

INTRODUCTION

This is one of those messages you may not need right now, because you may not be walking through this valley. Perhaps you can use it to reflect on something that happened to you previously—or save it until you need it, because the time will come in your life when you will walk through the valley of grief.

Studies tell us the most painful death experience and the most intense grief comes from the death of a spouse, followed closely by the death of a child and then by the death of a parent. Studies have also determined the grief that accompanies suicide is unique among any other kind of grief experience. As we talk about grief today, and the stages and categories, these are not hard and fast. Different people's grief experiences will be as different as their own personalities. But it's good for you to understand that you *can* survive grief and move forward after being devastated by the death of a loved one.

It gives me great hope to know that the Lord Jesus understands grief. The prophet Isaiah looked at the character and nature of the Messiah. "He was a man of sorrows, and familiar with suffering." (Isaiah 53:3) The Bible says he bears our sorrows and we can cast our sorrows and cares upon him. Let's briefly look at the life of Job, he definitely had a bad day and definitely experienced the excruciating pain of grief. Job was a wealthy man, blessed, but in one day he lost 10,000 head of livestock. Today we are going to see how Job responded to the bad news of the death of loved ones.

Job 1:18-22. "While he was still speaking, yet another messenger came and said, 'Your sons and daughters were feasting and drinking wine at the oldest brother's house, when suddenly a mighty wind swept in from the desert and struck the four corners of the house. It collapsed on them and they are dead, and I am the only one who has escaped to tell you!' At this, Job got up and tore his robe and shaved his head. Then he fell to the ground in worship and said: 'Naked I came from my mother's womb, and naked I will depart. The Lord gave and the Lord has taken away; may the name of the Lord be praised.' In all this, Job did not sin by charging God with wrongdoing."

Before you rush to the false conclusion that Job didn't hurt or struggle, look at Job 6:2. "If only my anguish could be weighed and all my misery be placed on the scales! It would surely outweigh the sand of the seas." Grief causes that kind of pain. Today we're going to talk about how all you can walk through the valley of grief and come out the other side a stronger person and a better person. But you must walk through the valley, and it's not easy and it's often not quick. Here are three things you can do with your grief.

I. EXPRESS YOUR GRIEF

Number one. Express your grief. Don't be afraid to express your grief. There have been many studies and those who have studied it believe people pass through several stages of grief. I'm reluctant to say that, because these are not automatic and they are not simple. You never find yourself saying "I'm in stage two, I need to move to stage three." It doesn't happen that way. It

helps you to realize there are stages and that it is a process. Most people have some of these emotions.

1. Shock

First is shock. Most people react with shock when they learn about the death of a loved one, excluding those who have experienced the terminal illness of a loved one, because they go through a lot of these feelings *before* the death of their loved one. It's called "anticipatory grief."

A couple of years ago, I preached a message entitled "Help! Someone I Love is Dying." I talk about anticipatory grief in that message, which has been added to this series. Those who go through anticipatory grief don't have exactly the same grief process as those who learn of the unexpected death of a loved one. Those who suddenly learn often go into shock.

I've been emergency room waiting areas when the doctor comes out after an automobile accident or heart attack and has to give the toughest news a physician ever gives, where he or she has to sit down with the family members and say, "I'm sorry he/she has died." I've often heard families express disbelief and refusal to accept a death. Something physical happens to you that pushes you into shock; it's as if your body experiences a burst of adrenaline, because you know you're going to face a lot of demands emotionally and physically over the next few days.

2. Numbness

A lot of people discover they are very clearheaded initially, because they know they have details to take care of, but soon it goes progresses into the second stage doctors have observed: numbness. It's as if God has injected them with a spiritual or emotional anesthetic that dulls and deadens some of the immediate pain. C.S. Lewis wrote his classic book *A Grief Observed* after his wife, Joy, died. He wrote, "It feels like being mildly drunk or having a concussion. There is sort of an invisible blanket between the world and me. I find it hard to take in what anybody says. Perhaps the bereaved ought to be isolated in special settlements like lepers." It's like going to sleep at night and lying on your arm and cutting off the circulation and when you roll over it's asleep and tingly. You don't feel anything. God sometimes mercifully puts us in that numbness stage. Have you ever talked about somebody during a funeral and you notice they didn't even cry and you thought they held up well? It could be they're just numb.

3. Pain and fatigue

Number three. As soon as the adrenaline wears off, the pain and fatigue come crashing down. It may happen soon or it may be delayed. Dr. Eric Lindemann talks about some of the physical symptoms of grief. "You may experience pain in your chest, pain in your abdomen, a ceaseless throbbing in your head, nausea, faintness, dryness in your mouth, tightness in your throat that causes difficulty in swallowing, shortness of breath, a need to sigh, a general lack of energy and weariness not associated with physical exertion." For those of you who've walked through the valley, do you remember how tired and drained you were after the funeral? It was hard to put one foot in front of the other and get out of bed. That's very common. You may almost feel like

you're dying yourself, because the physical and emotional pain comes crashing down. That's what Job was talking about when he said he was burdened.

4. Confusion

That often leads to stage four, confusion. People go through a variety of emotions, but at this stage, they may think they're going crazy. I've had widows tell me they'll be sitting in a chair in their house and they look up and see their husband standing at the door. Then when they blink and look again, he's gone. The pathways in your brain saw that person who is so special to you and it runs through your mind again, it's just an illusion, but you're not going crazy. I've had women tell me that two months after their husband died, they forgot and set a place for him to eat at the table and wondered what time he was going to get home.

Sometimes people in this confusion stage often find themselves laughing uproariously and they almost feel guilty about the fact that they're laughing. During a time of grief, all your emotions are closer to the surface and that's why sometimes at a funeral you'll find people laughing and feeling guilty about it.

I loved Grady Nutt, that Prime Minister of humor. He tells a true story about a funeral experience in Kentucky. There was a death in a church family and a young pastor arrived at the family's home filled with church members. People were standing everywhere, elbow to elbow. When the pastor arrived they made a path for him, because the widow wanted to see him. When he got to the woman, they tried to find a private place to talk. The widow pulled him into the bathroom and they shut the door. She sat on the edge of the tub, he put the lid down on the toilet, and they sat there, knee to knee, talking and praying and planning the funeral. It was a wonderful time of ministry. The widow got up and opened the door; dozens of people were out there looking in and the young preacher stood up and without thinking—he turned around and flushed the commode. The widow burst into tears from laughter. Everyone in the home began to laugh. Sometimes when people begin to laugh in that kind of setting, they may wonder if they're going crazy. Absolutely not. You go through all kinds of confusing feelings.

Sometimes in the confusion stage, people also experience anger and guilt. They'll be angry at the doctor or hospital or the person who was driving the other vehicle; they get angry at themselves "If I had only talk to that person for five minutes longer." They go through the "what ifs." If only...what if...if I could have only changed it. Sometimes people even get angry at God. That's very normal to be angry at God, for awhile. But don't stay angry at God. "Of all the bums on the street of all the criminals in the penitentiary. Why couldn't you take somebody like that instead of my loved one?" There's nothing wrong with having those thoughts, but don't give in to the temptation to follow those thoughts. Sometimes we even get angry at the person who died. You are looking for targets for your anger.

The husband of a good friend of ours in Alabama died of Hodgkin's' disease. He was in his mid-40s. The woman was left with two teenage girls. I remember going to her home a couple months after he died and watched her stomp her feet on her kitchen floor. She said, "I'm so mad at Don for leaving me all alone that if he was alive I'd kill him right now." That's normal to experience feelings of confusion.

5. Flood of tears

People generally arrive at stage five, the flood of tears. This has a very cleansing, purifying effect. Don't judge people who don't weep at a funeral. One of the lies propagated in the American public is "Real men don't cry." That's a lie. Sometimes we tell little boys "Be a big man, don't cry." Or we even tell people at a funeral to stop crying. Go ahead and cry! It's okay. It's okay if you *don't* cry too. Sometimes this is a delayed reaction. The widow who told me she held up really well at the funeral said two months after her husband was buried; she received her bank statement, and for the first time in her marriage tried to balance her checkbook. She said after two minutes she burst into tears, put her head down on the desk, brushed checkbook away and sobbed her heart out. She said it was cleansing.

A man told me after his wife died he held up well during the funeral. Six months after his wife's death, he was driving to work and one of his wife's favorite songs came on the radio. He began sobbing uncontrollably and had to pull over. He put his head on the steering wheel and wept for 15 minutes. That's not unusual; you're not going crazy. Many people come to that stage. That's a good stage to come to. Grief is caused by loss and is just as normal as eating when you get hungry, and sleeping when you get tired. The good news is as you pass through this valley, you can make the turn. And after you've spent time expressing your grief, you *can* come to a turning point.

II. ACCEPT YOUR GRIEF

Number two, you can accept your grief. You're still hurting, but you know you've made a turn and things are getting a little better when you can admit to yourself that you are grieving and you can accept your grief. "I've been hurt; I know I've been hurt, but I think I can continue to live my life." There may be a couple of stages during this transitional period.

1. Selective memories

Number one is the period of selective memories. You know you're making progress when you can come to a point where you can remember that person and *choose* to remember the good things about that person. Initially, the memories may be painful, but when you get to the point where you can choose to forget the painful memories and remember the positive, that's a good point.

In that message "Help! Someone I Love is Dying," I relate my personal experience of my parents' death from cancer in their mid-50s. My father had renal cancer that metastasized into his lungs and later his brain. It affected the part of the brain that controls kindness, sanity and moral restraint. For the last month of his life before he entered his comma, he was a man we had never known before. He used vile language to my mother and us and said terrible things he'd never said before. I had to keep telling myself, "That's the cancer." It hurt terribly. Frankly I had forgotten that—I only chose to remember it to share it with you, because I know some of you have gone through the same thing. God will allow you to forget those painful memories of your

loved one being sick, emaciated, or attached to an IV or how they looked after the automobile accident. God gives you the ability to choose your memories and remember them positively.

I remember my dad when we used to go fishing. I remember my dad when he coached my Little League team, when he taught RAs and Boy Scouts at our church—those are the memories I hang on to—NOT that last month. You know you're making the turn when those memories can come to your mind and you can choose to remember the good ones.

2. Redirection of life

Another stage people come to is redirection of life. That involves the word H-O-P-E. Some of you may be struggling with an incomplete grief experience. If you're struggling with grief, your life will never again be the same. Your life has been changed because of the death of that loved one, so you must come to the point where you accept the fact and redirect your life knowing that person is no longer physically present with you. Suddenly food begins to taste good again; you can sleep all night and you're looking forward to life. That's hope. In 1 Thessalonians 4, Paul says, "I don't want you to sorrow at others who had no hope," meaning we as Christians have hope; we have hope that we will be with Jesus. We have hope that we will see those loved ones again and we have hope that heaven really is a wonderful place and you are accepting your grief when you come to that point. But there are some danger signs and I've known some people who have had incomplete, abnormal, unhealthy grief experiences. They struggled far too long with grief. There are three dangerous you need to avoid in your grief process.

(1) Denial

Number one is denial. Some people deny the fact their loved one is gone. It can be as bizarre as the woman in Buffalo, New York, who literally preserved the body of her mother for years, rubbing her down with body lotion to try to preserve the her body. It can also manifest itself in the form of making a shrine out of the bedroom of someone that has been gone for many years, leaving it exactly as it was the day their loved one died, often not even entering the room. Denial prevents a healthy grief experience.

(2) Isolation

Secondly there is withdrawal. Once you go through grief, there is a temptation to isolate yourself and withdraw from normal relationships a normal life, embracing your pain and grief. That's a temptation you must avoid. Don't try to walk through great grief alone. God is there to help you. "Yea though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil for you are with me God." You'll find God there to help you and his people to help you through grief.

(3) Self-pity

Number three is self-pity. We've all known people who rather enjoyed the attention and embrace their pity far too long. A lady in a former church still maintained friendships with ladies her age, some had husbands and some didn't. Twelve years after the death of her husband, Louise still couldn't bear to hear anyone else talk about her husband. Her chin would quiver and her eyes fill

with tears and she would say, "At least you have a husband. I don't even have a husband." Finally she did that in the presence of one of her friends who knew her well enough to say, "Louise, get a life! I love my husband but I'm not going to cry for him 12 years after he's gone." She held onto her self-pity and didn't walk through the process of accepting her grief.

III. USE YOUR GRIEF

Number three. You can use your grief to help someone else. Your tears can be the rain that waters someone else's garden and if you'll use the grief process and sorrow, it can make you a stronger person and you will be equipped to help other people.

*I walked a mile with laughter
She chatted all the way
But I was none the wiser
For all she had to say.*

*But I walked a mile with sorrow
And not a word said she,
But oh the things I learned
When sorrow walked with me.*

No one enjoys grief, but once you go through the grief experience, you're equipped to help someone else who is grieving.

The turning point in this whole grief process for Job is in Job 42:10. Let's see how and when Job made the transition from expressing and accepting his grief to the point he could use the experience, which happens when you stop focusing on your own pain and loss and focus on someone else's pain. Remember the four friends they came to see Job? With friends like these you don't need enemies, because these guys didn't help him much. These "friends" treated Job and made untrue allegations about him. But in the process God revealed his power and love for Job and Job came to the point where he stopped grieving and turned to his friends and prayed for them, he's helping someone else. "After Job prayed for his friends, the Lord made him prosperous again and gave him TWICE as much as he had before." Before, Job had 10,000 head of livestock. Afterward, Job had 20,000 head of livestock. He had 10 children; God blessed him with twice as many. How many did God give him? 20? No. He gave him 10, because Job never lost the ten he had. His ten children that died went to the Lord—Job still had them. Those of you who have had children, or loved ones who know the Lord you haven't lost them; they're in heaven with the Lord right now and you can come to the point in your grief process when you take what you've learned and help someone else.

CONCLUSION

A widow wrote a letter to her husband who died and went to heaven. "What it's like to be your widow is being devastated by the seemingly simple act of discarding your toothbrush. It's sorting through your clothing and wrapping the empty sleeves of a sportcoat around me, sobbing into its lifeless shoulders. It's returning to familiar or favorite places that first time without you and

feeling so alone. It's missing the lingering smell of your shaving lotion after a goodbye kiss. It's eating alone at the counter of a restaurant on Easter Sunday, because no one remembered that I was alone. It's sitting in church alone at weddings and being especially touched by 'till death do us part.' It's struggling to keep my composure seeing your empty place at the dinner table, especially on your birthday, our anniversary, and holidays. It's not finding comforting arms when I rushed home hurt and bruised by a conflict. It's not hearing, 'Honey, I love you,' or 'You really look good in that dress.' But it's also knowing that even if you could come back you wouldn't, not after being with the Lord Jesus Christ, nor can I ask you to trade the company of the altogether lovely one for that of a very imperfect wife. But oh how I do miss you."

You can walk through the valley of grief and come to the place where you say, "God, you know how much I miss my loved one, but I thank you that you're taking good care of them." Our hearts do get broken. That's why Jesus said, "The Spirit of the Lord has anointed me that I might heal the brokenhearted." If your heart has been broken by grief, I suggest you take every broken piece and offer them to Jesus and say, "Heal my broken heart and heal my pain."

OUTLINE

I. EXPRESS YOUR GRIEF

1. Shock
2. Numbness
3. Pain and fatigue
4. Confusion
5. Flood of tears

II. ACCEPT YOUR GRIEF

1. Selective memories
2. Redirection of life

Barriers to acceptance

- (1) Denial
- (2) Isolation
- (3) Self-pity

III. USE YOUR GRIEF



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For the Joy...
Pastor David Dykes