

COPING WITH GRIEF

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The Archaeologist John Romer tells of a text found in one of the ancient Greek cities in Turkey which was found with the burial of a child. It was a plea to the boatman who, the Greeks believed, would row the people over the river of death. "Please take special care of our little son. He never did walk well and now he has new shoes".

Grief is one of life's constants. Sooner or later, everyone experiences it. So the questions fly: What is grief, and what does it do to us? How does the Christian faith help us when face it? Can any good come out of it?

In this theology is simply picking up the questions flung at us by life. There's a Peanuts cartoon in which Schroeder and Charlie Brown are on a baseball pitch. Charlie wonders why they always lose their games.

Schroeder tells him "Man is born to trouble as the sparks fly upwards". Charlie looks blank. Linus explains that it's a quote from the book of Job. Lucy comes in with an opinion. "If people have bad luck it's because they have done something wrong". Schroeder returns "that's what Job's friends said, but I doubt it". Lucy comes back with "what about Job's wife? I don't think she gets enough credit". When the other children join in Schroeder says that suffering is important because you mature through it. But who wants to suffer asks Lucy? Pig Pen says "But pain is a part of life". Then Linus says that people who talk only about Job's patience don't understand the book of Job. As they talk on and on Charlie Brown steps away from them. "I don't have a baseball team" he says "I have a theological seminary".

The point is here as so often is that the theological questions come at you straight out of life. You can't be human and not ask them. So today let's look at grief and try to understand it better so that we can deal with it more redemptively when the time comes- as it surely will.

Firstly what is grief anyway? If you had pencil and paper and were asked to write a definition of grief, what would you write? Not long ago scouring for sermon material I came across a book entitled "The painful problems facing today's Minister". Well, I thought that one's book I don't need to read. I could write it myself. Almost every minister could give you an endless list of painful situations they've been part of.

We all know how grief feels and how it hurts. Let me try and define grief- and you can tell me afterwards if I've got near to getting it right. As I understand it grief is above all else about loss. It is the pain we feel when we lose something special to us. It is sorrow, disappointment, loneliness, heartache. Frequently it comes when you lose someone you love. I think of the epitaph to the trooper killed at El Alamein.

"To the world he was a soldier,
To me he was the world".

But it may also come through divorce or separation. It may be loss of job, or health or home. When it comes we can feel Lord Bryon when he wrote "there's no joy the world can give like that it takes away." It is to this situation that Jesus says "Blessed are those who mourn, for they shall be comforted".

The main thing I want to say today is this. Grief is a journey. It has a starting point and a destination. It is an experience we go through. So the Psalmist speaks of walking through "the darkest valley". Like all journeys it takes time. There are different stages we must pass through before we reach our destination. If we can recognise the stages of grief it may make the journey easier. Dr Elisabeth Kübler-Ross suggests there are 5 stages of grief – I'm not quite sticking to hers but I'm not far off.

Stage 1 is numbness, shock, the inability really to take in what has happened. To begin with it's like a bad dream - you can't really believe it's happened. It cannot be true- not really. If you go in the next room the person you love will still be there. When I wake up it will all turn out to be a bad dream.

Then there is the stage of expressed emotions - feelings of pain deep down within us must come out. We need to cry, to talk. Just to sit and sob. Sometimes we resist this, trying to deny our grief. We resort to the stiff upper lip. This is quite dangerous. If you shut your emotions in perhaps you'll never really come to terms with your grief. Certainly it's right to cry. These are the kind of times for which God gave us tears. Sometimes people get embarrassed about crying. Perhaps if they were strong and had faith they wouldn't need to. But if you hit your thumb with a hammer and tears flood into your eyes no-one says you're being weak. You've been hurt. And so with grief. Deep ties have been severed. You have been wounded and deep emotion is welling up in you. You need to talk it out, cry it out. Let it out.

Then comes the stage of loneliness. You feel so alone. People may help you as much as they can but finally it is your pain. No one else can feel it quite as you do - and no one do it for you. You have to walk that valley alone. Of course I don't think anyone is alone in that experience. "Yea though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death I will fear no evil for thou art with me". The words are true but often grief makes them feel unreal. The reality of grief is the absence of God- "My God, my God, why hast thou forsaken me?" The reality of grief is the solitude of pain, the feeling that your heart's in pieces, your mind's a blank.

Then, not always, but quite frequently, there comes a feeling of resentment or anger. Why did this happen? Whose fault was it? Why didn't that nurse spot what was going wrong earlier? Just what was God doing? Why did he allow it? Sometimes there may be feelings of guilt. If only I hadn't said that. Why didn't I say I loved you more? Oddly sometimes people who actually have done as much as any human being could for someone still feel like this.

Finally there is the last stage - the return to ordinary life. That's the victory- to be able to go on with life. The theologian William Barclay lost his daughter in a tragic accident. Afterwards he said "The one saving reaction is simply to go on living, to go on working and to find in the presence of Jesus Christ the strength and courage to meet life with steady eyes".

To be able to go on- that is the challenge of faith, that is the finest tribute we can pay to God and to the one whose loss we mourn. So how does Christian faith help us as we go through the stages of grief?

Firstly claim the healing fellowship of the Church. The times when we are hurt are the times when we most need other people. Let the prayers, the bunch of flowers, the hugs, the cakes, the tender handshakes, the letters be a means of strength. Get back into Church as soon as you can and let the Church be part of God's healing processes.

Secondly use the experience of going through grief so that you come out of the other side having learnt something from the experience. All of us know how ghastly pain could be. But sometimes you find something from it you didn't have before. For a start once you know how terrible pain can be it ought to make you better able to feel the pain of others. When I had gall-stones pains someone told me the pain was the next worst to childbirth – though I have no way of checking this! But at least the pain made me more conscious of what anyone else who had it was feeling. If you've lost someone you love that can be unspeakably terrible – that gives you some idea what others are feeling. And my guess is that most of the real achievements of life come not when everything is easy but when we are put to the test. There's a wonderful quote from the end of Hemmingway's *A Farewell to Arms*: "The world breaks everyone, then some become strong at the broken places." If we're going to have to go through grief let's try and see what we can do with it positively.

And finally, to make that possible, claim the presence of God. This is what Jesus Christ came to show us - that God is with us and for us. "Blessed are those who mourn, for they shall be comforted". It's helpful to remember that the word comfort comes from two Latin words - cum- which means with, and fortis, which means strength. The word *comfort* therefore literally means *with strength*. So this text has this promise in it "When you go through trouble and sorrow, God will give you strength".

Dear friends, I hope you know that is true. There's a story about a man whose wife had died, leaving him with a small son. Back home from the cemetery, they went to bed early because there was nothing else he could bear to do. As he lay there in the darkness - grief-stricken, heartbroken, numb with sorrow - the little boy called from his bed "Daddy, where is mummy" and began to cry.

The Father got up and brought the little boy back to his bed with him but the child was still disturbed and restless and kept saying "Why isn't she here?" "When is she coming back". The father took his son in his arms and held him.

Finally he said "daddy, if your face is towards me. I think I can go to sleep now". And a little while later he was quiet.

The father lay there in the darkness, and then he began to pray "Oh God the way is dark, and I confess that right now I do not see my way through. But if your face is towards me, somehow I think I can make it".

The good news of the Gospel is that God so loved the world, The Good news is that God's face is towards us and so we can make it.

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