

A person in a dark jacket and pants is walking away from the camera down a snow-covered path in a forest. The trees and branches are heavily laden with snow, creating a serene and quiet atmosphere.

Walking With God Through Grief

The summer of 2012 stands in my memory as a great paradox of emotion. How can a few short weeks filled with such overwhelming joy change into such deep, aching sadness? On July 28, with great enthusiasm, I took Terri as my wife, and we fled away from the Texas heat for a honeymoon in the perfectly regulated climate of southern California. (We exchanged the 102 degrees Fahrenheit of our wedding day for a whole week of mid-70s in San Diego!)

We flew to Los Angeles and rented a convertible for the scenic drive down the Coastal Highway. Bathed in the California sunshine, the dawn of our marriage led us down our first

road trip as husband and wife. During that one week of newly wedded bliss, Terri and I enjoyed all the family-friendly fun that San Diego has to offer: Perfect weather. Zoo. Sea World. La Jolla. Hotel Coronado. Croce's. Gaslamp Quarter. Torrey Pines. Room service. In-room movie rentals. Did I mention the weather in San Diego is perfect? Our honeymoon felt as close to heaven, as I believe one can get without dying.

A JOURNEY INTO GRIEF

After we returned to Dallas in early August, Terri went back to work, and I mentally prepared for my final year of seminary. What will this “normal” life be as a newly minted husband?

But “normal” never came. On the afternoon of August 15, my brother Chris called me from Arkansas. “Mom is being airlifted to Mercy Hospital in Springfield. I found her lying on the floor at home, and it appears she had been there overnight. The EMT said it looks like she had a stroke, and mom is unresponsive.” Chris also said I should come. So that evening, as the Texas sun descended, Terri and I departed together toward the deepening night on our second road trip as husband and wife.

Mom lingered in a coma for a few days. The stroke had caused a significant amount of bleeding in her brain. Medication given to prevent clotting and help her brain re-absorb the blood destabilized her blood pressure, so it was discontinued. “If the brain swelling decreases within 48 hours, there might be hope,” the doctor explained. It didn't. The medical team said there was nothing more they could do. On Saturday, August 18, three weeks to the day after my wedding, mom died.

A few days later, we lowered her body down into her grave, placed beside her father. Mom and Dad had purchased the grave plot decades before, never imagining death would come so soon. She was only sixty. My family and I said our goodbyes, and we left her there among her people on that grassy Arkansas hilltop.

DISCOVERING THROUGH LOSS

Over those first terrible days, and in the months following mom's death, I searched the Scriptures desperately, hoping to find some sense of meaning in my circumstances. It proved harder when Granny (my mom's mom) passed away three months later. Then thirteen months after mom's death, my brother Greg was struck and killed in a roadside accident. I had enough faith in the goodness of God to believe that something, anything, should come from these tragic moments. Humbled by the way the Lord met and ministered to me through these losses, below are a few things God taught me in my journey through grief.

Grief is Normal

Grief is normal and healthy. It's so normal and healthy that the Ancient Near Eastern world formalized its expression. In the days of Abraham, Jacob and Esau, and all Jacob's sons, official days of mourning were observed. People commonly took a whole week off, put on special clothing, cried, and fasted. And they did all of this because they knew that the loss of a loved one is a weighty thing. Its magnitude needed expression in some shape in their lives.

Our skewed American notions of independence can whisper lies to us, suggesting that we ought to remain stronger than our grief, and we ought to push it down and overcome it. But this thought proves to be a self-destructive myth. Instead, we need to embrace our vulnerability, feel our loss deeply, and admit that our hurts are significant. Our loved one played a vital role in our life, and our love for them equaled that significance.

As we acknowledge the real and gaping void left by our departed loved ones, we now have to learn to allow the Lord to fill that emptiness. The pain of grief should prompt us to seek the fullness that only the Lord can provide. Psalm 63:1 reminds us that when we find ourselves in a “dry and exhausted land where there is no water,” we most deeply sense our need for the Lord's comforting presence (NASB). Amid our most considerable losses, we can pursue God and bring all of our pain and all of our emptiness to the Lord, asking Him to remind us once again that His “love is better than life” (Ps 63:3). He is sufficient to fill the deepest yearnings of our soul. And so, in the end, grief and lamenting is a call to worship.

Grief Testifies to the Goodness of God

Grief also has a purpose—it points to something beyond itself. In his book, *The Problem of Pain*, C.S. Lewis wrote that pain is God's “megaphone to rouse a deaf world.” The bellow of pain itself can prove deafening, and we often have trouble discerning its words. Turning down the distortion enough to hear the message requires a response of faith on our part. When we seek the Lord's sufficiency, asking Him to calm our souls, we will hear what our pain has screamed in our ears: “What a gift! How precious! How will we get by? They meant so much!”

Grief is pain over the loss of something so indescribably valuable that when it's gone, our human finitude knows of no way to adequately express it, except with tears, sobs, and a broken heart.

Grief reminds us that relationships, indeed people, are gifts. More pointedly, our pain reminds us that these gifts are *good*. Almost unspeakably good, sacred even, once they're gone. But the Bible says that every good gift comes from a good gift giver. James 1:17 tells us that “Every good thing given and every perfect gift is from above, coming down from the Father of lights, with whom there is no variation or shifting shadow” (NASB).

The loss of someone valuable should turn our faces in thanks toward our *ultimately* precious Saviour. Grief, rightly understood, therefore, should result in thanksgiving to God. It takes a little time and perspective to arrive here, but to miss this is to disregard the primary purpose of grief.

Embracing this message permits us to freely admit that the pain is almost too much to bear and to accept that sometimes, in the moment of a memory, we will suddenly find tears running down our faces. And with wet cheeks, we can still honestly say, “Thank you, Father!” We are not thankful that it hurts, but we feel grateful that we had such a wonderful gift that its loss would leave such a vast emptiness in our hearts. And grief that ultimately leads to thanksgiving is healthy indeed.

Grief Reminds Us that God is God

Sometimes we get angry because we forget or refuse to recognize that the gift we lost never belonged to us. Job, ancient and wise, is a famous example of someone who knew that God is a good gift-Giver. He lost everything, and his analysis of his loss is that the One who gives the gift always has the right to take it away (Job 1:21).

Of course, Job’s wife provides us with an example of one who lost sight of the purpose of grieving (Job 2:9). If we allow the pain of our grief to eclipse our vision of the good gift giver, we risk a spiritual disaster. King David reminds us that belief and confession of the Lord’s goodness is the antidote to despair: “I would have despaired *unless I had believed* that I would see the goodness of the LORD In the land of the living” (Ps 27:13, NASB, emphasis mine).

Grief Reminds Us We are not God

Nothing reminds us so acutely of our human limitations than standing by the graveside of a loved one we could not hold on to, even though we tried. Could anything be more maddening to the human psyche? Those who stand at bedsides, watching their loved ones slip away often say, “I feel so *helpless!*” That’s why those who stay alongside their dying loved one, know the myth of human control better than anyone. They have seen

first-hand that the proud mouth of medical technology boasts miraculous things, but in the end, it’s powerless to keep anyone we love with us.

Death allows no illusions of control, but our grief points to the all-powerful One. Grieving calls us to cast our burdens on the Maker of heaven and earth (Ps 121:1–2), the One who manages global sparrow populations, tracks hairline recession on every balding scalp (Matt 10:29–31) and faithfully guards what we entrust to Him until the last day (2 Tim 1:12).

Grief Reminds Us Death is an Enemy

Some of us know that a certain kind of anger in grief is not inappropriate. While we humbly acknowledge God’s sovereignty and relinquish back to Him what is His to take, we also recognize that death and suffering are not part of His design. It’s a lingering reminder of our fallen situation and the human sin that lies at its root.

Yet grief brings an appropriate response of outrage at the abnormality of death, and it reminds us it’s not supposed to feel normal. God did not make us to stay separated from our loved ones forever. He did not create us to die but to live! John 11:35 describes the anguish of the Lord Jesus in tears of grief over the death of his dear friend, Lazarus even as He anticipates raising him by His divine, life-giving power (cf. John 11:20–25).

Jesus’s tears display grief and outrage at the very presence of death in the world He created. Death intrudes (Rom 5:12). Or better, it is the houseguest humanity wishes it had never invited into its home. Through Satan’s deception and humanity’s rebellion, death has ransacked the domicile of humankind (Gen 3:1–6; Rom 3:23). Satan is a thief. He comes, and he steals. He kills and destroys (John 10:10).

But the Word of God assures us that death’s reign is temporary. The Lord Jesus Christ has broken in to plunder the strong man (Mark 3:27) and take back what is His own with resurrection power. “The last enemy to be destroyed is death.” (1 Cor 15:26). And it’s because we await the inevitable coming of our victorious King, and the resurrection of those in Christ who have passed on before us, that we have hope.

In the face of loss, we surely grieve, but we do not do so as those without hope (1 Thess 4:13–14). Hope is the reason that we can cry, and amid our tears, we can also smile. We know that our weeping is temporary, but our hope is everlasting. In the sunshine and the darkness, in times of joy, and through seasons of grief, we never travel alone. Our Lord Jesus, “a man of suffering, and familiar with pain” (Isa 53:3), walks beside us every step of the way.



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