

Aspects of Grief

These notes are not a literal transcript but a pool of notes on which I drew for the talk.

Introduction

Ecc. 7 says: *It is better to go to a house of mourning than to go to a house of feasting, for death is the destiny of everyone; the living should take this to heart.*
The heart of the wise is in the house of mourning, but the heart of fools is in the house of pleasure.

These aren't verses that readily appeal to people caught up in their own pursuits and pleasures, but as we all know bad stuff happens in life, and Jesus's heart is wide open to those who are mourning. He was often around people's homes at times of great loss and mourning and He was always ready and willing to do not just something but a LOT for people who were hurting. Look what He did in raising Jairus' daughter from the dead or as a result of grieving with Martha and Mary for Lazarus. We may not all have seen Him raising the widow of Nain's son, or in feeding the hungry crowds who had been with him for three days but there are no limits to the power of His compassion.

But when serious stuff happens it is easy to think hard thoughts of God. Even Mary of Bethany said that if Jesus had been around Lazarus wouldn't have died. So the first thing I want to do is to highlight God's awareness of what people are going through and His willingness to help. I'll start with a couple of passages from the Old Testament:

'I have seen the misery of my people in Egypt – all the troubles, hardships and humiliations that they have received at the hands of their slave drivers . I have heard them crying out because of all this. I know how much they are suffering

and I am concerned about it, so I have come down to rescue them from the hand of the Egyptians and to bring them up out of that land into a good and spacious land, a land flowing with milk and honey.' Exodus 3:7

The Lord was concerned about the people's distress and came down and did something about it.

and now from Isaiah 63:9 ESV

*In all their distress He too was distressed,
and the angel of His presence saved them.
In his love and mercy He redeemed them;
He lifted them up and carried them
all the days of old.*

Let's hear that again in another version

*The people had many troubles,
but he was not against them.
He loved them and felt sorry for them,
so He saved them. (ERV)
He sent his special angel to save them.
He picked them up and carried them, just as He did long ago.*

In Hannah Hurnard's *Hind's Feet on High Places*, the Shepherd, who represents is the Lord, says in the chapter the Valley of Loss that this is one of His favoured places for coming alongside and meeting people. I pray that we will all know His carrying caring presence in just such ways as we go through our own trials and losses.

What we go through may not be as radical as Moses' parents placing their baby in the reeds hoping that someone might find him, or David returning from Ziklag to find that raiders had taken all the his men's wives and families and his own too, but events and episodes that cause loss happen to all of us. May the Lord grant us the

resolve David showed at Ziklag to strengthen himself in the Lord at such times and to see His deliverance come about beyond the loss. Let Moses be found! But we need the help of others for all this to happen, just as there would be a new family to raise Moses, and for David's men to be successful in pursuing the raiders.

Reasons for grieving

The English word **bereavement** stems from old Dutch and German words that mean '**to plunder**', and '**to take by force**'. It's helpful to keep this in mind because grief is a response to having something deeply precious taken away from us, sometimes very forcibly.

Just to take up the theme we looked at in Isaiah that *in all our distress the Lord too is distressed* – we read in Hebrews 4, '*We do not have a high priest who is unable to feel sympathy for our weaknesses, but we have one who has been tempted in every way, just as we are – yet he did not sin. Let us therefore hold firmly to the faith we profess and approach God's throne of grace with confidence, so that we may receive mercy and find grace to help us in our time of need.*

It was prophesied in Isaiah 53:3 that Jesus would be 'a man of sorrows acquainted with grief'. In the next chapter of Hebrews we read, *During the days of Jesus' life on earth, He offered up prayers and petitions with fervent cries and tears to the One who could save him from death, and He was heard because of his reverent submission.*

It's so important to grasp the fact that the Lord doesn't despair over the fact of loss and suffering but rather finds spiritual ways to express His anguish and then *practical* ways to alleviate it. As we shall be seeing, grief and mourning, horrible though they are in so many ways, can actually be a very godly response if they drive us closer in to the Lord's heart rather than allowing the weight of suffering to drive us into despair and away from Him.

Moses' parents were candidates for the most extreme grief of all, which psychologists tell us is associated with the loss of a child. We have not had suffered

that directly, but we have had five miscarriages. In each case we had thought the baby was well and truly implanted in the womb and the grief was considerable when the miscarriages came and the pregnancy ended. It has been his mercy that we have since been blessed with Ruth, Tim and Dominic.

The long goodbye

Some situations of course just do not have any easy closure: people with Alzheimer's, for instance, suffer a prolonged dying before death itself. That is very hard for their partners as a dear friend wrote to us from America about what he calls the long goodbye to his wife, 'We got married till death us do part; she is not dead, but we are separated as a result of the Alzheimer's.'

Coping with shrinking horizons, as Elijah did by the brook

We've been though that recently of course with my mother's ten years of Alzheimers, and many of you will have experienced what I call shrinking horizons in various forms. Something of what Elijah must have felt as he watched the water levels in the brook Cherith shrinking from day to day.

Many of us deep down are carrying a sense of loss because we are not able to be what we would like to be or to do what we would most like to do because of some internal or external limitation that has happened. This is particularly true if doors have closed in our faces, or age, health and other limiting factors have combined to shrink our horizons.

Of course there are no limits with God – He *loves* to work through the least, the last and the lost, any place any age, but that doesn't mean that there aren't necessary adaptations to make and emotions in us we may need to face. You could say that in one sense life is a series of losses on a smaller or bigger scale, from the moment we come out of the comfortable womb, through leaving home to go to nursery school, to leaving our parental home altogether when we are older (and what a wrench that can be for parents – many feel the pain of empty nests most acutely).

In every new phase there are many gains as and new opportunities as we move on, but there are also likely to be significant things that are missing that were there in the last phase of life. This is inevitable. It is crucial that we are courageous and flexible enough to ride the waves successfully and to press on and make the most of the new opportunities – but that may mean pausing to address any sense of loss that we have suppressed rather than processed.

Ros and I are having to come to terms with the fact that my doctor told me before we moved to Malvern that my pancreas was conking out. Despite prayer and working closely with the diabetic team my diabetes has been galloping this year. Because my blood sugars are so unpredictable this means that I simply can't do a good deal that I could have done just a year or even a few months ago. I can't pretend to like it one bit – but the Lord fashions His yoke for each one of us, and made it possible for me to be doing what I am called to do, in terms of writing, praying and counselling rather than charging round the country speaking as I used to do in years past. But there are many adjustments to make.

I liked the title of a book Ros saw the other day by an American Benedictine nun – *Growing Older Gracefully* – it must be good!

Paul's call is that we should 'give thanks in all circumstances for this is God's will for you in Christ Jesus'. (1 Thess.5:18) That is not only a biblical command, it is a spiritual revelation. The gratitude attitude is so very important; every day there is so much to be thankful for and it is right to take time to pause and express our gratitude.

Whenever we do that, it's like we're taking the sword of praise down from its place on the wall where it is hanging passively and put it to good use. The devil flees before the sight and sound of God's people thanking Him!

I'd like to illustrate this by pointing to two people who didn't have what we commonly take for granted: their mobility and their sight. Nicky / blind person in Oxford.

When I was with my mother earlier this year as she lay dying in hospital, the thought came to me clearly that when one season passes, another will always open up. Thank God that He is the God of the seasons. But that doesn't mean that we should try to underestimate the degree of loss and grief people feel when they are required to up sticks and move, (just think of all the Syrian refugees) or when such things as retirement and redundancy strike, along with all the loss of role and influence and honour that may follow in their wake.

When and where we are able to do so, it pays to prepare ourselves for transitions that are inevitable. It's the ones that take us by surprise that are usually hardest to handle. I've heard stories of husbands who have lost their jobs but who just couldn't face telling their wives, and who still leave the house at their accustomed time. This sort of denial really does happen and people need time and support to recover from the shock of severed hopes and shattered dreams can be very intense.

When a bush or shrub is taken out of a flowerbed, God doesn't just fill the hole there and then. It takes time and energy for hope and direction to come back, for us to get the new bucket load of experience under our belts and our appetite for life to be restored.

If people gloss over their griefs and effectively cover them up, rather than processing them, it means that when further losses come they build on top of unprocessed loss – and there is always a loss of power and momentum as a result. For many of us, I would suggest that our starting point should be simply this: **giving ourselves permission to grieve.**

There are right and proper encouragements in Scripture to forget the former things, and to move on and press into whatever Christ is leading you into – but there really is such a thing as a **work** of grief; a time to remember properly and to process the layers of grief. As Ecclesiastes puts it, *there is a time to laugh and then a time to weep and a time to mourn. (3:4)*

The tradition of stoically keeping a stiff upper lip is a lot less engrained in people than it used to be, but it is still there for many of us, and whilst it may help us to get through certain things in the short term, it proves really *unhelpful* in the longer term if it clashes with a false idea about how Christians ought to be able to deal with things. It leads to *a hardening of the oughteries!*

So let me say this very clearly: Responding to loss stoically is *not* the same thing as the authentic biblical qualities of courage, perseverance and endurance.

Courage really is the word. The Spanish writer Cervantes put it this way, '*he who loses wealth loses much, he who loses friendships loses more and he who loses his courage loses everything.*'

Part of the problem is that people often don't realise that they need to grieve. Oddly, it is often little things that remind us of our bigger losses. There used to be a sign at French level crossings: *un train peut en cacher un autre* – 'one train can conceal another'. For many it is often the death of a pet that releases damned up emotions for other losses.

The patterns and sequence of grief emotions are widely known these days. They can strike with great intensity and in any order: disbelief shock, anger denial bargaining and so on before finally coming through to a deeper acceptance. I won't go into these in any detail now as I have done so in considerable detail in my book, *Vale of Tears*, which I would like to point you towards. One major thing we need to come to terms with is the vital need to forgive anyone and anything that has contributed to the grief that we are going through. This is not so automatic as it might sound. There are often many layers of hurt to work through.

There is also an equally crucial need to be willing to let go when the Lord calls us to yield something or someone back to Him and to hand the baton on. The moment we continue just one step beyond the anointing we cease to be anointed and appointed and effectively become fixed and institutionalised. It is a very sad thing to witness,

but I've seen it happen in both churches and businesses when people are reluctant to let go and hand the baton on at the proper time.

Sometimes the opposite happens, and genuinely anointed people are thrust out of the role God raised them up for, through Absalom style presumption and rebellions. The consequences of this can be devastating, as well as being a huge loss and challenge for the person who has been ousted.

The Work of Grief

Many of us are only too used to putting off expressing our grief to a more convenient moment – but that perfect moment may never come. One of the reasons for this is that we know that we are going to have to face profoundly unpleasant things. Much better to embrace the work of grief, and to handle it so far as possible, in manageable sized pieces, preferably with the help of trusted friends and counsellors. True friends, as someone beautifully put it, 'brush away the veil of tears'.

If we don't, we are in real danger of succumbing to what Jennifer Rees Larcombe calls the POMS– the 'poor old me's and gibe in to a whole splodge of self pity, anger and resentment.

Grief has its own ways of striking back when we try to keep the lid on. It's as emotionally rumbustious as a hormonally challenged teenager slamming doors. Grief is anything but neat and tidy: it threatens to overtake us at the most unexpected and inopportune of moments.

When we are in times of grief, we'll often find ourselves praying the same sort of thing over and over again. This is not the heaping up of empty words that Jesus condemns; it's much more a case of allowing the pain in our heart to meet the grace that is in God's heart, and that takes as long as it takes.

I mentioned that I was with my mother in hospital earlier this year. I'm so glad I spent the time with her. One day, the staff called me in at 4 am. They had recognised a change in Mum that they knew to mean she had only hours to live. All too often

these days, death is seen as a sanitised and medicalised event, removed from family or personal contact. It's probably true to say that when life expectancy was a lot shorter, families were better able to grieve together than they do today.

Some of us are much more able to articulate our grief, of course, than others.

Typically, women talk their grief out better than men, who are often less vocally gifted and more inclined to internalise. But all of us, with help – and we often will need help – can find ways to release it. What helps one won't be the best way to help another: some people will write, paint, or compose effectively in memory of a loved one; the outsider might not realise at all that they were working through their grieving, because it looks as though they are doing just whatever it is that they are doing. The Psalms often become more precious to us than at any other time in our lives for they really do take us with God's help to the depths of human life.

We all have to find by trial and experience, what helps at such times and what is a dead end way of thinking or acting.

If you possibly can, it is most helpful to let the grief out in deliberately controlled stages. As I've said already, it's no good pretending that all is well, not least because grief that is not attended to usually develops into a hardening of a shell around our hearts. Tectonic plates.

Exercise

Journaling too provides a highly effective way to express grief emotions without overloading our friends and support networks.

People who write about their traumas commonly experience fewest panic attacks and recover quickest.

I have mentioned on several occasions in the past how helpful this threefold writing exercise is: what happened, how I felt at the time and how I feel about it now. It seems to be best to separate these accounts rather than doing them all at one go. In

other words this is a serious exercise. All the evidence is that by pulling all three of these strands together something special seems to happen in a healing dimension. When recording what has happened it is important to be take care not to leave anything major out! It's easy to leave a crucial stage out. For instance, one person described a fire in his house in great detail - but completely omitted to mention that his mother died in it.

MUSIC too soothes and calms agitations that words alone cannot always reach. it affects a different part of the brain. In some cases it may stir up grief before it heals.
(Song of Wind)

The importance of friendship

Never underestimate the importance of friendship. It's so important to keep friendships in good repair. You don't want to be casting round wondering who to contact when something serious occurs. Good friendships stand every strain – but those which are based on meeting needs or on getting what you can get out of them (materially or socially) quickly fall by the wayside during times of grief.

The question 'How are you?' becomes all but impossible to answer when we are unsure of our relationship: there are too many layers, and our ability to answer truthfully will depend, to a great measure, on how much we trust the person asking the question. 'Can he or she really handle what I am feeling?' 'Is she just wanting to feed on my grief and make herself feel important?' 'Or is it just a rhetorical question to which they weren't expecting any serious answer anyway!' Attitudes like that are a long way from weeping with those who weep.

May we be spiritual midwives and pastors who come alongside people in their griefs and losses and who don't ignore people just because they have long faces.

Dear Father, help us to discern the difference between grief and trauma.

Grant us a measure of authority to lift off in prayer trauma and excessive grief, and then to walk alongside.

Walking with those who are grieving

When visiting the newly bereaved we often wonder what on earth we will find to say. It is worth saying God doesn't and can't give grace for hypothetical situations. Many of you will have heard of the occasion when the four year young Corrie Ten Boom asked her father, 'What it like to die, Daddy?'. Her wise father replied by asking her when they would buy a ticket for a train journey? Of course, in those days before advance booking, the answer was they would do so just before getting on board. And that is when the Lord provides what we need too.

We need midwives for the end of life as for the beginning. A week or two ago Mike Alley died – elaborate, **Mary singing to Mike, his non-believing grand-daughter reading the Bible to him. Someone who lost a teenage son said the same thing , praying with him, holding hands, stroking him, love leads the way but it is so good when it finds physical expression. Ros was brilliantly like that with Mum during her last few months, and she was wonderfully grateful despite the advanced Alzheimers.**

This is all the more challenging when the midwives to the dying are also the chief mourners.

So what is it that people who are grieving really need?

In a word: reassurance. The terror of an earthquake lies in the earth, which is the foundation of our stability, being so severely shaken; grief is like that to a greater or lesser extent. In the initial aftermath, the Lord may send a divine anaesthetic to help us through the emergency times, but then it can happen that grief cuts in in full and leaves us feeling completely cut off from His presence. Never underestimate the power of after-shocks, either. I have a friend in Christchurch, New Zealand, who has been totally traumatised, not only by the big earthquake a few years ago, but by the thousands of serious after-shocks that have made her part of town a continuing disaster zone.

Reassurance is all-important. **A grieving person needs reassurance that says that you still care, and that you are committed to walking with them through it, as it were lending them your strength for a season and reassuring them that Jesus is walking beside them.**

It's no wonder that the enemy tries hard to get people to turn to spiritualism for the false comfort of supposed messages from the afterlife. Those who are grieving need to know they are accepted. What people really need comes down to two words: 'your presence.' The same is true for all who are experiencing loss of any kind, those who have been rejected and betrayed.

Sadly, many people are more conspicuous by their absence at such times – perhaps because they fear they have nothing worthwhile to give: the fear of putting our foot in it can be very strong, especially when we actually have done that in the past. We must still continue to visit and not let fear hold us back.

Or it might be that they do not want to expose themselves to what they are quite sure will be painful emotions. Excuses are the order of the day for avoiding people in grief – just as they are in a different way for writers! There is selfishness, as well as fear at work in this. Both have to be overcome. Remember: what people need most is our presence.

Allowing someone the time just to grieve may be the kindest thing we can do for them. Don't feel you have to be Mr Fixit – just go to the house of mourning. It is often deeper and more meaningful just to weep together. We are always closer to people we have wept with! As Spurgeon said 'tears are liquid prayer.'