

Healing & Learning to Live with Grief

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An Eruption of Grief

Just four days after my wife and I were married, I found myself at my new in-laws' house, surrounded by her 10 brothers and sisters, and many of their spouses, watching, praying, as my new father-in-law, her father, passed away. This didn't come up as a surprise. He had been diagnosed with stage 4 pancreatic cancer several months earlier, but we had watched him deteriorate over those months. And the Lord had worked powerfully in the family, and there had been great moments of reconciliation, great moments of the Lord's presence.

But in that moment, as he was surrounded by his 11 children, his loving wife of 40 some years, as, in that moment, when he passed away, there was still, as best described, kind of an eruption of grief. They're a believing family. We're a believing family. We knew that he was a disciple and that he was hopefully going to quickly see the face of Christ and be welcomed into the kingdom. But there was still something, there was still real loss. I mean, he was dead. He was gone. Our time with him in the way that we had grown accustomed to was no more.

About four years later, the same exact process basically happened with my dad. My dad was my hero. He was my best friend. I talked to him every day. I grew up wanting to be like him. As I matured into adulthood, he was my constant companion and cheerleader and friend throughout this whole thing of life. And get a call from him one day, and he had been diagnosed with stage 4 cancer, extremely rare form of cancer, only about 50 people get it every year in the country. And I watched this 63 year old man who didn't smoke, didn't drink, worked out every day, go from a healthy, all in disciple, loved his wife, loved his kids, loved his grandkids, to about a year later, I'm in his hospice room, I'm holding this hand, my brother and I are praying with our spouses and with my mom, and we're praying and we're kind of sending him into heaven. We're praying him into the kingdom.

And I was heartbroken. I mean, this is my guy. I was so, so sad. I remember just this profound experience of grief in that moment. Then a few years after that, one of the other most significant men in my life, my uncle, also got diagnosed with cancer. And after a long battle with it, also succumb to it. And in that moment, I also experienced a very acute grief, not only of losing him, but the memories of my dad and my father-in-law, all these really important men in my life who have been foundational into who I am, were now gone.

And I was reminded in that time of grief that comes from death of that scripture tells us life is short, it's like a passing shadow, here today, gone tomorrow, a little puff of smoke. And also reminded of some of the prayers that we pray of the Psalms of this clear, there's this grief and there's this suffering and there's this common experience to all mankind of trials and tribulations here on earth, that everybody dies, and everybody suffers, and, therefore, everybody grieves. We're all walking through a valley of the shadow of death. There's a certain way that we are not where we should be. And we're not yet in the place where every tear will be wiped and every tongue will confess and all wrongs will be made right. And that we're not quite in that place yet,

right of that peace and that joy, that is not just fleeting as it often feels here on earth, but is everlasting. Of course, I'm talking about heaven. This side of heaven, grief is a reality.

We are Not Conquered by Grief

And I just gave you some examples of grief in my life that came from death. But there's all sorts of different grief, right? It could be death of a loved one. It could be the loss of a job. It could be the rupture of a relationship. It could be all sorts of different ways that we are wounded, we are thrust into suffering, and what emerges out of that suffering, emerges out of those trials is those of us in some ways who are left behind or left to pick up the pieces, learning to live with grief. And that's today's topic, how do we learn to live with grief?

And it's really important as we begin this conversation about learning to live with grief is that we got to start right out of the shoot with saying, "We are not conquered by grief. Grief is not the lord of the universe. Grief is not the lord of our lives. Jesus Christ is the Lord of our life." But even as we walk with Him and even as we become more like Him, and even as we grow a deeper in love with the Lord and a deeper faith, that does not eliminate the very real possibility and eventuality of grief.

Yet, what we see in the scriptures and then we see Him through all the history of the church with the saints is, often those who love Him the most often, experience a great deal of suffering, that in those moments of suffering, we are then given an opportunity, a choice as to how we relate to the suffering, who we submit to in the midst of the suffering, do we choose His path that leads to healing, that leads to life, that leads to still the fruit of the Spirit, or do we try to make it our own way and kind of reject that and reject God and get angry at Him? That leads to despair, that does not lead to hope. We're left with those two choices, but there's always, in the life of a disciple, there's this constant reality of suffering and grief, and how are we as a disciple supposed to navigate that.

Four Reminders to Help us Navigate Grief

Well, with all questions, as it relates to the discipleship, the first place to go is to look at Jesus and to say, "How did He handle grief?" And so, what I want to give you is what, kind of four tips or four principles or four reminders to help us navigate grief. Born not only in the life of Jesus, but in my own life as well, that these things that the Spirit has shown me as to how you can not just kind of live and submit to grief, but submit that grief to the Lord and allow yourself to still grow in holiness and still thrive in the midst of it.

It's Okay to Grieve

So, the first thing, when more we're talking about grief, we have to remember, it's okay to grieve. It's okay to weep. It's natural that feelings of sadness will emerge. It's natural that there will be times when things happen in our lives, where the appropriate response is sadness, is a grieving heart. I mean, even Jesus, when He hears about His friend who has died, Lazarus, and He goes, and there's that funny story of how He waits a few days and then He goes 'cause He knows what's coming, but even Jesus who knows what's coming, He knows He's going to raise Lazarus

from the dead, this is going to happen, He's anticipating this, even Jesus who knows what's coming, when He arrives and sees Martha and Mary grieving for their brother, that very beautiful short verse in the scripture, two words, *Jesus wept, Jesus wept.*

The God of the universe, the King of the world, He's a savior of all mankind, the one who was literally about to make that situation right to end their grieving in that moment by bringing their brother back, even Jesus, when He sees the grief of people He loves, Martha and Mary, He also weeps. This should be a tremendous consolation to us. The Lord, in a way there is blessing, mourning, it even says blessed are those who mourn for they shall be comforted, right? There is a way that that mourning that He's talking about is not just physical mourning, it's mourning for souls, it's mourning for our sins. There's lots of different ways that we mourn and grieve. But to see in the story of Lazarus, that Jesus sees the grieving of Martha and Mary and the people that love Lazarus, and He joins them in it.

So, it's okay to give yourself permission to grieve. It's okay to allow some of those emotions to express themselves. Remember, emotions are fantastic companions on the journey of life. They're horrible leaders. You don't want to be governed by your emotions, but you need to pay attention to your emotions. You don't want to be constantly led by them, but you need to be informed by them. You need to be aware of what's happening there. And it's not healthy for the will to so suppress the emotions that we never actually allow ourselves, both even in a physical way, but then it is certainly in an emotional way, to let out the very real things that are going on in our hearts and in our minds. So, number one, as we learn to live with grief, it's okay to grieve, it's okay to weep.

You Cannot Anticipate Grief

Number two, we have to remember that grief is unpredictable. And what I mean by that is, it's almost impossible to anticipate moments when the feelings of sadness, the grieving process is kind of rear its head. I learned this when I was dealing, particularly with my dad where, when he died, I kind of imagined and anticipated that certain moments over the next year would be really hard, like holidays and his birthday and everything. And what I found was I could never really predict when I was going to be sad. The first holiday after he died, the big one was Thanksgiving. And I thought, "Man, this is going to be so hard. He's not here. There's going to be so much grief in this."

And I remember going through Thanksgiving kind of being like, "Oh. Yeah, I miss him. But I don't feel too bad." But then, totally, unexpectedly, the first Michigan football game, we were big Michigan football fans, we've seasoned tickets, we go to the games, and he and I, it was one of our favorite things to do together. And I knew that that would be kind of a traumatic moment to go to a game without him. But it wasn't until a very specific moment when they played the pregame video, kind of a hype video to get the crowd going, that all of a sudden, I found myself crying in the stadium, 110,000 other people around me. And I found myself crying because I missed him so much in that moment. Other times, I'd be driving down the road and a song would come on and that would remind me of him, and I'd find myself grieving.

So, you can't really predict when grief is going to happen, and that's okay. Just know that it's going to happen. And then when it starts to erupt, if it's the appropriate place and time, to allow it to have its moment, to then be able to move past it, because allowing those moments of grief to emerge are part of the healing process of kind of letting some of the poison come out of the wound. Some of the pus that is this open wound, that maybe isn't always an acute pain, but then something presses on it, ooh, that hurts. Then you got to take care of it in that moment. But grief is not predictable. It's very unpredictable.

And so, to know that ahead of time, it's to say, I'm not going to try to anticipate when grief is going to come. I'm just going to go through life, following the Lord, being with the Lord, and when those moments come, I'm going to respond to them accordingly. And I'm not going to stress about if they come, when they come, how they come, I'm just going to move forward with Him." So that's number two.

Thank the Lord Daily

Number three, tip for learning to live with grief is to spend extra time expressing gratitude to the Lord for everything in life, but in particular, for whatever is good, true, and beautiful within the thing that's causing the grief. One of the verses that has helped me so much with grief is from Philippians here. Philippians 4, starting in verse 4, "Rejoice in the Lord always. Again, I will say, rejoice." When St. Paul says this, it would be easy to be like, "What are you talking about, Paul? How can you rejoice always?" I mean, biblically, when you repeat something twice, it's really emphasizing it. "Rejoice in the Lord always. Again, I say, rejoice." And if you're tempted to think, "Paul must be living in a world different than ours," read some of his other letters where he talks about all the sufferings he's been through. He's like, "I've been scourged this many times, I've been shipped wreck this many times, I've been stoned, I've been blah, blah, blah, blah, blah." He's suffered immensely. And somehow, he's still saying rejoice always.

So, what's his secret? What does he say about that? He says, "***Let all men know your forbearance, perseverance. The Lord is at hand.***" One of the ways we know, and we can be confident that we can forbear in a tough time is because the Lord is at hand. What does that mean? He's right on our side. He's not far off. He's right present with us.

And then he says, "***Have no anxiety about anything.***" Again, what a ridiculous statement. I mean, come on, Paul, have no anxiety about anything? What about my finances? What about my marriage? What about my kids? What about my aging parents? Here's the secret. "But in everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made known to God. And the peace of God, which passes all understanding, will keep your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus."

What Paul is saying is pray, supplicate to the Lord, but do it with thanksgiving. Because a grateful heart is not an anxious heart. Gratitude and anxiety cannot coexist. The more we are grateful, the less anxious we become. The more we are grateful, the anxiety around grief dissipates. Does grief go away? No. Actually, sometimes the experience of grief can actually be more profound the more we're grateful.

So, for instance, I've spent a lot of time thanking the Lord for my dad. As I would pray and thank Him for the gift of this father, for my father, often I would feel more sad that he wasn't there, but that type of sadness was almost like a cleansing sadness. It wasn't anxiety ridden. It wasn't the type of sadness that I experienced at different times where I was like, "Oh my gosh, my dad's not here. How am I going to do this? I don't know who I am anymore." Blah, blah, blah. That was anxiety inducing. That was an unhealthy grief. That was actually kind of putting me into deeper bondage to fear. But the more I was grateful for Him, the more I was freed up to recognize the gift that he was in my life, but that the Lord is good and He knows what I need and that He'll take care of me. And the anxiety diminished, even as the grief still exists.

Allow Grief to Run its Course

So, tip number one, remember, it's okay to grieve. Tip number two is recognize that grief is unpredictable. Tip number three is to express what's going on to the Lord with gratitude. Cry out to Him, tell Him that you're grieving, but tell Him how grateful you are for the person or for the situation or for your love or whatever it is. And then, number four is give grief time, give it time.

There's that old adage, time heals all wounds. I'm not sure about that. I mean, there's probably some truth in that. I think the Lord heals all wounds in time. In due time, all wounds are healed by the Lord, either on this side or through death. But there is something right about allowing grief to kind of run its course where, you know, a lot of cultures have times seasons of mourning where you'll actually wear black for a year or black band or something to tell people, like this is a tough time for you, that I'm grieving, I'm mourning someone. And to do that, not just for three days, have a visitation and a funeral and go back to your life, but really recognize that they could take a year to two, years to three years before that really kind of acute, like very strong grieving pain is still right at the surface.

I'm, six years since my dad died, still grieving a lot. But it's not the same as it was. And here's the other thing that comes about that I've noticed is that, as the grief begins to change, as it becomes less acutely painful and less sensitive, less under the surface, as you go longer and longer without those kind of more dramatic moments of grief, there's a temptation to actually feel guilty that you're not grieving the same way that you did before, and that's not okay, that's not right. You can't give yourself a hard time, for as you start to heal and as you start to move on from certain grieving moments, you should be able to celebrate that and thank the Lord for what He's doing and not feel guilty that you don't still feel as badly as you did before. You're not dishonoring the person. You're not dishonoring your experience. You're not kind of putting your head in the sand, if all of a sudden the pain is not the same as it was before. In fact, that's just part of what the Lord wants to do in you.

So, you got to give it time and you have to let that pain emerge and transform. And what I found is like the pain with my dad, the grieving with my dad is no longer kind of right under the surface. It's less likely that I'll just kind of spontaneously burst into tears, which is the first year of this, the whole experience, but more like a dull ache, more like a deep bruise. The Lord's still heal healing it. And if I press hard enough on it, yeah, it'll hurt. But most of the time, I'm able to move forward without that direct awareness of my grief. So, it's okay to grieve. Grief is unpredictable. Let the Lord know what's going on but do it with gratitude. And then give it time.

Our Great Consoler

Friends, our God is the great consoler. He's the great healer. He's the one who truly understands the human experience, as evidenced by Jesus wept, Jesus endured suffering. Jesus came into our experience so that He could transform us, but so that also we could have the confidence that our God is not distant. Our God is not ignorant of what this life is about. No, He's right there with us. So, journey with the Lord, give yourself space to grieve, and have hope and confidence that He'll bring you to healing. God bless you.