all comfort, who comforts us in all our troubles, so that we can comfort those in any trouble with the comfort we ourselves receive from God.**
- God has designed us to grieve over death. Today's pain has a vital purpose, allowing us to say good-bye to the past so we can live in the present and build a healthy future. In our sorrow, we can sense God's empowerment.
- If we try to deny the grief, then we will not heal. We can deceive ourselves mentally, maybe, but the hurt will fester inside, doing ongoing damage until we finally deal with it. On the other

hand, if we allow ourselves to mourn, then God will comfort us, heal us, and deliver us to greater strength, faith, and equipping to help others who are mourning.

- **Psalm 46.1 NIV: God is our refuge and strength, an ever-present help in trouble. Psalm 147.3 NIV: He heals the brokenhearted and binds up their wounds.** As we grieve, he is at work within us, comforting, sustaining, and healing.

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## Helping Others

† Let's talk a little about helping people who are mourning.

- If grief is a necessary response to tragedy, if it is part of God's process of bringing closure and healing, would it be right to talk someone out of grieving? Not if it is healthy grief. You have to let them go through it. So don't try to kid them out of it or tell them to look on the bright side. During the first three phases of grief, don't try to shift their focus off themselves or get them comforting you; they need to focus on themselves until they reach the acceptance phase.
- We can comfort people; after all, the 2 Corinthians verse we just read said that God comforts us so that we can comfort others. When two sons were murdered, [**1 Chronicles 7.22 ESV**] **Ephraim their father mourned many days, and his brothers came to comfort him.**
- Paul was comforted to know others were mourning for his situation. **2 Corinthians 7.7 NET: We were encouraged not only by his [Titus'] arrival, but also by the encouragement you gave him, as he reported to us your longing, your mourning, your deep concern for me, so that I rejoiced more than ever.**
- But consider the friends of Job, who came to comfort him in his tragic situation. After some of their form of comfort, Job said to them, [**Job 16.2 NET**] **"What miserable comforters are you all!"** They made him feel worse, not better.
- **Romans 12.15 NET: Rejoice with those who rejoice, weep with those who weep.** It is good to show compassion and empathy, to be there for them. You can be kind, bringing food, mowing the lawn, watching the children, whatever is needed. You can be praying for them, and willing to pray with them. You can make yourself available if they want to talk or cry with someone.
- Just don't attempt anything witty or instructive. Don't offer platitudes or stories from your life. There is nothing you can say to make it better and lots you can say that will make things worse. A simple "I'm sorry," an expression of empathy, and an open invitation to talk is your best bet.
- Even when people cry out theological questions, it often is best not to answer. That's hard for me, but people going through the denial, anger, or depression phases of grief are not responsive to theological reasoning; they hurt and they need to express it; they need to know you understand and hurt with them. Later, when they are in acceptance, you can talk it through.
- Give grieving people the freedom to feel the grief and deal with it in their own way. Take your cue from the person you are trying to comfort. If they want to relive memories or talk, then go ahead. If they just want to be quiet and alone, give them space. Don't judge them either way.

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## How to respond to grief

† How can we help ourselves while grieving? What will help us most is if we have prepared ourselves theologically before the crisis. The more we understand God and his word correctly, the more

equipped we will be to handle tragedy and consequent grief. The more of God's truth we have in our heads, the more God's word can comfort us and counter any destructive negative thinking.

- **Psalm 119.28 NASB: My soul weeps because of grief; strengthen me [O God] according to Your word.** When we are grieving, we might want to avoid scripture, but this is counter-productive. Read and sense God speaking to you, comforting you. Find verses that speak to your struggle. Be strengthened as you read again about God's character, love, and plan.
- **Psalm 23.4 NIV: Even though I walk through the darkest valley, I will fear no evil, for you [O God] are with me.**
- **Psalm 71.20 NIV: Though you have made me see troubles, many and bitter, you will restore my life again; from the depths of the earth you will again bring me up.**

† Throughout the grieving process, it is natural to have questions, like "Isn't prayer supposed to change things?" or "Why didn't God heal or protect my loved one?" We might think our faith failed, Satan won, or God is not as loving or powerful as we hoped. It is common to struggle with God's goodness, love, or sovereignty. It can help to keep in mind some scriptural truths.

- First, we cannot always understand what God is doing or why. **Romans 11.33 NET: Oh, the depth of the riches and wisdom and knowledge of God! How unsearchable are his judgments and how fathomless his ways!**
- Second, faith is not measured by tangible results alone. Hebrews 11 says the prophets were commended for their faith, yet many failed to sway anyone, and two of the greatest – Isaiah and Jeremiah – began their ministries with God telling them they would fail to be persuasive.
- Third, death is not a failure of prayer or faith, because everyone dies, even the righteous. James, one of the three people closest to Jesus during his ministry, was the second recorded martyr after Jesus left. **Acts 12.2 NIV: He [King Herod Agrippa] had James, the brother of John, put to death with the sword.** Even Jesus died, as part of God's plan.
- Fourth, God is trustworthy even when we do not understand what he is doing or why. God loves us even when he allows us to hurt. God is pleased with our faith, even when we don't get the results we want. And God is all powerful, even when he does not do what we want.
- Whatever thoughts or feelings you have in your grief, be honest with yourself and with God about them. Being honest with God does not turn him away, it helps you sense he is near.

† Scripture also gives us hope, which can mitigate some of our sorrow and facilitate healing.

- Speaking to the exiles, Isaiah quoted God saying to Israel, **[Isaiah 60.20 NASB] "[There will come a day when] Your sun will no longer set, Nor will your moon wane; For you will have the LORD for an everlasting light, And the days of your mourning will be over."**
- In **Revelation 21.3-4 ESV**, we have a vision from John: **And I heard a loud voice from the throne saying, "Behold, the dwelling place of God is with man. He will dwell with them, and they will be his people, and God himself will be with them as their God. He will wipe away every tear from their eyes, and death shall be no more, neither shall there be mourning, nor crying, nor pain anymore, for the former things have passed away."** So we know an end to our sorrow is coming, which gives us hope to carry on.
- **1 Thessalonians 4.13-14 NET: Now we do not want you to be uninformed, brothers and sisters, about those who are asleep [dead], so that you will not grieve like the rest who have**

**no hope. For if we believe that Jesus died and rose again, so also we believe that God will bring with him those who have fallen asleep as Christians.** This is a great comfort when we grieve over believers who have died: their suffering here is over, they are in Heaven now; and we will see them again when we all are resurrected to life on the renewed earth at the end.

- Notice Paul does not say we should avoid grieving. He says we are not to grieve like [or in the same manner] as those who have no hope. Our hope is sure, so our grief is more mild and brief. It is hard when the deceased was not a Christian, but even then we can hope that God extended grace at the last moment. I have to hope that for most of my dead relatives. It is a painful reflection, even years later, but hope helps mitigate the pain.
- When the deceased is a young child who never had a chance to know Christ, we still can hope that our beloved is in Heaven. Most Christian theologians believe such children remain under God's protection. This certainly was David's belief. When his young child died, he said, [2 Samuel 12.22-23 NET] **"While the child was still alive, I fasted and wept because I thought, 'Perhaps the LORD will show pity and the child will live. But now he is dead. Why should I fast? Am I able to bring him back? I will go to him, but he cannot return to me!'"**
- Pastor Chuck Swindoll commented, "David knew that he would see his child again when, following death, he entered into God's presence. We also know that God's heart is tender toward little children. Thus, we can be assured of the destiny of our little ones who die before they are capable of accepting Christ." LeeAnn and I are clinging to this hope for our unborn child. We anticipate someday rejoicing and praising God together with our child.

† As an aside, let me say that the loss of a child, whether in the womb or already born, is a life-shattering ordeal that requires mourning. Even an early-trimester miscarriage involves the loss of a life and of a fond hope. Even the death of a grown child is a severe shock.

- As you grieve, protect your marriage. Fight the instinct to withdraw into private grief, so as to provide each other with mutual support. A counselor can help you speak openly and honestly with each other. Ensure your other children get the counseling and support they need.

† Ok, we said scripture can help us navigate the passage of grief. Prayer also is helpful.

- This is the example of Nehemiah. He wrote, [Nehemiah 1.4 NET] **When I heard these things [some bad news about Jerusalem] I sat down abruptly, crying and mourning for several days. I continued fasting and praying before the God of heaven.**
- Someone grieving once told me, "I've cried myself to sleep every night ... and asked God to help me handle this sorrow and heartbreak." Go ahead, cry out to God, shout at him if you must, cry with him, ask for his comfort. As you pray, he will communicate with your soul.
- While grieving, be vigilant against spiritual and emotional attacks, especially the inclination to isolate, neglect your family's health, or turn to destructive worldly coping mechanisms. This is another reason to stay in scripture, prayer, and relational intimacy throughout this process.

† On the handout, I have listed some problem signs of abnormal grieving. If you notice these in yourself or a loved one, then you should get some counseling help.

† Let me close by saying again that the grieving process is God's method of healing us after tragedy. Stay close to God and to your intimate friends and family, stay hopeful, trust in God to bring you closure and healing, be sure to ask for help if you need it. Let's pray . . .