

## *Grieving Great Losses*

### *2 Samuel 13-18; 1 Thessalonians 4:13*

It was a day of unspeakable grief. The nation was torn by civil war. Although chosen and anointed by God himself, King David was a monarch in exile. He had lost the support of most of the nation. He had lost most of his army. Worse yet, the rebellion was led by David's own son, Absalom. Absalom had already killed his own brother and was now threatening to kill his father David in order to get the throne. David was forced to flee the capitol city of Jerusalem with a small army of loyal friends.

The prospects for victory in that day's battle seemed slim. His generals insisted that King David stay behind lest he be killed or captured by Absalom and his soldiers. As his army marched off to battle David stood by the line to say good-bye and gave a strange last command to his generals that we find recorded in 2 Samuel 18:5: "*Be gentle with the young man Absalom for my sake.*"

David anxiously awaited news. Then two runners came from the battle scene. There were two announcements to make. In a bloody conflict that took 20,000 lives David's army was victorious. And, Absalom was killed. In 2 Samuel 18:33-34 we read:

*The king was shaken. He went up to the room over the gateway and wept. As he went, he said: "O my son Absalom! My son, my son Absalom! If only I had died instead of you—O Absalom, my son, my son!"*

David wailed with grief. Absalom would never succeed him on the throne. Absalom would never have a son of his own. David would not see or talk to his son again.

Now, understand, Absalom was a traitor. Absalom was a murderer. Absalom wanted to kill his father. Absalom would have destroyed Israel. Any rational person would say Absalom got exactly what he deserved. But Absalom was David's son. He loved his son. All the dreams were over. All the future was

sealed. David wasn't thinking about justice or the kingdom. He was grieving the loss of his son.

Grief is like that. Grief is seldom rational. It is always emotional. Grief is our response to the great losses of life.

Grief comes in many different packages, sizes and shapes. Grief may come with the loss of a job that defined how you see yourself. You tried your best. You needed the money. Grief may follow in the wake of a divorce. You loved each other and expected to live happily ever after. What began with so much promise and such high hopes ended with hatred and anger. Grief may be the result of lost finances. All your plans for the future disappeared with a bad investment, lost contract or failed business. Grief comes when there is a disability where your body will not do what you want it to do. All your tomorrows are changed by a disease that can't be cured or an injury that can't be fixed. You look around you and see those who can do all the things

that you want to do but are unable to do. Then there is the grief of a broken relationship. You loved and were hurt. You hoped and were disappointed. You trusted and were betrayed. And there's the grief that comes with death. This is perhaps the cruelest and most final of all losses. Everything you

had hoped for is taken away in its stark finality.

We all have hopes and dreams that have been stolen or shattered. Sometimes it happens over a long period of time; sometimes it is sudden and unexpected. Almost always it is beyond our control. The greatest losses of life are body slams that leave us bruised and broken and unable to imagine how life could ever be good and normal again.

Grief is our response to those losses. It is a mix of the worst of emotions. We are lonely, afraid, overwhelmed, angry, depressed and sad all at the same time. One moment we want to lash out and get even;

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the next moment we want to curl up and die. Grief often brings physical pain. Our bodies ache; our heartbeat changes; we experience shortness of breath, headaches and insomnia.

Grief can be unexpected and unpredictable. A psychologist once told me that just when you think you are finally recovering from your loss and getting over your grief it sneaks up on you from behind and slams you on the side of your head as if with a two-by-four. You can be driving down the highway listening to the radio and finally feeling okay when the color of a passing car, the tune on the radio or a random thought brings grief cascading back all over again.

I will not give you any specific stories of grief because we all have our own. It usually doesn't help to hear about someone else's pain. Sometimes it is even discouraging to be told about others whose circumstances are worse or others who handled their grief with seeming ease. We all have our losses. We all have our pain. Sooner or later we all experience grief.

Our culture has lots of advice for how to deal with grief. Some of it is helpful; some of it is not. We are told that there are stages through which many, but not all, travel: denial; anger; bargaining; depression; and finally acceptance. We are told that time heals all wounds, but some of us know better. We are encouraged to get another dog when the dog dies or another spouse after a divorce. "There are lots of fish in the sea," we're told. "Tough it out, be brave because nobody likes a crybaby!" We are told "that's life" and "you'll just have to go on." And there's some truth in what they say.

But as Christians we have a different kind of grief. I graduated from seminary when I was 24 years old and became the pastor of a church of about 200 in a small Colorado city of 18,000. One distinctive of the town was that it had more nursing home beds per capita than any other city in Colorado. I was often called upon by people I didn't even know and who were not part of the church family to officiate at funerals or pray at the bedside of those who were dying. But my early pastoral encounters with grief were by no means limited to the elderly. There were suicides, car crashes, farm accidents, diseases and a plane crash that took young lives.

Nothing in my life or training had prepared me to walk so often through so much suffering and grief.

For the first time I saw a man die, not on television but in real life. For the first time I had to inform a family about a death. I was in over my head. I did the best I could. I learned a lot of lessons.

I learned that not everyone grieves alike. I saw some grieve out loud and others grieve in silence. I saw some heal quickly and others take a very long time. But there is one lesson that I learned that was profound and more pronounced than all the others. It was the difference in the way Christians and non-Christians grieve. Not in the number of tears or the extremes of emotion but in presence or absence of hope. I saw it even in some of the most immature of believers. It was an obvious distinction that those who are Christians grieved differently because they had hope. You could sense the power of God and the presence of the Holy Spirit in their grief. It was amazing to behold. St. Paul wrote about it in 1 Thessalonians 4:13 when he said, "*Brothers, we do not want you to . . . grieve like the rest of men, who have no hope.*"

Paul's point is simple and significant. Christians grieve. Christians hurt. Christians are sad. Christians cry. But not like those who are not Christians. The difference is that Christians have hope.

Hope is an expectation of a better tomorrow. It is not a denial of loss. It is not the absence of grief. Hope is the deep down conviction that God has something better to come—not because there is any current evidence of anything good but because of a profound trust in God. Hope is about what God will do, not about the way circumstances are.

When Christians grieve we believe in God. We believe that God exists, that he knows about our loss and that he himself is acquainted with grief. Sometimes Christians are angry with God because of the losses we have experienced, but even anger is an acknowledgement of God's person, presence and power. When we grieve we still believe. We know that God is there for us no matter what happens.

When Christians grieve we have sufficient grace. The grace of God is his provision of whatever we need when we need it. For St. Paul his loss was a physical disability that plagued him throughout his adult life. He repeatedly pleaded with God to heal him and God said no. Finally, in 2 Corinthians 12:9 Paul recorded the words of Jesus as his own: "*My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness.*" He discovered that God gave grace that fit his specific need.

When we fantasize about what can go wrong in life we often think we would crumble under the loss of a child or a career or the ability to walk or to see. But we must realize that God does not give his grace in advance. We can't store it up. However, God does give us grace that is sufficient when that time actually comes. As Christians we do grieve all the while knowing that God will be there to give us sufficient grace that we cannot imagine until we need it.

When Christians grieve we often hope for relief from the immediate pain of grief. We pray for the current problem to be fixed, for a cure for the disease, for restoration of the relationship, for a better grade or for a new job. And, to tell the truth, God often comes through with stunning blessings. I have often had people tell me that God took the worst thing that ever happened to them and made it into the best thing in their lives. One man told me that the best thing that ever happened to him was to lose a job he loved because that job loss was a tool of God to start a business he never would have attempted. However, grief does not always turn into happiness. When someone you love dies there are no replacements. When a dream is shattered there is not always a better dream around the corner.

As Christians we have an ultimate hope. It is an eternal hope for heaven and happiness that will last forever. I do not pretend that eternal hope heals the wounds of grief but it makes an indescribable difference. No matter how bad life gets we have the promise of Jesus Christ for a far better eternity. It may be ten years off or fifty years off but Revelation 21:4 tells us that heaven is coming where God *“will wipe every tear from their eyes. There will be no more death or mourning or crying or pain, for the old order of things has passed away.”*

When Christians grieve we have the family of faith. We are never alone. Jesus gave us his church and other Christians to help us through—not the institution of the church but relationships. Christian friends are a gift from God when we are grieving. I have watched Christians go through grief that I don't have words to describe and I've seen other

Christians stand with them and help them better than the best of families.

Build Christians relationships before you need them. Sometimes we receive calls from people facing great losses and discover that there is no record of them ever connecting with Wooddale Church. They have never attended a class. They have never made friends. We do all we can to help but we sincerely wish they had become better connected to the family of faith before tragedy struck so that we could better minister to them when they need it the most. Christians never need to grieve alone. We have brothers and sisters in Christ who will share the grief with us.

So then, what's a Christian to do? How are we

to act like Christians not only in the best of times but also in the worst of times?

Certainly, grieve your loss. Cry. Jesus did. We read in John 11 that Jesus wept at the tomb of his friend Lazarus. You don't have to bury the sad-

ness. You don't need to hide the anger. You don't need to cover the hurt and pretend to have Christian happiness. It's okay to grieve. In fact, it's good to grieve. Those who bury their grief risk creating a toxic waste site deep in their souls that will cause pain and pollution later in life. 2 Thessalonians 4:13 does not discourage or prohibit grief. Christians grieve but not like those who have no hope. We grieve but it's a different kind of grief.

Affirm your faith. Faith is for the best of times and the worst of times. In the midst of grief, declare that you believe in God. Actually tell God that you believe in him, that you trust Jesus for eternal life and that you trust Jesus for what you are going through. Even if it is difficult to do—in the middle of your grief—renew your faith and allegiance in Jesus Christ as your Savior and Lord. Don't let your grief distance you from Jesus at the time you need him most of all.

Accept help. Many of us want to withdraw when we are grieving. That's what I want to do. I prefer to grieve alone. It's hard enough for me to handle my own emotions without having to deal

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with the emotions of other people. However, prolonged isolation is seldom good. We need the counsel, encouragement, wisdom and experience of other Christians. So let others help you. Accept their calls. Let them pray for you. Share your feelings. Go to a support group. Allow the grace of God to flow through others to you.

Serve others. Modern psychologists tell us that when we are grieving may be a very good time to help others. We will bless them but we will also help to heal ourselves. But this expression of Christian grief doesn't come from psychology; it comes from the Bible in 2 Corinthians 1:3-4:

*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 have received from God.*

Maybe most of all we act like Christians by holding on to our hope. At the heart of all that is Christian is hope. Hope is the expectation of a better tomorrow. When we become Christians we trust Jesus to forgive our sins and give us eternal life

with him in heaven. When we go through the difficulties, setbacks and disappointments of life we trust God to get us through to a better future. As Christians we can even look death in the eye and be assured of eternal life that has been promised by God. Through Jesus Christ there is always more. Through Jesus Christ there is always better. There is always Jesus.

In the greatest losses, when deeply discouraged, when scared to death—don't give up. Hold on to hope. But, even if you lose hope, even if you decide to quit, even when grief is winning, God will not quit. God will not give up on you. God will never let go. Jesus Christ will hang in there with you until hope comes back.

Paul wrote to the Thessalonians, “*Christians, we do not want you to grieve like those who have no hope.*” And Jesus said in John 16:20, “*You will grieve, but your grief will turn to joy.*”

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