

2CH Sunday at 7.30

Good grief

Presented by Chris Witts

One of the sad facts of life is that as you get older, the more funerals you attend. That's how it is for me. I've lost count of the numbers of funerals I've attended say in the past 5 years. I have to come to know many people in my years of ministry, and some of them have reached old age, and then they die. Some of them have died suddenly, while others have been through illness and pain. And I miss seeing them around as I used to.

So, I find myself reflecting on this big issue of life, and I realise that most people will, during their lifetime, attend at least one funeral of someone they know. And as they do, they will experience sadness, grief and sorrow, thinking about the reality that their friend, relative or work colleague, has died. It's not an easy topic to talk about, and if we're honest we prefer to put it out of our minds and dwell on more pleasant subjects.

But grief and grieving are facts of life. How comforting to know we have a Heavenly Father who understands our feelings, and shares life with us, especially in times of sorrow and loss.

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It's a sure thing that you and I are going to experience loss of one kind or another at some point in our life. For some, the experience is repeated many times over. This may be the case in your life. Perhaps you are in the throes of grief right now. It's part of life we can't really ignore, and whilst we usually think of grief as the result of someone dying, grief can also be from the break-up of a marriage, the result of being robbed, or from things such as the loss of a job, or the loss of an item that has sentimental value. Anything a person loses that is near and dear to them will cause grief to some degree.

But what is grief? It's an intense sorrow caused by a loss, and is common to everyone. It's not unusual to feel sad at some loss. If a loved pet dies, for example, the grief felt is genuine and should be acknowledged. With any of these losses, the natural response is to grieve—which may include a mixture of reactions and emotions, all of which need to be worked through and resolved. Grieving is not a quick-fix simple event, but a process that can take weeks or many months depending on the significance of the loss.

Have you noticed that loss does not discriminate on age, race, sex, education or nationality? Grief is just like any other emotion that God has given us. In giving us emotions God also gave us ways to express them. He gave laughter to express joy, words to express anger, and tears to express sorrow – it's OK to feel sorrow. But it is an emotion that's not easy to talk about. Each of us deals with our grief in unique and different ways. When a family member dies, we may struggle because we don't understand why it had to happen. Just the thought of spending our remaining years without the physical presence of that person causes us inner pain. Grief is a painful emotional hurt that can be slow to heal. Grief is standing by watching someone you love battle with Alzheimer's disease, or watching your children make decisions which break your heart.

C.S.Lewis lost his wife Joy to cancer and he was devastated at her death. He was overwhelmed by grief and his world was shattered. He found life incredibly difficult, and struggled with his faith in God. After an inner battle, he eventually found comfort in his own soul and at the end of his book "A Grief Observed" said: "Only torture will bring out the truth. Only under torture does he discover it himself." He said the pain he felt was similar to having your leg cut off. No-one is saying it's easy to understand, but I guess it's like Ralph Waldo Emerson who wrote these words – "When it is dark enough, men see stars". The stars of hope and healing often only reveal themselves to those who suffer the dark pit of sorrow and grief.

I read about one woman whose two sisters died tragically. She announced to the rest of the family, "There is no God. I don't believe in Him anymore." This woman was understandably angry at God, but instead of telling Him how she felt, she rejected Him. Do you know God doesn't get upset when we are angry at Him?

He knows it anyhow and He understands. The healthy thing to do is to tell Him how we feel so we can resolve these feelings. Otherwise we will keep them inside and become physically ill, depressed, withdrawn, or take out our hurt on others. In our grief we may feel anger, loneliness, and a crushing emptiness that says "Life will never be the same again. How will I cope?"

It was like the Psalmist in Psalm 43 who in his time of anguish cried out to God "All your waves and billows have gone over me, and floods of sorrow pour upon me like a thundering cataract" (v7.LB) After a little while, God came to him and he was able to say "I know that I shall again have plenty of reason to praise him for all that he will do. He is my help. He is my God" (v11 LB).

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If you've attended a funeral service, you will notice that people usually shed tears. And that's a good thing to do. Crying is part of the emotions God has given us, especially when we are grieving. Unfortunately, in our society, crying is perceived as an act of weakness or embarrassment. I heard of one family member who gave advice like this: "When you go to the funeral, don't embarrass us and your self by making a scene crying". This is not helpful. In fact, it can bring emotional harm later on as the grieving process continues.

I've heard others say "It's not healthy to talk about it", as if denial will hurry up the grieving process. Wrong again. We should let people talk about their loss openly and as often as they want to. Because as they talk, they gain emotional strength and comfort.

If you went to Sunday School, you may remember the teacher asking the question "which is the shortest verse in the Bible?". The answer was John 11:35 – "Jesus wept". Two words that tell us so much about grieving. Jesus, the Son of God, knew the full extent of emotions including loss and grief, as He stood at the tomb of his friend Lazarus at Bethany, and weeps at his death. He had died four days earlier and his sisters Mary and Martha and their friends are also grief stricken. This Jesus was not some angelic being who was above the feelings of ordinary people: He knew how tough life was back then, and He was familiar with suffering. In fact, years before, the prophet Isaiah had said "He was despised and rejected by men, a man of sorrows, and familiar with suffering" (Isaiah 53:3). Jesus was not cheerful all the time – He grieved and He wept.

Jesus wept because somebody had died. His friend Lazarus. Quite frankly, isn't this reason enough to be moved to tears? John tells us unmistakably how deeply Jesus was moved by the death of Lazarus. He joins the grief of Mary and Martha and the people of Bethany. He wept over the frailty of life and the randomness with which it was snuffed out. Jesus wept because he sees and feels something in Lazarus' life and death, and new life, that reminds him of his own life and death and new life. Maybe his tears were shed over realizing that no one seemed to understand what he was about, much less believe it.

Or maybe he wept over the enormity of what he had been given to do, and how alone he was. It was not time to make light of it or joke about it. Woody Allen once said "It's not that I am afraid to die. I just don't want to be there when it happens". We may smile at his dark sense of humour, but we know what he meant. But Jesus took grief seriously. He knew about pain and suffering and loss. Jesus wept as anyone would weep who has lost a friend, as Mary and Martha weep over the loss of their brother, as each of us weeps when our time comes. Jesus wept, and there is nothing extraordinary about that. "See how he loved him," the crowd of mourners said that day.

Jesus' wept because he and the people whom he loved were face to face with the ultimate question, at the edge of the most profound of all mysteries. Life is not unlimited. A bumper sticker I heard about summed it up pretty well: "Eat Dessert First; Life is uncertain." One of the privileges ministers of religion have is bringing comfort to people in their time of bereavement. There is no greater task than sharing the news that Jesus understands their pain, because He went through it as well. Prior to His arrest and crucifixion, we read in Mark's gospel these words of Jesus: "My soul is overwhelmed with sorrow to the point of death". He was referring to His own death here, but the point is that the eternal God is not immune to sorrow.

Grief is inevitable and we cannot escape it. We are *supposed* to grieve when someone close to us died. It's something not only to be expected, but to be accepted. And that's not always easy.

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Because we live in a culture that tries its best to deny death, we find grieving a difficult topic. The anthropologist Margaret Mead once said “when someone is born, we rejoice. When someone is married, we celebrate. But when someone dies, we pretend that nothing has happened”. Yet loss is part and parcel of life.

Very often, we rush in to help someone in their grief by saying “don’t worry – time heals everything”. I don’t think that’s very helpful at all. For some, time only *prolongs* the agony, and the struggle to get on with life takes much longer. I’ve heard others say “it’s time to *get on* with your life”. This is easier said than done when you’ve lost a partner of say 60 years married life.

Grief is not a sickness or a disease, but a natural human response to a significant loss. Grief says we miss that person and we’re struggling to adjust to life without that special relationship. Tears are not a sign of weakness, but an indication of how special that relationship was. Grieving people should be allowed space to cry as much as they want to. Don’t try to stop them, however well-meaning your attempts might be! They are going through the valley of loss, but with help and support and understanding, they will re-organise their lives and continue on, at the time they choose – however long it may take.

If you want to help someone who is grieving, the best thing to do is be a good listener. You don’t have to talk – just be there and listen carefully, and with sincerity. Grieving people need to talk about their loss – and for that to happen, someone has to be willing to listen. One lady I read about said “In my home, I watched from the window hoping that every car that slowed down was stopping outside my place. Anyone would have done. I wanted to talk. And when they did come, they seemed to talk about every other subject except the most obvious topic – my husband’s death. Then I wanted them to leave”. What does this mean? If you’re doing most of the talking, you’re probably not helping.

One of the wonderful benefits of being a Christian is that Jesus promises comfort in your time of loss. In the Sermon on the Mount He said “Happy are those who mourn; God will comfort them” (Matthew 5:4). How can anyone be happy and grief-stricken at the same time? I think it’s all about being honest with our own emotions. Psychologists all agree that facing up to and acknowledging our inner pain is the first step on the road to recovery. You don’t have to indulge the negative feelings and wallow in them, but you must allow yourself to feel them. There is nothing wrong with turning to the Lord for comfort. Jesus promised His presence to those who mourn – “you *will* be comforted”. I mentioned CS Lewis a few minutes ago, and he said something else very interesting. From his own experience of loss he said “If you are not willing to face pain then you will not experience true joy”. He was talking about emotional pain of course. God cannot comfort anyone who doesn’t show Him the wounds.

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The pain of grief and bereavement is very real, and God promises His own peace and comfort. There is something wonderful about His presence which cannot be copied by anything or anyone else. The writer of Psalm 30 put his feelings like this: “You have changed my sadness into a joyful dance: you have taken away my sorrow and surrounded me with joy. Lord, you are my God; I will give you thanks forever” (Psalm 30:11-12).

From my experience of life and getting to know people, it seems that grief is like a wound that needs time and attention to heal. And that’s where we can help by accepting and understanding how they feel. If someone you know is grieving today, accept them as they are. Avoid the temptation of trying to “fix” their hurt. They are not looking for answers or solutions at this point, rather an acceptance that they are going through difficult days. Your empathy and sorrow will help them grieve. Remember that everything in life has the potential to be a stepping stone or a stumbling block. Loss is inevitable – what we do about it is our choice. Why not try and help grieving people make good choices so they can pick up the broken pieces and make the most of what they have left?

Heavenly Father, we ask that Your comfort and love be very real right now to those who suffer bereavement. May they know that we care. I pray in Jesus Name. Amen.