

# June 9, 2019

## Good Grief?

### 2 Samuel 1

C.S. Lewis, author of many well-known books including the Narnia series and *Mere Christianity*, was a bachelor for most of his life. In his mid-fifties he married Joy Davidman. Within four years she died of cancer. As he tried to make sense of the experience, he wrote a book entitled, *A Grief Observed*. He begins the book with these poignant words, "No one ever told me..."

It is odd that we talk so much in the church about many important things, but there are some things we hesitate to talk about. We could list several important topics that we rarely mention. One of them is surely the whole issue of the loss of something precious – whether it be a loved one, a friend, perhaps a job, possibly a marriage, or even one's health. How do we cope with loss? In our text today, David is dealing with the deaths of Saul and his great friend, Jonathan.

It may seem odd to talk about this on a Sunday we celebrate the arts. But actually the arts are great therapy. One of the best ways to deal with grief is through art. David writes a song to help him process his loss and grief (2 Samuel 1:19-27).

#### ***Grief is Real***

Bad things happen. That's life. And when they do – whether it is a death, a diagnosis, the loss of a job, a marriage breakdown, or something else – people often react in predictable ways. They go through a grieving process. People sometimes feel guilty about it; they think they should be able to handle things as if life was business as usual. We struggle with our emotions. We wonder if we're normal, or if we're losing our minds. We need to know that grief is normal. In fact, it's essential.

Most cultures have an established pattern for people who are mourning. David, when he learned of Saul's and Jonathan's deaths, tore his clothes, mourned, wept, and fasted. In Victorian times, people would wear black for a prescribed period of time. People had permission to mourn. For a time. But then the time of mourning would end.

Unfortunately, our society doesn't have an accepted custom that gives us permission to grieve. We are pressured to get back to business as usual as quickly as possible. Neither do we have a way of marking the end of mourning. So we struggle with whether we're OK, or whether we're losing our sanity. Grief is very normal. And it is good for us to understand it a bit. Initially there is a sense of shock. We are bewildered. Dazed. Stunned.

When David gets the news of Saul's and Jonathan's deaths, he asks, *"How do you know they are dead?"* (2 Samuel 1:5). The messenger has just said he has come from the battlefield. David is in shock. We often react that way too. We are disoriented. It is as if our world has suddenly stopped. We can't believe other people can go about their daily lives. Our world is suddenly so different.

People may react with anger. People can direct anger in all sorts of ways. It can be anger at the person who brings the news (as in David's case). We may lash out at the doctor, or the person who brings us the pink slip. Anger may be directed at the person who is dying or sick. It can be anger directed at ourselves. Later in David's life, his son, Absalom, would die, and David would lament, *"O my son Absalom ... if only I had died instead of you."* (2 Samuel 18:33). This anger towards ourselves is really guilt (if only I had done more/ prayed more/seen the problem sooner). Sometimes our anger is directed toward God.

What is helpful to someone in these circumstances? Consider, first of all what's not helpful ... After Absalom's death, David's friend, Joab, came to him and got after him for mourning: *"Go out and encourage your men. I swear by the Lord that if you don't, not a man will be left with you by nightfall"* (2 Samuel 19:7). Joab is very callously saying, *"Get on with your life. Pick up the pieces and move on."* That is not helpful.

Most of us would never do that to someone who has just loved a loved one or whose marriage has just fallen apart. But sometimes we say or do things that are a tad sweeter but have much the same effect. We say, *"There, there; everything will be alright."* Or we try to give advice. Or we quote (out of context) verses like *"All things work together for good..."* Or we try to change the subject. Or we simply avoid the person who's suffering. We're not recognizing the seriousness of the problem for the person involved. We're trivializing the issue as if it doesn't exist. But it does. The layoff notice is real. The death is real. The diagnosis is real. The divorce is real.

Consider how Jesus handled people in grief. After the crucifixion, two disciples were on the road to Emmaus. They had just seen Jesus – the one whom they loved and believed in – cruelly executed. They were in shock. They were angry. Jesus, now resurrected, joins them on the road, but they don't recognize him. What does Jesus do? First, he listens to their story. Second, *"Beginning with Moses and all the prophets, he explained to them what was said in all the Scripture concerning himself"* (Luke 24:27). During the journey, he (1) listens, and (2) talks about the person for whom they were grieving. What people need from us are ears that will listen. And, uncomfortable though it may be for us, people also need the opportunity to talk about their loss.

### ***Where is God in our Grief?***

God is always present with us through these difficult times. But God doesn't always work things out the way we expect him to. In John 11, Mary and Martha sent for Jesus

because their brother, Lazarus, was ill. They expected Jesus to come and heal him. They expected Jesus to come and heal Lazarus so he would not die. But Lazarus did die. When Jesus finally came, Mary confronts him, almost accusingly, *"Lord, if you had been here, my brother would not have died"* (Luke 11:32). We have an expectation that when crises come God will be there to help. And He always is. But we make a mistake when we think we know exactly what kind of help to expect. Mary and Martha did not receive the kind of help they had anticipated.

When God doesn't seem to be there for us in the way we expect, we are tempted to accuse God the same way Mary did: *"God, you've abandoned me. You didn't answer my prayers."* We may become bitter and angry. There is a fascinating picture of how God may act for us contrary to our expectations in Isaiah 40:31: *"Those who hope in the Lord will renew their strength, they will soar on wings like eagles, they will run and not get weary, they will walk and not faint."*

The Lord's strength may come to us as a powerful force that causes us to soar above all the circumstances of life. There is an overwhelming sense of peace, even joy. There is miraculous healing. God intervenes dramatically. Perhaps you've had that experience at some time in your life. Or the Lord's strength may come not so much as a powerful feeling, but as energy and physical strength. You may find you have the ability to get on with things and do more than you ever thought possible.

Through God's grace, we find the strength to walk and not be faint. Frankly most of us would rather soar or run than walk. Somehow plodding along when we could be flying high or sprinting through things seems rather dull. But in times of grief and loss, simply being able to walk is enough. David knew this. When David wrote the famous words of Psalm 23, his comments is *"Even though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil, for you are with me..."* Sometimes we have to take little steps, and find God there in the everyday, ordinary things. This is not what we might expect from God. But it is still God's very real presence in our lives.

Notice the order in which Isaiah puts these verbs. First, soar. Second, run. Third, walk. It seems backwards. We would normally assume we would walk, then run, then take off and fly. Yet in crisis situations, Isaiah's words often are accurate. Initially, when someone dies or we suffer a loss, people may have a sense of soaring above circumstances as the details come together. Friends and family are around. There is a day or two when life's a blur. God carries you above it all. Then, as the things come together and plans are made, it's like running – God gives the strength to get things done. Sometimes we don't recognize it's God who is working in us and through other people. We credit adrenaline and all sorts of things. It is God who is there.

Inevitably the soaring and the running pass. We are not created to soar at dizzying heights indefinitely. Even the fittest people cannot run forever. No one ever goes

through the Christian life with more than a few isolated moments of soaring and running. Most of life is walking. Family goes home. Friends call less often. And when they do call, we feel like we have to pretend life is fine. There's the day to day drudgery of having to do all those routine little things again. It's hard to get out and get going. It's in this moment-by-moment walking that the presence of God is most real. He gives us the strength to walk and not faint. And in time, as God walks with us through our lives, we start to see God at work in surprising ways.

### ***Out of the ashes***

When the Kenow Wild Fire burned much of Waterton National Park in 2017, a huge area was devastated. Every living thing was destroyed or had fled. But by the next spring, the first grasses were growing and flowers were blooming. Some tiny seedlings somehow survived. And now that the taller trees were gone, they had the opportunity to grow and flourish. Wildlife returned. Out of the apparently lifeless landscape of devastation, was springing new life. Different. But in its own way healthy and robust, and full of potential.

In our lives, out of our loss, God can bring new life, too. Sometimes it happens so slowly we're hardly even aware of it. But new life comes. We find the strength to get out again. We find the strength to move forward. We discover our anger – even our anger toward God – transforms into wisdom as we gain perspective on life. Out of the devastated landscape of our lives comes new life that is surprisingly beautiful.

Yes, it is different than life was before. But even in its difference it is beautiful. God leads us beside peaceful streams we never knew before. He lets us rest in green meadows we've never been in previously. God is at work, bringing the beauty of new life out of disaster. David asked the Lord for guidance. And God provided it. David could sing, *"The Lord is my shepherd, I have everything I need,"* because it was true. That can be our experience, too.

This is where art – visual art, writing, dance, drama, photography, music – can be tremendous therapy. Through the act of being creative, God can often bring healing into our lives and experiences. Try it. The point is not to create glorious art, but to process our emotions and experiences through something active and engaging. David's song (2 Samuel 1:19-27) is not great poetry. But it helps him process his grief.

*"Lord, I don't have wings to fly with; I don't have legs to run with; but thank you I'm still on my feet. I have not fainted. God, walk with me, today, I pray. Amen."*

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