What You CAN Say to Someone Who's Grieving

When we lost our (believing) son to suicide last month, we received hundreds of cards and Facebook notes assuring us of people's care and sympathy. What a blessing!

So often, people just don't know what to say in the face of horrific loss and pain, and it's easy to say the wrong thing. One of my favorite-ever blog posts is "What Not to Say When Someone is Grieving."

But I want to share ideas on what has been truly comforting and supportive, because some of the comments we received are how "the God of all comfort" (2 Corinthians 1:3) blessed us, and I hope you find them helpful for crafting what YOU can say to someone in pain.

Bottom line key: what really comforts and encourages us (because we're still making our way through grief) is communicating LOVE. Nothing encourages like the power of love. If you're really crunched for time, scroll to the end for the two most powerful notes we received.

Cards

I am sad and so sorry or all the pain you are experiencing. I'm praying for your peace in the midst of the anguish. With love for you and appreciation for your faithful witness.

May you both feel the hope that anchors our souls—even in dark days and weeks.

I am so sorry for the grave loss you are suffering. I am lifting you up in prayer and asking the Holy Spirit to intercede for you in this time when words are not enough. I ask God to make His nearness evident to you in the coming days

and that His peace would surround and carry you moment by moment. May the Lord bless you and keep you.

There are no words sufficient to convey my deep sympathy for you. Having said that, I know that Curt is now experiencing what those of us who remain can only look forward to—complete fellowship with the Lord Jesus Christ and all the saints who have gone before. You both remain in my heart and prayers.

Praying for an extra measure of God's presence and peace in the days ahead.

We love you and we feel your pain and wish we could bear some of it for you. We lift you up to our Father's grace!

We know that Curt is fully healed and rejoicing with Jesus over the indescribable gift of glory! Still, we cannot fully fathom the deep emotions you are going through. Just know you are and will be in our prayers.

Facebook notes

I will be in prayer asking the Lord to tenderly hold you both in His hands and ease your pain and your grief.

May the Holy Spirit minister to you and meet your needs in ways beyond we could even ask or imagine.

My heart is breaking for you. I'm so sorry. Love you all.

May the Lord be so near, may you cherish your wonderful memories with you son, and may the hope of heaven bring comfort in the deep pain of loss.

No words can adequately comfort—but I am so deeply sorry and I pray for sustaining comfort until the promised reunion.

I am heartbroken for your loss but so grateful for your hope that you will see Curt again.

Oh Sue, words fail. May the peace that passes understanding

come to you, Ray and the family quickly.

Words are inadequate in the midst of such tragedy. Love and prayers for you and your family.

Oh dear friends, we are crushed by this news but we know God’s grace superimposes us in our most difficult moments. We are praying for you in this difficult time and know your future reunion with Curt will erase this present sorrow.

Oh, Sue! I am weeping with you. I am praying for you right now. May the Lord comfort you as only He can. One day, death will be forever defeated and all will be made new. Come quickly, Lord Jesus!

I am asking the Lord to help you feel His presence and strength in tangible ways and that the hope of heaven comforts you. Sending you so much love!

My heart grieves with you, Sue and Ray. May God’s loving presence comfort and sustain you as He did for me four years ago when I received similar news about my son. I’m thankful we grieve but not without hope. My prayers are with you now and in the days to come and I send you my love.

We lost our son to suicide two years ago, so when I tell you my heart aches with you I know whereof I speak. I pray that the Lord sends you comfort. I pray that the Lord holds you in his loving arms. I pray He gives you whatever strength you need. I love you sweet sister in Christ.

—

Lord, we ask for Your comfort to envelop our beloved Bohlin family in their time of unimaginable sorrow. Please grant them strength to face each day and the peace that surpasses all understanding.

Surround them with love and support, and let them feel Your presence even in the darkest moments.

Help them to find solace in the memories of their son and to lean on one another as they navigate this painful journey. May they feel Your everlasting arms holding them close, providing hope and healing in the days to come.

In Your merciful name, we pray. Amen.

——

I wish I could give you a huge hug right now. My heart aches for you and Ray.

My heart breaks for you both. May you experience God's supernatural peace surpassing all understanding … in such an un–understandable moment.

I have no words. Only tears.

Our hearts are breaking for you! God is faithful, yes but this is HARD.

Oh Sue & Ray, what words are there for this? May you be swamped with God's tender mercy. I pray that the structure you have built upon the firm foundation of Christ, day after day & year after year, now be a sanctuary for you. May many take note to see & know that Jesus is enough for unspeakable times.

Devastated & heartbroken for you all. He was such a sweet soul and he will forever have a piece of my heart. Grateful he is in the arms of Jesus and no longer in agony. Praying the Lord's peace washes over your pain.

Oh Sue. My heart is shattered on your behalf. May you be comforted by ways that only the Lord can offer. I love you SO MUCH. I am approaching His throne for you and your family.

I know God is so near and grieving along with you and Ray! I pray that you can submit all your steps and words to him and let him heal you the only way our amazing God can. I am sending so many hugs.

Oh Sue! I cannot imagine the depth of pain coupled with the hope of heaven. Lord, preserve my dear friends through their deep loss, sustain them with your mighty hand, extend peace and rest as they reflect on sweet memories. Hold them close Lord.

The Most Powerful Notes:

h how my heart hurts for you as you bear this great loss. You have been so faithful to love and care for your beloved son all these years. Now you can rest in knowing he is in the arms of Jesus now. May the God of all comfort carry you and sustain you in the difficult days to come, and may He fill you with joyous memories you can cherish in the midst of the grief. You are incredible parents and I'm sure that very few will understand the burden and sacrifice you have carried for so long. Rest now in peace knowing he is with Jesus and your loving work is complete

—

My eyes have been glued to this page for 30 minutes, unsure of how to start such a note,

I know words can fail at such a time, but loving prayer does its most urgent work. You both are loved by so many and I know that heaven's gates are flooded with the prayers of the body of Christ. My prayer tonight is that the God of all comfort would comfort your hurting hearts.

Please know that your tears are mingled with family and friends who love you so. I am thankful to be in that number.

With my note comes my love,

Loving and compassionate words can't *fix* grief, but they most certainly can bring comfort in the hard coldness of the pain of loss. I hope you find this helpful the next time you want

to say something that communicates your heart.

This blog post originally appeared at

blogs.bible.org/what-you-can-say-to-someone-whos-grieving/ on Aug. 24, 2024.

The Keys to Emotional Healing – Part 2

In part 1, I talked about grieving as a necessary part of emotional healing. The other part is forgiving, separating ourselves emotionally and spiritually from the offense so that we can continue to be healthy toward the offender. As I said last time, forgiving is like pulling out the soul-splinter that is causing pain and the emotional "pus" that accumulates from unresolved pain and anger. (Grieving discharges this emotional pus.) Forgiving releases the person who hurt us into the Lord's care, for *Him* to deal with.

We see this modeled by the Lord Jesus during the crucifixion process, when He repeated over and over, "Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do" (Luke 23:34). With each fresh offense, He released the offender into His Father's hands, refusing to succumb to the sin of unforgiveness.

Let's say you do something to hurt me. It's like tossing a potato at me. I catch the potato and discover it's a *hot* potato. I could continue to clutch the potato to my chest, screaming in pain and yelling at how much it hurts and how awful you are to do this to me, going on and on, "IT HURTS! IT HURTS! OHHH THIS IS HORRIBLE, TERRIBLE, AWFUL PAIN! HOW DARE YOU DO THIS TO MEEEEE!"

Or I could let go and let it drop to the floor.

There is relief in release, to be sure, but the problem with merely letting go is that we can pick it back up again. Biblical forgiveness means "sending away," with the Old Testament image of a scapegoat to help us understand. Once a year, the priest would place his hands on the head of a goat, symbolically transferring the sins of the entire nation to the goat, send it away into the wilderness, then release it. (Lev. 16:7-10)

We do need to let go of the offense and the offender, but the real power in forgiveness is *sending it away* to Jesus for Him to deal with.

If someone tosses a metaphorical hot potato at us, instead of simply letting it drop to the floor where we could pick it up again, we need to imagine Jesus standing there with His hands outstretched, inviting us to give our "hot potato" to Him. He has asbestos hands!

Forgiveness means we acknowledge the offense against us, and then transfer the offender over to God in our hearts. But for forgiveness to be real and true, we need to face the impact of the other person's sin or hurt against us and *grieve* it before we can truly let go of it and send it away to Jesus. Otherwise, it's like going to the emergency room with a broken bone and telling the doctor, "I want you to fix my bone from the other side of the room without touching me."

In the real world, if I continued to clutch a hot potato to myself, it would cool down and no longer cause pain. But in the emotional realm, if we continue to clutch an offense to our hearts, it hardens into something like cement, and a wall is built between the offender and us. And between us and God. And between us and everyone else. Unforgiveness is spiritually and emotionally dangerous. One of my family members hung on to every offense of her entire life, real or perceived, and never

let go. With every year she became more and more bitter, cold and hard-quite unlovely and unlovable, apart from the power of God. She died with a heart so diminished and shriveled that her death was nothing but a relief for the rest of us.

When we forgive the ones who hurt us, we send their offense to Jesus, who already paid the penalty for their sins and woundings against us. The best exercise I've ever encountered to help people forgive is called "the Jesus Jail," which you can find here courtesy of my friend Chuck Lynch, author of the book *I Should Forgive, But*. . .

Grieving and forgiving: the two powerful components of emotional healing. May you experience the grace of God in tearing down emotional strongholds (2 Cor. 10:4) to walk in the freedom of healing.

This blog post originally appeared at blogs.bible.org/tapestry/sue_bohlin/the_keys_to_emotional_healing_-_part_2_ on April 24, 2012.

The Keys to Emotional Healing – Part 1

After seeing God bring about major transformation of emotional healing in a number of broken people, I asked Him what was happening when He healed people's hearts. I wanted to understand the process. His answer was simple and profound, but never easy: "grieving and forgiving."

Both of these emotional disciplines are necessary to move from the place of sustaining a wound to the soul, to the place

where that wound no longer controls and diminishes us—because it has been transformed into a healed scar.

Grieving means moving pain and anger from the inside to the outside. Tears are God's lubricant for that process, and what a gift of grace tears are. They are a physical manifestation of emotional pain, and when we weep—whether silent tears rolling down our cheeks or huge wracking sobs that exhaust us—the pain leaves our soul as it leaves the body.

One of my friends was so deeply wounded as a child by various kinds of abuse that in order to survive, her personality splintered into several "alters." (Multiple personality disorder is now called DID, Dissociative Identity Disorder.) One day in therapy, as she cried while talking about the pain inside, she reached for the box of tissues to blot the tears. Abruptly, she "switched" to another alter who said to the therapist, "Don't let her use the Kleenex. We need to feel the tears rolling down her cheeks. That's what healing feels like." When she told me this, it resonated deeply with me as true, and I started paying attention to how the feeling of tears on my face nourishes my soul, regardless of the reason for them. (Specks of dust under my contacts notwithstanding!)

In many cases, grieving also requires getting angry. Anger as a response to a violation of our dignity as people made in God's image, to shaming or disrespect, to neglect or abuse, is a healthy reaction. It says, "You treated me as worthless when I have great value as God's beloved child. You dishonored me AND you dishonored God." We can express anger in constructive and destructive ways, and of course it's always better to choose a constructive expression! We see the Lord Jesus constructively channeling His anger as He fashioned a whip before cleansing the temple (John 2:15). Some people have punched pillows, or hammered nails into pieces of wood, or torn down something slated for demolition. Others have screamed out their anger and grief in a safe place. Punching bags are a helpful place to discharge anger. And one of the

most powerful ways to release anger is to create a list of all the ways someone has hurt us, and the impact of their choices and actions on us, and then talk to that person in an empty chair. We say—or yell or scream—the things we would want to say if we could duct-tape the person into the chair so they couldn't leave, if they *had* to listen to us. And we go down the list, one item at a time, telling them everything they need to know about what they did and how it affected us. Often it's unwise, if not impossible, to actually dump all that anger on the actual person, but it's amazingly healing to speak out the pain and anger with our words. Out loud. Emphasis on LOUD, if need be!

Once we have grieved the hurt, the next step is letting go: forgiving. Forgiving is like pulling out the soul-splinter that is causing pain and the emotional "pus" that accumulates from unresolved pain and anger. (Grieving discharges this emotional pus.) Forgiving releases the person who hurt us into the Lord's care, for *Him* to deal with.

I'll explain more about forgiving in my next blog post, The Keys to Emotional Healing – Part 2.

This blog post originally appeared at blogs.bible.org/tapestry/sue_bohlin/the_keys_to_emotional_healing_part_1 on April 16, 2012.

What Not To Say When Someone

is Grieving

Last week my dear friend Sandi Glahn wrote another boffo blog post about the myths of infertility, which included some of the dumb things people say.

It may be insensitivity or a lack of education that spurs people to say things that are unhelpful at the least and downright hurtful much of the time. I still remember my own daggers to the heart after our first baby died nine days after her birth. And for the past several years, I have been collecting actual quotes said to those already in pain.

So here's my current list of What Not To Say when someone is hurting:

Don't start any sentence with "At least. . . ."
• "At least you didn't have time to really love her."
• "At least he's in heaven now."
• "At least you have two other children."
• "At least that's one less mouth you'll have to feed."
• "At least it didn't have to go through the pain of birth."
• "At least you've had a good life so far, before the cancer diagnosis."

Don't attempt to minimize the other person's pain.
• "Cancer isn't really a problem." (e.g., Shame on you for thinking that losing your hair/body part/health is a problem.)
• "It's okay, you can have other children."

Don't try to explain what God is doing behind the scenes.
• "I guess God knew you weren't ready to be parents yet."
• "Now you'll find out who your friends are."
• "This baby must have just not been meant to be."
• "There must have been something wrong with the baby."
• "Just look ahead because God is pruning you for great works."
• "Cancer is really a blessing."

• “Cancer is a gift from God because you are so strong.”

Don’t blame the other person:
• “If you had more faith, your daughter would be healed.”
• “Remember that time you had a negative thought? That let the cancer in.”
• “You are not praying hard enough.”
• “Maybe God is punishing you. Have you done something sinful?”
• “Oh, you’re not going to let this get you down, are you?” (Meaning: just go on without dealing with it.)

Don’t compare what the other person is going through to ANYTHING else or anyone else’s problem:
• “It’s not as bad as that time I. . .”
• “My sister-in-law had a double mastectomy and you only lost one breast.”

Don’t use the word “should”:
• “You should be happy/grateful that God is refining you.”

Don’t use clichés and platitudes:
• “Look on the bright side.”
• “He’s in a better place.”
• “She’s an angel now.” (NO! People and angels are two different created kinds! People do not get turned into angels when they die.)
• “He’s with the Lord.”

Don’t instruct the person:
• “This is sent for your own good, and you need to embrace it to get all the benefit out of it.”
• “Remember that God is in control.”
• “Remember, all things work together for good for those that love God and are called according to His purpose.” (Romans 8:28 is powerful to comfort oneself, but it can feel like being bludgeoned when it comes from anyone else.)

What TO say:

• “I love you.”
• “I am so sorry.” You don’t have to explain. Anything.

What TO do:
• A wordless hug.
• A card that says simply, “I grieve with you.”
• Instead of bringing cakes, drop off or (better) send gift certificates for restaurants or pizza places.

And pray. Then pray some more. It’s the most powerful thing we can say or do.

This blog post originally appeared at blogs.bible.org/what-not-to-say-when-someone-is-grieving/ on January 20, 2009, and you can read the many comments there.

“I Need Help Resolving Past Stuff In My Life”

I need help resolving past stuff in my life. I’m stuck and I don’t know where to go or what to. Can you help?

I can tell you that from my study over the years, as well as personal experience, I believe the key to emotional healing (which is what resolving past stuff is about) is a two-pronged effort: grieving and forgiving. That said, the overarching, “big picture goal” is what David realized in Psalm 51:6 when He told the Lord, “I know that You desire truth in my inmost parts.” God brings freedom and healing when we allow Him to show us the lies we have believed about what we’ve experienced and the conclusions we have come to about Him, about life, about other people and about ourselves. When we renounce the lies and embrace the truth, we actually experience Jesus’

promise in John 8:32, “You shall know the truth, and the truth shall set you free.” But it needs to be more than an intellectual assent to the truth; we also need to open our hearts to the freeing power of truth.

It’s important to face our losses and our woundings, inviting Jesus into the process (absolutely essential), so that we give Him access to those places in our hearts that need healing. In fact, one of my mentors calls Christian denial “the refusal to give God access to the hurts He wants to heal for His glory and our benefit.” Instead of going digging, it’s much better to ask the Holy Spirit, our Comforter and Counselor, to shine His light on which wounds and losses He wants to address, since He knows the best order for untangling our messes. As He brings memories to the surface, we ask for grace in facing them, experiencing the feelings again but this time in a redemptive way because we are giving them to God to heal, and grieving the ungrieved feelings we haven’t yet dealt with. This means tears, and sometimes screams. (The best definition I’ve ever heard of Post Traumatic Stress Disorder, the emotional debilitation that can follow an emotional trauma such as sexual abuse, or war, or observing something horrific like the workers who cleaned up the aftermath of 9/11, is “failure to scream.”) Journaling is one of the most important tools in grieving because there is something therapeutic about the layers of sensory experience in writing on paper: holding the pen, feeling the paper, smelling the ink and the paper, hearing the sounds of pen on paper. And somehow, the Holy Spirit seems to be able to direct our thoughts and our feelings in the process of writing out what’s in our hearts, and He dislodges the shards and splinters of lies that are embedded in our souls so that we can recognize them, renounce them, and embrace the truth He shows us.

One of the things God has shown me about grieving is that there is a finite amount of grief for each wound and loss. He knows how many tears are attached to each wound, and once

they’re out of us, they are gone forever, collected by God Himself in His tear-bottle (Ps. 56:8). (Consider this: if you think about a childhood loss or painful experience that caused tears, have you cried about it lately? Probably not, because you finished grieving it years ago. There were a finite number of tears over losing a beloved pet in fourth grade, for example. And also consider that since there will be no sorrow or crying or pain in heaven for the believer (Rev. 21:4), all our grieving has a time limit.

The other part of healing is forgiving, where we face the wrongs done to us and choose to let go of them into God’s hands for Him to deal with. There are good resources on understanding forgiveness and how to forgive (two of the best are *Total Forgiveness* by R.T Kendall and *I Should Forgive, But…* by Chuck Lynch), but bottom line, we forgive because the only one we hurt by refusing to forgive is ourselves. It’s like someone tosses us a hot potato, and we clutch it to our chest exclaiming with pain, all the while continuing to hold it to ourselves. Forgiving means letting go of the hot potato so it no longer hurts us. When we forgive the people who caused us pain, we release them into God’s hands for HIM to deal with them as He sees fit. Louis Smedes said that when we forgive someone, we set a prisoner free, and we discover that the prisoner was us.

Refusing to forgive has terrible repercussions. Unforgiveness is a bitter, corrosive poison that consumes a person’s soul and diminishes their spirit. I watched a family member grow increasingly invalid and weak with the years of holding onto grudges and insults, whether real or perceived, as if they were treasures. By the time she died, all of her life and vitality was drained out, and there was nothing but a brittle shell of who she used to be. But failing to grieve also has painful consequences: uncried tears heighten stress and cause all kinds of physical diseases and maladies. Because we are a unit of body, soul and spirit, our bodies hold onto soulish

pain and it comes out as physical pain and illness. This is why James 5 “connects the dots” between physical illness, confession of sins, and the need for prayer.

Hope you find this helpful.

Sue Bohlin

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Virginia Tech Massacre: Coping with Grief

As the world joins Virginia Tech in mourning a terrible massacre, I’ve found myself experiencing poignant memories of an earlier visit to that campus when students also struggled with recent death. Though that tragedy was smaller in scope, grief and confusion abounded then as now.

Several months before my evening lecture at Virginia Tech, I had recommended that my hosts have me speak on love, sex, and dating . . . nearly always a popular campus draw. But they preferred I speak on death and dying: *One Minute After Death*. Reluctantly, I agreed; they publicized accordingly. Though they didn’t claim clairvoyance, their selection proved providential.

A few days before my presentation, three Tech students died tragically in separate incidents involving suicide and a fire. The campus buzzed with concern about death and dying. The lecture venue was packed; the atmosphere electric.

Death’s Shuddering Finality

I told the audience of similar sadness: The spring of my sophomore year at Duke, the student living in the room next to me was struck and killed by lightning. For some time after Mike's death, our fraternity was in a state of shock. My friends wrestled with questions like, "What's life all about?" "What does it mean if it can be snuffed out in an instant?" "Is there life after death?"

Our springtime happiness became gloom. A memorial service and personal interaction helped us process our grief. I vividly recall a classmate driving Mike's ashes home to Oklahoma at the end of the term. Death had a shuddering finality.

Now, in the recent massacre's immediate aftermath, stories both heartrending and inspiring are emerging. Rescue workers removing bodies from Norris Hall, where the bulk of the killings occurred, encountered cellphones ringing, likely parents or friends trying to contact missing students. Parents wandered the campus that first evening seeking to learn their children's fate.

During the siege, engineering professor Liviu Librescu, an Israeli Holocaust survivor, blocked a door with his body, sacrificing his life so students could flee.{1}

God and Evil?

As mourners process their anguish, it's only natural to wonder where God is in all this. Virginia Governor Tim Kaine, who once served as a volunteer missionary, noted at the campus convocation that even Jesus, in his dark hour on the cross, cried out, "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?"{2} He encouraged grieving students to embrace their community to help everyone process their pain.

The late William Sloane Coffin gained fame as a controversial peace and civil rights activist during the Vietnam War. He also served as chaplain of Yale University and had a helpful take on the question of God and suffering.

“Almost every square inch of the Earth’s surface is soaked with the tears and blood of the innocent,” Coffin told *Religion and Ethics Newsweekly*, “and it’s not God’s doing. It’s our doing. That’s human malpractice. Don’t chalk it up to God.”

“When [people] see the innocent suffering,” continued Coffin, “every time they lift their eyes to heaven and say, ‘God, how could you let this happen?’ it’s well to remember that exactly at that moment God is asking exactly the same question of us: ‘How could you let this happen?'”{3}

The problem of evil has many complex facets, but the horror in Blacksburg resulted from human action. Students and faculty face considerable healing. President Bush reminded them, “People who have never met you are praying for you…. In times like this, we can find comfort in the grace and guidance of a loving God…. ‘Don’t be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good.'”{4} Sound counsel for a grieving campus community.

Notes

1. Laurie Copans, “Holocaust Survivor Killed in Virginia Shootings,” Associated Press, April 17, 2007; on ABC News at http://abcnews.go.com/US/story?id=3048967&page=1, accessed April 18, 2007. See also Richard T. Cooper and Valerie Reitman, “Virginia Tech professor gave his life to save students,” Los Angeles Times, April 18, 2007; http://tinyurl.com/2lnomg, accessed April 18, 2007.
2. Matthew 27:46, quoted here from the more contemporary language of the New Living Translation. Kaine appeared to be quoting from the King James Version. Audio of Governor Kaine’s April 17, 2007, Virginia Tech convocation speech is at http://www.vbdems.org/, accessed April 18, 2007.
3. “Profile: William Sloane Coffin,” Religion & Ethics Newsweekly interview with Bob Abernathy, Episode no. 752, originally broadcast August 27, 2004; rebroadcast in 2007; http://tinyurl.com/2vdr6t, accessed April 18, 2007.

4. Text of the president's April 17, 2007 speech at the Virginia Tech memorial convocation is at http://tinyurl.com/2t6txa, accessed April 18, 2007. The third sentence in the Bush quotation here is from Romans 12:21.

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Grief and Grace

Former Probe staffer Rick Rood, a hospital chaplain who understands the pain of losing his beloved wife, addresses loss, grieving and God's grace.

Over the past eight years that I've had the privilege of serving in the hospitals, I've had the occasion and privilege of interacting with thousands of grieving people, and to become more than casually acquainted with the many aspects of the "grieving process." In seeking to become better able to comfort those who are grieving, I've read many books and attended numerous seminars. But I've observed that while it's one thing to learn about the grieving process, it's quite another to experience it. Australian pastor Donald Howard wrote in the preface to his short book entitled *Christians Grieve Too* that though he was prepared for the death of his wife from cancer at the age of forty-six, he was "ill-prepared for grief."

Part of me didn't want to write this short essay. I've gotten in the habit of writing about some of the painful things in life the past year or so (though from the perspective of faith). And I wanted to write something happy, or even humorous. But I guess it's one of the occupational hazards of a hospital chaplain that you are constantly confronted with the realities of life that most of us would rather forget

about (until it’s no longer possible). This past year, I didn’t have to go to the hospital to be confronted with this kind of reality. So, please bear with me as I “reflect” one last time.

One of the things I’ve noticed about grieving people is that though all people do grieve their losses, everyone grieves differently. There must be a host of factors influencing how people grieve: the kind of relationship they had with the loved one, and its depth, the degree of dependence of one on the other (either the dependence of the survivor on the deceased, or vice versa), the presence of ambivalence in the relationship (the presence of anger as well as love), the degree of guilt (whether real or imagined) experienced by the survivor, the kind of loss (sudden, traumatic, preventable, etc.), the person’s temperament and personality, gender, ethnicity, family background, past losses and accumulated grief, one’s world view and spirituality. Wow. That’s just the short list! Knowing just this much has kept me from comparing how one person grieves from another, and from making judgments about things I know little or nothing about.

There are many excellent books and resources available on grief and loss these days, quite a number from a Christian perspective. But few of them take into consideration in much detail what the scriptures tell us about grief, except for some passing references. My work and my own personal experience have prompted me to pay more attention to this topic in my Bible reading than I normally would. And especially this past year I have tried to listen more closely to what the Lord says to us about it through his Word. Some of what I’ve found so far has surprised me. All of it has encouraged me.

Grief and Loss

This first section will of necessity be a bit more somber. But it is a necessary prelude to what will follow! The first and

most obvious thing one notices in reading the scriptures is that death follows sin, like winter follows fall. God had warned that Adam's sin would result in death (Genesis 2:17). And it did. The solemn refrain "and he died" appears eight times in the list of Adam's descendants given in Genesis 5. Death is indeed the "wages of sin" (Romans 6:23a). Death is not (as we are sometimes told) "a natural thing" or "just a part of life." Death was not part of the created order when God pronounced it "very good" (Genesis 1:31). It is an aberration, an alien invader into God's natural order. Isaiah describes death as a "covering which is over all peoples," and a "veil which is stretched over all nations" (Isaiah 25:7). It is the great equalizer.

The second most obvious thing one notices is that God promises that death will one day be destroyed. The day is coming when "He will swallow up death for all time" (Isaiah 25:8), when the sentence of death will be "abolished" (1 Corinthians 15:26), and it will "no longer be" (Revelation 21:4). For all who are in Christ, this is our great hope!

The third thing that becomes apparent as one reads the scriptures is that while the sentence on death awaits its fulfillment, sorrow and grief follow death and loss as naturally as spring follows winter. If death were just a natural thing, it would be unnatural to grieve the resulting loss. But since death and loss are not natural, grief and sorrow *are*. They are the expression of pain resulting from the severing of relational bonds that were originally designed by God to be permanent. But because of sin and death, they no longer are. And it hurts.

It's interesting that the first person described in the Bible as grieving is God! Scripture tell us that because of the evil and wickedness of man. God was "grieved in His heart" (Genesis 6:6). We don't understand everything about the emotional life of God. It is certainly not exactly like our own. But since we are created in his image, we should not be surprised to learn

that our emotions are in some sense a reflection of his own. One of the most remarkable statements of scripture in this regard appears in Isaiah 63:9, “In all their affliction, he was afflicted.” Edward J. Young, in his commentary on Isaiah (vol 3, p. 481) says, “God feels the sufferings of his people as his own sufferings.” In fact, every member of the Godhead is described in scripture as experiencing grief. Not only God the Father, as in these passages, but also God the Son. In reflecting on his rejection by the nation’s leaders in Jerusalem, it is said that He “wept over it” (Luke 19:41). At the tomb of his friend Lazarus He “was deeply moved in spirit and was troubled,” and indeed that he “wept” (John 11:33, 35). In the garden of Gethsemane Jesus is described as pouring out His heart to God the Father “with loud crying and tears” (Hebrews 5:7). The Holy Spirit is described as experiencing grief as well. Compare Isaiah 63:10 and Ephesians 4:30, where we are warned against “grieving the Holy Spirit” by our sins. The psalmist says that God “remembers” our tears (Psalm 56:8). And it is even implied that He is in some sense moved by them (Isaiah 38:5, “I have heard your prayers, I have seen your tears”).

The fact that God experiences grief should not be seen as contradicting his sovereign control over all things. For it is clear that there are many things within God’s sovereign purpose that are nonetheless grievous to Him. In fact, there are many things within God’s purpose that are the cause of His anger and judgment.

If God, then, experiences grief, it should not surprise us to find many scriptures which describe God’s people as experiencing grief as well. Abraham is said to have “mourned and wept” over the death of his wife Sarah (Genesis 23:2). So Joseph at the death of his father Jacob (Genesis 50:1). The nation Israel at the death of Moses (Deuteronomy 34:8). Indeed, there is an entire book devoted to expressing the “Lamentations” of the nation Israel over the fall of Jerusalem

to Babylon. True, God's people were admonished not to mourn in the same way that the surrounding pagan nations did at the death of their own. Though we do not understand today the meaning of these practices, the Jews were forbidden to "cut themselves" or "shave their head" for the sake of the dead, as their pagan neighbors did (Leviticus 19:28; Deuteronomy 14:1). Nonetheless, there were traditional mourning practices among the Jews that were viewed as entirely appropriate (e.g., the covering of the head in 2 Sam 15:30, the baring of the feet in Isaiah 20:2, and the covering of the lip in Leviticus 13:45 and Micah 3:7.) The fact that Ezekiel was forbidden these outward expressions of mourning at the death of his wife (Ezekiel 24:16-17) as a sign to the nation concerning their impending judgment (v. 24), indicates that such restraint was not considered normal.

In the New Testament we find similar expressions of grief on the part of God's people. We've already noticed our Lord's own grief. Indeed he was called "a man of sorrows and acquainted with grief" (Isaiah 53:3, cf. v. l0a). A curious description, if indeed Jesus rarely wept. One aspect of our growth in likeness to Christ is that we should be growing more transparent about our emotions, and more empathetic with those of others. We should also note the description of the "devout men" who when they buried the martyred Stephen "made loud lamentation over him" (Acts 8:2). A most interesting reference appears in Paul's letter to the Philippians (a letter devoted to promoting the joy of the Lord), where he states that should his friend Epaphroditus have died as a result of his recent illness, he would have experienced "sorrow upon sorrow" (2:27). Just as in the Old Testament, so in the New, God's people have reason not to "grieve as those who have no hope" (I Thessalonians 4:13). But there is nothing in the New Testament which suggests that God's people nonetheless do not or should not grieve the temporary loss of relationship with those they love. Theologian J. I. Packer has stated: "Grief is the human system reacting to the pain of loss, and as such it

is an inescapable reaction" (*A Grief Sanctified*, p. 12).

Of particular interest to me is the fact that the removal of grief and sorrow from human experience is tied very closely in scripture with the ultimate removal of death and loss. Compare the following statements from both Old and New Testaments. "He will swallow up *death* for all time, and the Lord God will wipe *tears* away from all faces" (Isaiah 25:8). "And He will wipe away every *tear* from their eyes; and there will no longer be any *death*" (Revelation 21:4). Though I believe (as we shall shortly see) there is substantial healing available from the Lord in our grieving now, its effects will not be entirely and completely relieved until the old order of life is fully replaced by the new.

With this context in mind, before moving on to a consideration of God's comforting grace, there is an intriguing passage in the Old Testament that we ought not overlook. It's found in the sometimes enigmatic book of Ecclesiastes: "It is better to go to a house of mourning than to go to a house of feasting, because that is the end of every man, and the living take it to heart. Sorrow is better than laughter, *for when a face is sad a heart may be happy*. The mind of the wise is in the house of mourning, while the mind of fools is in the house of pleasure" (7:2-4 NASB). As with many of Solomon's sayings in this book, the italicized phrase is not easily understood. But the RSV rendering seems to capture its meaning well when it says, "By sadness of countenance the heart is made glad." Or as the NKJV puts it, "For by a sad countenance the heart is made better." What the writer appears to be saying is that genuine "recovery" from grief comes not by denying it or repressing it, but by giving appropriate expression to it. This is obviously something that the Old Testament saints understood, and practiced. And so may we. Someone well may ask how sorrow and grief can be consistent with the joy of the Lord. But it is interesting that St. Paul saw no contradiction in describing himself on one occasion as "sorrowful, yet

always rejoicing" (2 Corinthians 6:l0a). The former is the result of experiencing painful loss; the latter the result of contemplating the implications of the providence of God—simultaneously.

Few people have experienced losses greater than those that befell Job. Perhaps his initial response to news of the death of his children provides something of a paradigm for us. "Then Job arose and tore his robe and shaved his head, and he fell to the ground and worshiped" (Job 1:20). Grieving, but worshiping. Grieving profoundly. Worshiping humbly.

Comfort and Grace

In God's economy, if grief follows loss, then comfort follows grief. And this is exactly what we find in many passages of scripture. Among the things for which the Lord is said to have anointed his Messiah is "To comfort all who mourn" (Isaiah. 61:2b). Among those upon whom Jesus pronounced God's blessing are those who mourn, "for they shall be comforted" (Matthew 5:4). A fact sometimes overlooked is that it is only those who mourn, who acknowledge their grief, who place themselves in a position of being comforted by the Lord. God's comforting grace is the answer to our grieving heart.

One of the most endearing descriptions of the Lord in scripture is found in 2 Corinthians 1:3, "The Father of mercies and God of all comfort." He is merciful and compassionate in nature. And He is the source of all genuine comfort and encouragement. The word used here for "comfort" is related to the word used to denote the Holy Spirit as the "Comforter" … one called alongside to encourage and help (John 14:16,26). He is "the divine fount of all consolation to His people—the 'all' both excluding any other source of comfort and also emphasizing the complete adequacy of that comfort for every circumstance that may arise" (P. E. Hughes, *II Corinthians*, p. 13). The following verse states that God "comforts us in all our affliction" (v. 4a). "The present

tense of the verb shows that this God of ours comforts us constantly and unfailingly, not spasmodically and intermittently; and he does so in all our affliction, not just in certain kinds of affliction" (Hughes, p. 12). Furthermore, God comforts us "so that we will be able to comfort those who are in any affliction with the comfort with which we ourselves are comforted by God" (v. 4b). "Nor is the comfort received from God intended to terminate in the recipient: it has a further purpose, namely, to fit the Christian for the God-like ministry of comforting and encouraging others, whatever the affliction they may be suffering" (Hughes, p. 12). What a rich description of the comforting grace of God! From Him. To us. Through us.

But *how* does God's comfort come to us? One means through which God's comfort comes to us has been alluded to already. And that is that God identifies with us in our grief. We have noted above some of the passages that state this very fact. He "sympathizes with our weakness" (Heb. 4:15). "For He Himself knows our frame; He is mindful that we are but dust" (Psalm 103:14).

But beyond this, God has provided his word with a view to providing comfort in time of sorrow. "This is my *comfort* in my affliction, that your word has revived me" (Psalm 119:50). "My soul weeps because of grief; *strengthen* me according to your word" (Psalm 119:28). God's words seem to find their way into our heart particularly when they are set to music: "Your statutes are my songs in the house of my pilgrimage" (Psalm 119:54). I have found great comfort in the music of praise and worship to the Lord. St. Paul says that "through perseverance and the *encouragement* of the Scriptures we might have hope" (Romans 15:4). And concerning his teaching on our coming reunion with the Lord and with our departed loved ones, St. Paul says, "Therefore *comfort* one another with these words." It is in part through letting the word of God "richly dwell within" us (Colossians 3:16) that we can gain access to God's

comforting grace. I have found it true in my own experience that the Word of God has been a river of grace to my heart.

We are comforted also by simply experiencing the loving acts of God in our life. “O may your lovingkindness comfort me, according to your word to your servant (Psalm 119:76).” It is for the direct experience of the faithful love of God that the psalmist is praying here. And I believe God does comfort and encourage us by leaving his “fingerprints” on our lives in many ways during our days of grieving. He lets us know through his providential acts that we are not alone. That He is with us. That He loves us. That He has a purpose for us still (cf. Genesis 50:24).

As indicated in the passage examined above (2 Corinthians 1), much of God’s comfort comes to us through his people. Later in this very letter, Paul tells us that he was comforted by God’s sending his friend Titus. “But God, who comforts the depressed, comforted us by the coming of Titus” (2 Corinthians 7:6). When God provided Rebekah as a bride for Isaac, it is said that he “was comforted after his mother’s death” (Genesis 24:67). When Paul was imprisoned in Rome, he wrote that he was “refreshed” by his friend Onesiphorus who searched for him and found him (2 Timothy 1:16-17). It is often overlooked that much of God’s grace comes to us, not only directly from His Spirit or through His word, but through His people. Peter tells us that it is as we steward the gifts God has given us in serving one another that we administer “the manifold grace of God” (1 Peter 4:10). The Old Testament people of God seemed to put this understanding into practice in a very practical way. It was apparently their custom to surround their grieving neighbors with love and support by providing meals for them. The “bread of mourning” and “cup of consolation” were biblical terms meant to be taken in a very literal way (cf. Deuteronomy 26:14; Jeremiah 16:7; Hosea 9:4).

In what ways can God’s people administer God’s comforting grace? Certainly through following Jesus’ example to “weep

with those who weep” (Romans 12:15b; contra Proverbs 25:20). By learning to be comfortable and patient with those who are actively grieving their losses. By learning to be “quick to hear, slow to speak” (James l:19b). By being a “ready listener.” I’ve personally found that those who have simply “listened to my story” have greatly comforted me. I once heard a pastor speak of this effect as “healing through the laying on of ears.” What a great phrase! When Job’s friends first came “to sympathize with him and comfort him” (2:11b), it is said that “they sat down on the ground with him for seven days and seven nights with no one speaking a word to him, for they saw that his pain was very great” (2:13). (Oh that they would have remained in silent mode!) Later, Job made this telling statement: “For the despairing man there should be kindness from his friend; so that he does not forsake the fear of the Almighty” (6:14). The thought is that lack of kindness can serve only to push people further from God when they are despairing. I’ve talked with many people in the hospital through the years who have distanced themselves from various churches. When I’ve inquired about what occasioned their departure, too often I have been told that it was during a time of bereavement. You can fill in the rest of the story. One way I’ve learned that we “speak the truth in love” is by being sensitive to the recipient’s present ability to receive it and absorb it. (“I have many more things to say to you, *but you cannot bear them now*“, John 16:12.)

Closing Thoughts

A rather obscure passage that has served to guide me in all of this is found in 1 Samuel 30:1-6.

> “Then it happened when David and his men came to Ziklag on the third day, that the Amalekites had made a raid on the Negev and on Ziklag, and had overthrown Ziklag and burned it with fire; and they took captive the women and all who were in it, both small and great, without killing anyone, and

> carried them off and went their way. When David and his men came to the city, behold, it was burned with fire, and their wives and their sons and their daughters had been taken captive. Then David and the people who were with *him lifted their voices and wept until there was no strength in them to weep*. Now David's two wives had been taken captive, Ahinoam the Jezreelitess and Abigail the widow of Nabal the Carmelite. Moreover David was greatly distressed because the people spoke of stoning him, for all the people were embittered, each one because of his sons and his daughters. *But David strengthened himself in the Lord his God.*"

What a great passage for summing up our thoughts in this article. We see first the experience of sudden loss. Then the expression of understandable sorrow and grief. They wept 'til there was no more strength in them to weep. But then, as he was able, *David strengthened himself in the Lord.*

It's that last phrase that I want to emphasize in closing. And there are two thoughts that emerge from it. First, the strength to move through our grief comes from the Lord. We go astray when we seek to find comfort for our grief apart from Him. I've seen many in the hospitals who have fallen into addictions or into unhealthy relationships due to their attempts to find comfort apart from the Lord. We've seen already some of the ways in which the Lord comforts and strengthens us in our grief, so that we can move on with our life and fulfill God's remaining purposes for us.

But second, as David did, we ourselves must take responsibility for obtaining God's comfort and strength. David *strengthened himself in the Lord his God*. Gaining God's comfort involves our active participation in the process. And if the people around us seem not to be helping us in this direction, then we must ask God to lead us to those who will. And seek them out. Not everyone is so equipped. A dear friend who had previously lost his wife told me, a good while before I lost Polly, "Rick, your recovery will be your

responsibility."

The rate of recovery is unique for every person. But there is at least one passage in scripture which speaks of those who seemed to be stuck in their grief, "refusing to be comforted" (Jeremiah 31:15; cf. 2 Chronicles 15:7), in need of "restraining their eyes from tears" (Jeremiah 31:16), and of remembering that "there is a hope for (their) future" (Jeremiah 31:17). We do this as we utilize the means of grace which God provides, placing our faith in Him one day at a time, in pursuit of his purpose for the remainder of our days. Part of that purpose may be (probably will be) serving others who are still on the path of grief.

> *Do not fear, for I am with you; do not anxiously look about you, for I am your God. I will strengthen you, surely I will help you, surely I will uphold you with My righteous right hand* (Isaiah 41:10).

Suggested reading:

Howard, Donald. *Christians Grieve Too*. The Banner of Truth Trust.

Lewis, C. S. *A Grief Observed*. Bantam Books.

Mitsch, Raymond R. and Lynn Brookside. *Grieving the Loss of Someone You Love*. Vine Books.

Packer, J. I. *A Grief Sanctified*. Vine Books.

Scazzero, Peter. *The Emotionally Healthy Church*. Zondervan.

Wright, H. Norman. *Helping Those Who Hurt*. Bethany House.

Wright, H. Norman. *Recovering from the Losses of Life*. Revell.

Wright, H. Norman. *Will My Life Ever Be the Same? Finding God's Strength to Hope Again*. Harvest House.

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“I Am So Afraid—What If There Is No Heaven?”

I am writing to you because I am very concerned and don’t know where to turn for help. I am a Christian and have always felt I had a great deal of faith. I lost my father, my mother and an older sister over the years – and my faith sustained me during those traumatic times.

Recently our 38 year old daughter died quite suddenly. I am just overwhelmed with grief – and I believe the medications given her caused her sudden death. She had kidney problems – but her doctor was aware of that, and the med he gave her should not have been given to her because of her kidney problems.

Now I seem to have lost my faith completely. I cry and want so much to know she is OK and that she is not sad and lonely as we are here without her. I have begun to question if there really is a Heaven? I read recently that Heaven is something Christians invented to take away their fear of death. Is this true? I also read a book called *Embraced by the Light* by Betty Eadie, and it really upset me. She claimed to have had an out of body experience where she went to Heaven, and then she wrote a whole book about what heaven is like – and the different levels there, and how one may stay at a lower level, or advance to a higher level.

I am so afraid – what if there is no Heaven? Or if there is, is my daughter sad and lonely because none of her family are

there with her? I just don't know anymore what to believe. I try to pray – but find no peace. I am so afraid.

Dear _____,

I am so very, very sorry to hear of your tremendous loss. You must be in such shock you don't know how to "do life" at this point.

As a mother who has also lost a daughter, I want to encourage you in how the Lord comforted me. Most especially, I am comforted by the truth of Psalm 139:16–"All the days ordained for me were written in Your book before one of them came to be."

_____, your daughter didn't live one day less than God intended for her to live from before the foundations of the earth. It FEELS like a premature death to us who are left behind, but no one is more powerful than God, and HE is the one who determines the length of our days. So even though it is hugely painful and grievous, and even though it's tempting to blame the medications, she died on the day God knew she would die and planned for her to die. Not a day sooner, and not a day later.

Secondly, Jesus said He came from heaven (John 6:51). It is a real place. If there is no heaven, then Jesus lied. If Jesus lied, then he was not the holy Son of God, and His death was meaningless. If His death was meaningless, then none of us have any hope. But our hope is REAL and TRUE! He died to make it possible for us to be united with God and reunited with our believing loved ones.

Paul said that to be absent from the body is to be present with the Lord (2 Cor. 5:6,8). If your daughter trusted Christ, she is immersed in a living sea of light and love and glory, worshiping the Lord Jesus and enjoying the freedom that comes from being released from this fallen, decaying world. When she "graduated" from your womb to your arms, did you ever worry

that she was lonely for the comfort of the dark, warm place inside you? I bet not! <smile> She was in a far, far better place when she was born. When people are in heaven, it's like graduating from the womb to our mother's arms only way, WAY better. Being with the Lord is so much better than this earth that we can't even begin to imagine it, any more than the pre-born infant can imagine what it's like to be nestled in her mother's arms, to look in her eyes, to see a glorious sunset, to listen to a symphony. To eat ice cream! To love and love back. . . all those things cannot be imagined in the womb, but they await the baby, just as the joys of heaven await us if we have trusted Christ as our Savior.

I want to suggest to you that you read Joni Eareckson Tada's wonderful book *Heaven*, because it will make you much more familiar with heaven and it will greatly comfort your heart. Unlike Betty Eadie's book *Embraced by the Light*, Joni's book is TRUE and based completely on the Bible.

I pray you will know the warmth of God's comfort in growing measure as you grieve the loss of your daughter. One of the things that makes heaven so real to me is knowing that my daughter and my parents are there. I pray the realness of heaven will grow for you as well.

In His grip,

Sue Bohlin
Probe Ministries