

EQUIPPING FOR MINISTRY IN THE 21ST CENTURY

Good grief

“Good grief” is the expression of frustration that falls frequently from the lips of Charlie Brown, Lucy, Linus and even Snoopy in Charles Schulz’s cartoons. It is a seemingly paradoxical expression that begs a larger question about the nature of grief.

When we experience significant loss we often wonder whether the weight of it will overwhelm us. We doubt that we will ever laugh again. We even hesitate to hope that the pain will ever subside. Grief is real, it is painful and sometimes it lingers.

Jesus is a man of sorrows, acquainted with grief. He knows our pain and He knows the pain of losing people that He loves (even eternally). In seeking to prepare His disciples for the grief they would experience at His death, Jesus says, “You will grieve, but your grief will turn to joy” (John 16:20). That promise extends to the followers of Jesus today who, although they grieve, do not grieve as those who have no hope (1 Thessalonians 4:13). Indeed, we have hope and it springs eternal.

Grief is real because death and loss are real. Death and loss are real because sin is real. The One who came to solve our sin problem, also solves our death problem. And we can rely on Him to help us shoulder the weight of our grief.

But we do not want you to be uninformed, brothers, about those who are asleep, that you may not grieve as others do who have no hope.

1 Thessalonians 4:13 ESV

Truly, truly, I say to you, you will weep and lament, but the world will rejoice. You will be sorrowful, but your sorrow will turn into joy.

John 16:20 ESV

Indeed, we grieve over many things, losses great and small. We grieve the reality of death, divorce, disaster, the loss of our sense of security, loss of job, marriage, meaning, purpose, position, health and wealth. We grieve the loss of ability, capability, friendship, fellowship, standing, our unrealized dreams, the future which we had planned and the reality of life that hasn’t turned out the way we had hoped. And therein lies the rub. The most subtle desires of our hearts, our genuine affections, even our idols, are exposed in our grief.

What grieves you?

Are those genuinely things that grieve the heart of God?

Where are you in the process of yoking yourself to Christ and allowing Him to shoulder the weight of that grief even as He shares with you the weight

of His glory?

Hear anew the promise of our crucified and risen Savior:

“Come to me, all you who are weary and burdened, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you and learn from me, for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. For my yoke is easy and my burden is light” (Matthew 11:28-30).

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Week I: Getting up in the dark

One month shy of my 16th birthday my dad died of a heart attack. He left on a business trip full of life and came home as ashes in an urn. He was 43 years old. The same age I am now. It's a sobering thought.

I certainly remember my own grief. I recall the powerful impact my dad's death had not only on our family but on our friends, neighbors and the larger community. I remember the people who offered what they thought were comforting words. I credit them with helping me to develop a theology and practice of presence and a commitment to never say such things to other people in the midst of grief.

I also remember the people who came alongside and walked with me a journey that took years. For them I will be eternally grateful.

With the hindsight of years and many griefs observed in pastoral ministry, I believe I now have some perspective on what others experience on the journey of grief.

My sister and I acknowledge how differently we grieved. We certainly both passed through Elisabeth Kubler-Ross' five stages of grief (denial, anger, bargaining, depression and acceptance) but we did so at different paces and required different resources to help us. During some stages the emotions were expressed, at other times suppressed. Gifts of space and time and grace were often exchanged.

One powerful challenge a Christian friend shared with me along the way was to get up in the dark. Before sunrise, get up, face east and wait. The Son has risen and the sun will rise. God can be trusted. Mourning will turn into dancing; maybe not today, but one day. God will wipe away every tear and death will be no more; maybe not today, but someday. You do not have to carry the weight of this grief all alone. There is a God whose love has swallowed up the power of death and He stands ready even now to shed light into the darkness of your despair.

Read the Psalms of lament.

Read Ezekiel 37.

Read I Corinthians 15.

Read Romans 8.

Cry out to the Lord. What grief in life is most weighty for you right now?

Hear the Savior invite you to cast your grief upon Him for He cares for you. Get up in the dark and put your hope in the Son-rise.

God has a different perspective on death than we do. When we consider how Jesus responded to death and what He taught about death we recognize the temporal and limited nature of our perspective.

Jesus said that the dead should bury their own dead. He spoke very matter-of-factly of His own impending death. In reference to John the Baptist, He grieved (John 11:33-36), and then He applied Himself to the ministry at hand. Jesus didn't offer much direct instruction on the subject of death, but He taught volumes about what lies on the other side of death in the Kingdom of Heaven for those who believe.

Jesus sees all the way to the other side. Jesus knows that the

glory of God outweighs all human grief. This is not to say that grief is not real. Jesus grieved. But Jesus also demonstrated what it means to put your hope in God the Father who is sovereign over all things, even death.

For reflection, discussion and prayer:

1. Meditate on I Thessalonians 4:13, "We grieve, yes, but not as those who have no hope."

2. Discuss the sources of grief and the source of hope.

3. Meditate on I Peter 1:6-8.

4. Discuss the griefs and trials that you have suffered and how your faith has been refined through those experiences.

Pray for one another.

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Week II: What grieves God?

In order to cultivate a Godly perspective on grief, we must consider what grieves God.

Hebrews 3:10-19 describes the grief God experienced in response to the evil heart of unbelief beating within humanity. That reality is first exposed in Genesis 6:5-6 where we discover that God was grieved by the wickedness and continually evil thoughts of humankind. Genesis 6:13 says that God was grieved that the earth was filled with violence through them.

Psalms 95:10-11 reveals that God was grieved when His people refused to trust His providence. It grieved God that His people murmured and complained even though He sufficiently provided. He was grieved that they disregarded His laws, going after idols and participating in immoral sexual behavior. God was grieved that His people rebelled against His authority and tested His patience.

God grieved.

Take a moment to ponder that truth.

Just as the Father grieved, so grieved the Son. In Mark 3:5 we learn that Jesus was grieved at the hardness of heart and the attitude of pride and arrogance of the religious leaders. They were not submitted to God and therefore, they would not submit to God's Son.

Ephesians 4:30 reveals that the Holy Spirit can also be grieved when people

- Ignore the teachings of Christ (v. 20-21)
- Fail to be submit to the renewing/sanctifying power of the Spirit (v. 22-24)
- Refuse to exchange lies for truth (v.25)
- Sin in anger (v. 26)
- Give the devil a foothold (v. 27)
- Fail to do useful work and fail to share with those in need (v. 28)
- Persist in unwholesome talk (v. 29)
- Continue in bitterness, rage, anger, brawling, slander and malice (v. 31).

With this list in mind, how are we causing God grief even now?

On two occasions that we know of, Jesus wept. He wept at the tomb of His friend Lazarus and He wept over Jerusalem.

Jesus knows even as He weeps that He is going to raise Lazarus from death. But how tender is the heart of God, how good our Savior that He would empathize with our pain and weep with us? His nature is to weep with those who weep and rejoice with those who rejoice, even over realities that He knows He is going to transform.

Jesus also weeps over Jerusalem. In Matthew 23:37 Jesus says, "Jerusalem, Jerusalem, you who kill the prophets and stone those sent to you, how often I have longed to gather your children together, as a hen gathers her chicks under her wings, and you were not willing." God grieves over those who will not believe. God grieves over the lost. Do we? Do the things that grieve God grieve us?

For reflection, discussion and prayer:

1. Meditate on Matthew 21:33-44.
2. Discuss the insight into God's grief that Jesus is expressing in the parable.
3. How does God feel about people who do not believe in the One whom He has sent?

Pray that your hearts might break at the things that break His heart, particularly unbelief.

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Week III: Choose to dwell on the glory, not the grief

Grief is a journey, an experience, an emotion, and it can become a mindset. There are people who get stuck in grief. They allow the loss to consume them. Waves of sadness swamp them, darkness overtakes, depression sets in like a heavy fog and the weight of it all robs them of the joy of salvation and the hope of abundant life. The truth is these people are exchanging the truth and the promise of God for the lie of the evil one who comes to kill and steal and destroy. They choose darkness over light and they choose to dwell on death instead of life.

You may know someone who is not walking through the valley of the shadow of death, they are in fact dwelling there. Pray for them. Pray that God would pierce the darkness with His radiating light. That He would lift the fog with the wind of His Spirit. That He would refocus the eyes of their heart which have become so fixed on themselves they are missing the glory of all that is possible for those who believe.

Invite your friend to walk with you in the Word of God. Where they will not listen to you, maybe they will listen to Him. Prayerfully prepare yourself for a ministry of presence. Read aloud in your own time with the Lord that you might be fully prepared to read aloud with them. Exercise your faith that you might be conditioned for a ministry of walking in shadowlands. Prepare your heart and mind for a disciplined and unyielding ministry of prayer that points continually to the Light of life. Stand in hope as you dwell on glory.

Your friend is hearing a broken record in their mind that repeats an endless refrain of woe. You are the agent of grace God has placed in their life to continue moving the needle out of the rut of self-pity and into the groove carved by His transforming love. Allow God's prevenient grace to pursue the heart and mind of the other through you. Allow yourself to become a conduit of God's Spirit as He uses you to draw your friend out of death into newness of life.

They may believe that it is not even possible. You will bear witness to the reality that with God all things are possible. As their eyes fall to the loss they have experienced in this world, you direct your gaze heavenward to the things which are eternal.

Tell them that you are praying God's Word over them. Read through Colossians. Dwell on Colossians 1:3-14, 1:15-20, 2:6-15, 3:1-4, 3:12-17. Verse 3:15 acknowledges that a life filled with Christ's peace is a choice. We choose to allow the peace of Christ to rule in our hearts and we equally choose to allow our hearts to be torn apart by anguish. We also choose our mindset. We choose to set our minds on the things of Christ and align our perspective with the perspective of God or we equally choose to set our minds on the things of this world.

The cause of grief may not have been of our choosing, but where we dwell is. We can labor long under the burden of the loss or we can be liberated from that bondage in Christ who carries it all to the cross, takes it all to the grave and transforms it all in His resurrection. We live in the midst of a culture of death, but we need not dwell there.

For reflection, discussion and prayer:

1. Meditate on II Corinthians 4:1-7.
2. Discuss in verse 1 the ministry that God has given each of us and the manner of that ministry.
3. Discuss in verse 3 the veiled nature of the Gospel and the treasure of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Christ in verse 6.
4. Discuss in verse 8 the realities of your life that line up with the list articulated by Paul.
5. Discuss verses 16-18. How are you tending to your daily renewal? How might you gain Paul's perspective on what he calls "light and momentary troubles" and the surpassing weight of God's glory?
6. Meditate on and discuss II Corinthians 5:1-6:2.

Pray for one another that your eyes be fixed and hearts set on that which is eternal and unseen.

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Week IV: Glimpses of glory by one acquainted with grief

Paul was a man with blood on his hands. He had persecuted the church. He had stood watching as Stephen was stoned. Acts 8:1 says that “Saul was there, giving approval to his death.” Verse 3 goes on to record that “Saul began to destroy the church. Going from house to house, he dragged off men and women and put them in prison.” Acts 9 begins with the words, “Saul was breathing out murderous threats against the Lord’s disciples.” That’s when the Lord called him to account. Read Acts 9:1-31 to get the whole story.

In Acts 9:4 we hear the crucified, resurrected, ascended Jesus confront Saul on the road to Damascus. “Saul, Saul, why are you persecuting me?”

“Who are you Lord?” Saul asked.

“I am Jesus, whom you are persecuting,” He replied.

That transforming encounter with the risen Christ changed everything. Saul became Paul. The old man died and a new man was born. Old theologies and old religious practices were replaced with a theology of grace and a life of truth. Having seen the glory of the Lord, nothing in this world would ever quite compare.

Although they tried, the authorities couldn’t beat it out of him. The Romans could lock him up in prison, but they couldn’t silence his testimony. Paul was often beaten, frequently imprisoned, flogged, shipwrecked, snake-bit and afflicted with a persistent thorn in the flesh. From what we know, he never enjoyed most of the things that people today regard as necessities.

Philippians 3:7-11 captures Paul’s heart on the matter. He says, “But whatever were gains to me I now consider loss for the sake of Christ. What is more, I consider everything a loss because of the surpassing worth of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord, for whose sake I have lost all things. I consider them garbage, that I may gain Christ and be found in Him, not having a righteousness of my own that comes from the law, but that which is through faith in Christ – the righteousness that comes from God on the basis of faith. I want to know Christ – yes, to know the power of His resurrection and participation in His sufferings, becoming like Him in His death, and so, somehow, attaining to the resurrection from the dead.”

For Paul, the glory of God outweighed all the grief of this world. In Romans 8:18 he says, “I consider that our present sufferings are not worth comparing with the glory that will be revealed in us.” He continues the theme in Romans 8:28 saying, “And we know that in all things God works for the good of those who love Him, who have been called according to His purpose.”

He concludes with the declaration in verses 31-39: “What, then, shall we say in response to these things? If God is for us, who can be against us? He who did not spare His own Son, but gave Him up for us all – how will He not also, along with Him, graciously give us all things? Who will bring any charge against those whom God has chosen? It is God who justifies. Who then is the one who condemns? No one. Christ Jesus who died – more than that, who was raised to life – is at the right hand of God and is also interceding for us. Who shall separate us from the love of Christ? Shall trouble or hardship or persecution or famine or nakedness or danger or sword? As it is written: ‘For your sake we face death all day long; we are considered as sheep to be slaugh-

tered.’ No, in all these things we are more than conquerors through Him who loved us. For I am convinced that neither death nor life, neither angels nor demons, neither the present nor the future, nor any powers, neither height nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God that is in Christ Jesus our Lord.”

Paul was convinced of these truths. Are we? Do we genuinely live as if we’re already dead? Do we really regard the things of this world as “nothing” when compared to the surpassing greatness and joy of knowing Jesus Christ?

For reflection, discussion and prayer:

1. Meditate on II Corinthians 1:1-11.
2. Discuss the calling in verse 4 to comfort others with the comfort we ourselves have received from God.
3. Discuss the kinds of realities that cause people to despair even of life (v. 8) and what it means to live under the sentence of death (v. 9).
4. Discuss the power of a life set on the hope of Christ in the midst of a world living under the sentence of death.
5. With that in mind, what might God be calling you to do?
6. Meditate on II Corinthians 2:12-3:3.
7. Discuss the doors the Lord has opened for you (v. 12).
8. Discuss the fragrance of the knowledge of Christ that is spread through you (v. 14-16).
9. Discuss what Paul means when he asks, “Who is equal to such a task?” (v. 16).

Pray for one another that you may be sent as God’s letter to others, the very aroma of Christ in the world, that His grace might be received by more and more people and cause thanksgiving to overflow to the glory of God. A glory which outweighs all grief.