

The Valley of the Shadow of Death – Part I – Grief

Psalm 46:1-2 [Tears are OK today]

What is grief? “Grief is the normal and natural emotional reaction to loss or change of any kind. “Grief is the conflicting feelings caused by the end of or change in a familiar pattern of behavior.”

When someone important to us dies, it represents an end to what has been familiar for us, and we must adapt to that new—usually unwanted—reality. There are often conflicting emotions. If the person you loved was sick for a long time and suffered, you are sad they are gone, you are upset there was not a miracle, but you are relieved they are not suffering any longer.

Grief can happen with any loss: a divorce, a loss of a dream, even in retirement. In retirement, you miss your work, you miss the people, but you are glad to be free from the stress and the freedom to try some new things.

God gives us grief to help us heal a broken heart. Grief is often misunderstood. We are not comfortable talking about death in America. All of us experience grief in one way or another. As Christians we have a Shepherd who can help us in our grief and He can guide us as we walk through the valley of the shadow of death.

In 1969 Elisabeth Kubler-Ross published a book titled, “On Death and Dying.” Kubler-Ross’s work began with patients who were dying and how they came to terms with their own death. It easily expanded to those close to the one dying. Later she applied it to other types of loss. Not everyone experiences grief this way. There is a part of me that does not like sharing so much non-Biblical material in this message, but this work has been helpful to many and it gives us a framework to discuss grief.

Stages of Grief

Elisabeth Kubler-Ross (EK-R) identified five stages of grief. Let’s look at them briefly: [These definitions come from grief.com a website by David Kessler who worked with EK-R.]

1. Denial - Denial is the first of the five stages [emotions] of grief. It helps us to survive the loss. In this stage, life makes no sense. We are in a state of shock and denial. We go numb. We wonder how we can go on, if we can go on, why we should go on. We try to find a way to simply get through each day. Denial and shock help us to cope and make survival possible. **Denial helps us to pace our feelings of grief. There is a grace in denial. It is nature’s way of letting in only as much as we can handle.** As you accept the reality of the loss and start to ask yourself questions, you are unknowingly beginning the healing process. You are becoming stronger, and the denial is beginning to fade. But as you proceed, all the feelings you were denying begin to surface.

2. Anger - Anger is a necessary stage of the healing process [for some people]. Be willing to feel your anger. The more you truly feel it, the more it will begin to dissipate and the more you will heal. **There are many other emotions under the anger and you will get to them in time, but anger is the emotion we are most used to managing.** Anger can extend not only to your friends, the doctors, your family, yourself and your loved one who died, but also to God. You may ask, “Where is God in this? **Underneath anger is pain, your pain.** [This anger is often confusing to people who are not normally angry. It can be part of grief.]

3. Bargaining - Before a loss, it seems like you will do anything if only your loved one would be spared. "Please God, " you bargain, "I will never be angry at my wife again if you'll just let her live." After a loss, bargaining may take the form of a temporary truce. "What if I devote the rest of my life to helping others. Then can I wake up and realize this has all been a bad dream?" **We become lost in a maze of "If only..." or "What if..." statements.** We want life returned to what it was; we want our loved one restored. We want to go back in time: find the tumor sooner, recognize the illness more quickly, stop the accident from happening... if only, if only, if only.

Guilt is often bargaining's companion. The "if onlys" cause us to find fault in ourselves and what we "think" we could have done differently. We may even bargain with the pain. We will do anything not to feel the pain of this loss. We remain in the past, trying to negotiate our way out of the hurt. People often think of the stages as lasting weeks or months. They forget that the stages are responses to feelings that can last for minutes or hours as we flip in and out of one and then another. We do not enter and leave each individual stage in a linear fashion. We may feel one, then another and back again to the first one.

4. Depression - After bargaining, our attention moves squarely into the present. Empty feelings present themselves, and grief enters our lives on a deeper level, deeper than we ever imagined. This depressive stage feels as though it will last forever. **It's important to understand that this depression is not a sign of mental illness. It is the appropriate response to a great loss.** We withdraw from life, left in a fog of intense sadness, wondering, perhaps, if there is any point in going on alone? Why go on at all?

Depression after a loss is too often seen as unnatural: a state to be fixed, something to snap out of. The first question to ask yourself is whether or not the situation you're in is actually depressing. The loss of a loved one is a very depressing situation, and depression is a normal and appropriate response. To not experience depression after a loved one dies would be unusual. **When a loss fully settles in your soul, the realization that your loved one didn't get better this time and is not coming back is understandably depressing.** If grief is a process of healing, then depression is one of the many necessary steps along the way. [But you do not want to get stuck here or in any of the stages of grief.]

5. Acceptance - Acceptance is often confused with the notion of being "all right" or "OK" with what has happened. This is not the case. Most people don't ever feel OK or all right about the loss of a loved one. **This stage is about accepting the reality that our loved one is physically gone and recognizing that this new reality is the permanent reality.** We will never like this reality or make it OK, but eventually we accept it. We learn to live with it. **It is the new norm with which we must learn to live.** We must try to live now in a world where our loved one is missing.

We must learn to reorganize roles, re-assign them to others or take them on ourselves.

Finding acceptance may be just having more good days than bad ones. As we begin to live again and enjoy our life, we often feel that in doing so, we are betraying our loved one. We can never replace what has been lost, but we can make new connections, new meaningful relationships. Instead of denying our feelings, we listen to our needs; we move, we change, we grow. We invest in our friendships and in our relationship with ourselves. We begin to live again, but we cannot do so until we have given grief its time.

[The stages] are tools to help us frame and identify what we may be feeling. Our hope is that with these stages comes the knowledge of grief 's terrain, making us better equipped to cope with life and loss. At times, people in grief will often report more stages. Just remember your grief is as unique as you are. [End of material from website]

Our Faith Can Impact the Way We Grieve

Everyone grieves differently. Some people do not experience all of the stages. It is possible to experience more than one of the stages or emotions at once. It is possible to go back and forth between them. You may experience feelings other than the five listed here. Our faith can make a difference in how we approach death of a loved one and the death of a dream.

1 Thessalonians 4:13 But we do not want you to be uninformed, brethren, about those who are asleep, so that you will not grieve as do the rest who have no hope.

The Bible does not say do not grieve. It says do not grieve as those who have no hope. The worst thing we can do is to try to not grieve. I would be more concerned about you if you were not upset. The main thing is to keep moving in the Valley under the guidance of our Shepherd. God has given us emotions. God has given us grief. **If we do not grieve now, we will get sick or have to take time to grieve later.**

It is possible to feel guilty if we do not feel grief deeply. "Have I cried enough?" "Have I hurt enough?" We all grieve differently and circumstances around the loss affect how we grieve. Let God guide you in your grief – grieve the way He made you to grieve and you will be OK.

If you break your arm you get a cast and everyone knows something is wrong so they are careful around you. When your arm is in a cast you don't expect as much out of yourself. You realize there are some things you can't do while your arm is getting well. It is also hard to get comfortable. Grief is like a cast for your broken heart, except others can't see the cast. You should not expect as much out of yourself, there will be some things that will be very difficult for you (like going to another funeral), and it will be hard to be comfortable in some settings. A person who loses a spouse suddenly feels uncomfortable in a couples class, but this is where your friends are. Sometimes you have to fight through the discomfort to stay connected.

Ways to Help and Not Help Someone in Grief

The Best Things to Say to Someone in Grief

1. I am so sorry for your loss.
2. I wish I had the right words, just know I care.
3. I don't know how you feel, but I am here to help in anyway I can.
4. You and your loved one will be in my thoughts and prayers.
5. My favorite memory of your loved one is...
6. I am always just a phone call away [sometimes we need to call].
7. Give a hug instead of saying something
8. We all need help at times like this, I am here for you
9. I am usually up early or late, if you need anything
10. Saying nothing, just be with the person

The Worst Things to Say to Someone in Grief

1. At least she lived a long life, many people die young
2. He is in a better place
3. She brought this on herself
4. There is a reason for everything
5. Aren't you over him yet, he has been dead for a while now
6. You can have another child still
7. She was such a good person God wanted her to be with him
8. I know how you feel
9. She did what she came here to do and it was her time to go
10. Be strong

Christians can approach the death of a saved loved one with assurance that we will see them again, but that does not mean we are not sad they are gone. When we love someone greatly we miss them when they are gone. Even if they have been really sick, we still miss them. There are a lot of memories. There are a lot of emotions.

Surviving grief is an individual thing. Some people need silence, some need to talk. Some write and some do for others. Some people do different things at different stages of the grief. Our goal should be to love them and help them the way they want to be helped.

The Best Traits of Friends who Help in Grief

- 1 Supportive, but don't try to fix the pain.
- 2 Try to understand the feeling of the friend, not focus on their own feelings.
- 3 A calming presence, listening, not forcing the grieving friend into making decisions too quickly.
- 4 Understanding, admitting, they can't make the pain go away.
- 5 Allows the friend to grieve, does not push them to "get over it."
- 6 Recognize loss – talk about the loved one when appropriate.
- 7 There is not a prescribed timeline for grief. It is not unusual to be in active grief for a year.

"You will not 'get over' the loss of a loved one; you will learn to live with it. You will heal and you will rebuild yourself around the loss you have suffered. You will be whole again but you will never be the same. Nor should you be the same, now would you want to." Kubler-Ross

We must look to our Shepherd. It gets especially dark in the Valley of Grief. Your Shepherd loves you, even if you are angry with Him. He will guide you. He will tell you when to rest, and when to get up and move. You should spend extra time at His feet, in His Word, in Silence before Him, even honestly pouring out your heart to Him. Jesus will be your Counselor and He will guide you through the Valley of Grief. Grief does not last forever. You can walk into the sunlight again.

Grief comes in one size, Extra Large. If we tuck it away in the bottom drawer where it never sees the light of day, it remains exactly the same. On the other hand, if we wear it, feel it, talk about it, and share it with others, it is likely that it will become faded, shrunk and worn, or will simply no longer fit. When grief has served its purpose, we are able to recognize the many gifts we have gained.

~ Dianne Arcangel, in Life After Loss : Conquering Grief and Finding Hope

From a blog by Jordan Ghawi [I saw this on FaceBook]

“Grief, you’ll find it comes in waves. When the ship is first wrecked, you’re drowning, with wreckage all around you. Everything floating around you reminds you of the beauty and the magnificence of the ship that was, and is no more. And all you can do is float. You find some piece of the wreckage and you hang on for a while. Maybe it’s some physical thing. Maybe it’s a happy memory or a photograph. Maybe it’s a person who is also floating. For a while, all you can do is float. Stay alive.

In the beginning, the waves are 100 feet tall and crash over you without mercy. They come 10 seconds apart and don’t even give you time to catch your breath. All you can do is hang on and float. After a while, maybe weeks, maybe months, you’ll find the waves are still 100 feet tall, but they come further apart. When they come, they still crash all over you and wipe you out. But in between, you can breathe, you can function. You never know what’s going to trigger the grief. It might be a song, a picture, a street intersection, the smell of a cup of coffee. It can be just about anything...and the wave comes crashing. But in between waves, there is life.

Somewhere down the line, and it’s different for everybody, you find that the waves are only 80 feet tall. Or 50 feet tall. And while they still come, they come further apart. You can see them coming. An anniversary, a birthday, or Christmas. You can see it coming, for the most part, and prepare yourself. And when it washes over you, you know that somehow you will, again, come out the other side. Soaking wet, sputtering, still hanging on to some tiny piece of the wreckage, but you’ll come out.

The waves never stop coming, and somehow you don’t really want them to. But you learn that you’ll survive them. And other waves will come. And you’ll survive them too. If you’re lucky, you’ll have lots of scars from lots of loves. And lots of shipwrecks.”

Isaiah 41:10 “So do not fear, for I am with you; do not be dismayed, for I am your God. I will strengthen you and help you; I will uphold you with my righteous right hand.”

Isaiah 43:2 “When you pass through the waters, I will be with you; and when you pass through the rivers, they will not sweep over you. When you walk through the fire, you will not be burned; the flames will not set you ablaze.”

Psalms 18:28 “You, Lord, keep my lamp burning; my God turns my darkness into light.”

Psalms 46:1-2 “God is our refuge and strength, a very present help in trouble. Therefore we will not fear, though the earth should change and the mountains slip into the heart of the sea.”

Psalms 73:26 “My flesh and my heart may fail, but God is the strength of my heart and my portion forever.”

Psalms 22:24 “For he has not despised or scorned the suffering of the afflicted one; he has not hidden his face from him but has listened to his cry for help.”

Psalms 34:18 “The Lord is close to the brokenhearted and saves those who are crushed in spirit.”