

Grief: It's Not About a Process; It's About The Person



By Paul Randolph

What losses have you grieved? What loss are you grieving now? Every human being must deal with grief to one extent or another. As we age, we face an ever-shrinking circle of family and friends. Unlike many other counseling issues, grief is something everyone will face. How can we understand grief better in order to deal with it more effectively in our own lives? How can we help others who grieve?

A Current Approach

Let's start with where we find most counselors today. Researcher Elizabeth Kübler-Ross has had widespread influence on how our culture understands and treats grief. She researched the grieving process by studying family members of patients dying of terminal cancer. She developed what has become known as the "stages" of the grieving process: Denial. Anger. Bargaining. Depression. Acceptance.

Through my years as a pastor, I ministered to countless grieving people. As a young pastor, I read Kübler-Ross's material and it made sense to me. As I began my pastoral ministry, I went armed and confident in the expectation that I had the answers needed for grieving persons. But similar to some of the sermons on marriage and family that I preached early on—boy, did I

have the answers! Now I look back and marvel at my naiveté.

What I found as I ministered to grieving families was that the process of grieving was not so cut and dried. At times, some people followed the stages of grief, as Kübler-Ross defined them. But others didn't. I dutifully told people to expect these stages. When these stages didn't occur in their own grieving, they came back to me to ask if something was wrong with them. I naively suggested that perhaps they weren't processing their grief in healthy ways because they weren't following the grieving script.

Grief is Intensely Personal

Let me describe two situations I faced as a pastor. First, imagine yourself as the parent of a vibrant young woman whose life was gradually taken away from her by multiple sclerosis. In her high school years, she was active in the church youth group and Young Life. She went off to college, then later married. After a difficult divorce, she found herself stricken with this crippling disease. Eventually she became bed-ridden and unable to talk. Her parents took her in and cared for her, day in, day out, year after year. They learned to clean her, feed her through a feeding tube, and turn her to prevent bedsores. Much of their retirement plans and savings went into her care. Imagine the range of thoughts and emotions these parents must have experienced. No parents ever expect this for

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their child.

Now put yourself in my shoes. I am the new pastor of their church. I hear their daughter's name mentioned in hushed voices, but I have no idea who she is or the content of her life story. Her father is a deacon, but he never says anything about his daughter. He continues to serve the Lord faithfully, never complains, never gripes. His wife sings in the choir and serves with the women's ministry. They serve the Lord with gladness. Eventually, they tell me about her, and I offer to visit her. "Pastor, that is very nice of you, but we know how busy you are, and she can't respond to you even though she still hears and they tell us she understands." I respond, "I understand, but I would still like to come. Would that be okay?"

How should I minister to this woman and her parents? What do I say? How do I help them make sense of this? Or, do I even need to help? Perhaps they can teach me something about simple trust and love. I learned that this was not their first family tragedy. Another child had been killed in a car accident. Everything I thought to say seemed trite. I focused on Scripture and prayer and said little else during my visits. A few years later, the daughter died in her sleep. After her funeral, her parents came to me and told me how much the service meant to them and their family. Her mother made the comment, "Pastor, as much as your words meant to us today, it was your faithful visits to her, your presence in our home that meant so much to us. Thank you."

Second, put yourself in the place of the parents of a twenty-one year old rookie police officer. You get the call one night that he has been shot. You rush to the hospital where you learn that your son has been shot in the head and is in surgery at that moment. Early the next morning you visit him in the surgical intensive care unit. You walk in and see tubes going in every direction. You hear the sound of the respirator and tones of his heart monitor. This vibrant young man had been ready to take on the world of criminals, to do some good. He is now just a body being kept alive by the miracle of modern medicine. This young man will die without ever being removed from the respirator.

Again, put yourself in my shoes as a pastor and friend of the family. You go to the ICU to be

with the distraught family. They hold his hand and talk about his life. What do you say to these parents, these dear friends? What do you do for them? At the funeral service, hundreds of police officers from around the city and the nation look to you to make sense of this tragedy. What words can bring comfort and understanding to those who mourn?

I share these stories not to tell you what a wonderful pastor I am. My church was no megachurch. I tell about these two families to get you to think about grief in a different way—not as a process moving through predictable stages, but as something highly personal. According to Kübler-Ross, grieving persons go through five stages. But the people in my examples never quite fit those stages. Both tragic deaths left the families grieving. One slow dying took many years; the other death took thirty-six hours. The first family never expressed denial, anger, bargaining, or depression. But they sorrowed (not one of Kübler-Ross's stages!) They hoped in Jesus. They loved their daughter faithfully. They kept a hopeful vigil. And they kept on with their involvement in church and community. Yet the intensity of their experience over the long haul was deep and profoundly moving.

The second family's experience bore more resemblance to the "stages," but they were all over the map, moving from one emotion to another and back again. Five typical reactions, but no orderly progression through stages.

While many people can identify with the common human experiences described by these "stages," I have found that not everyone experiences all of these stages, or in the order Kübler-Ross delineates. Grief is an intensely personal experience. Some people respond with a great deal of emotion, others very stoically. Some express anger, others express resignation. People feel a range of emotions. This is not to say that what Kübler-Ross calls "stages" does not validly describe five ways that *some people* go through in their grief. The problem is making these stages normative for *how everyone* experiences grief.

As a young pastor, I expected people to follow this sequence. When they didn't, I assumed something was wrong with them. Years later, I realized that maybe the problem wasn't

with the grievers; maybe the problem was with the stages themselves. The reality was that my church members simply did not match the Kübler-Ross theory. In fact, something else proved much more important. The decisive factor was not a description of a supposed process; it was the quality of relationships with God and others.

The Person of Grief

As believers who grieve, we do not live as those who have no hope. Yes, we grieve. We cry. We hurt. But we are not simply dust in the wind, or drops of water in an endless sea. We are created beings. We can know our Creator. We are comforted, but not by knowing the stages of a predictable process. We are comforted by a person: Jesus. And because of this, we can comfort each other. In the stories I shared

In these words, you begin to understand the depth of Christ's grief and loss. He is able to understand the depth of your loss and grief because His grief went deeper and further than your grief ever could. In His crucifixion and death He experiences the sorrow and grief of everyone who ever lived. Imagine what it must have been for Jesus to not only bear this incredible weight of grief and pain, but to do so as God poured out on Him holy wrath against sin.

As a pastor and counselor, I sincerely care about the sorrows and hurts of others. But unless your experience parallels mine in some direct way, I can't honestly say that I know what it is like to be in your shoes. At best, I can only imagine it. But I can point to someone who does know exactly what you are going through. He has been there, and more. Have you lost a loved

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earlier, what meant most to grieving persons were not the words I said, but the fact of my presence with them in their sorrow.

Of course, grief is a process—personal, variable, unpredictable, individual. But the key to where it ends up is the One whom the Bible describes as “the man of sorrows, acquainted with grief.” When you face loss, the only answer is to seek and find Jesus. The God-man brings an ability that no theory, no description, no other person or pastor can ever bring. Listen to this description of Him.

Surely our griefs He Himself bore, and our sorrows He carried; yet we ourselves esteemed Him stricken smitten of God and afflicted.

He was oppressed and He was afflicted, yet He did not open His mouth;

By oppression and judgment He was taken away;

But the Lord was pleased to crush Him, putting Him to grief;

As a result of the anguish of His soul, He will see it and be satisfied. (Isa. 53:4, 7, 8, 10, 11)

one? So has Christ. Have you been betrayed by friends? So has Christ, twelve times over. Do you feel God has abandoned you? Listen to Christ's words on the cross: “My God, My God, why have You forsaken me.” Is your soul anguished? Is it crushed by your loss? Jesus felt the same way.

How exactly did Christ bear your griefs and carry your sorrows? The Bible does not explain it in detail. It simply declares this to be the case. It tells the story that shows how it is true. This becomes a matter of faith. Take God at His word. Believe that what He says is true even if you can't fully comprehend it. He does this simply by virtue of becoming a man. He experienced the breadth and depth of human experience as the gospels faithfully record. But more than that, by virtue of being our Savior, He purposefully took upon Himself the griefs and sorrows of others.

Truth Becomes Real

People who grieve are not looking for an intricate explanation of this truth. They feel comforted simply by its mention. They need the *person* that Jesus is. Not Kübler-Ross's theory.

Not even an elaborate theological rationale. But the precious presence of a Savior. How does this truth become real for a grieving person? In working with grieving people, I've found that the answer comes in four ways: Realize the loving presence of God. Know the promises of God. Seek out God in prayer. Experience the loving presence of God's people.

1. Realize the Loving Presence of God

God is "an ever present help in trouble" (Ps. 46:1). Since He is not physically visible, how can we know this? It happens through faith, trusting that God is true to His word. He tells us that when we are hurting, when we are suffering, He is especially present.

- God is our refuge and strength, an ever-present help in time of trouble. (Ps. 46:1)
- The Lord is close to the brokenhearted and saves those who are crushed in spirit. (Ps. 34:18)
- For the Lord your God is with you wherever you go. (Josh. 1:9)
- When you pass through the waters, I will be with you; and through the rivers, they will not overflow you. When you walk through the fire, you will not be scorched, nor will the flame burn you. When you go through the fire, you will not be scorched... Do not fear, for I am with you. (Isa. 43:2f)

Notice how all these words emphasize the presence of God again and again. The actual presence of God through His Holy Spirit makes this truth real. For example, Paul begins Romans 5:3 by writing something that sounds absurd: "We can rejoice in the hope of the glory of God. Not only so, but we also rejoice in our sufferings." How can we rejoice in our sufferings? Is Paul telling us we need to have some warped sense of masochism? Paul explains how this can be true:

We also rejoice in our sufferings because we know that suffering produces perseverance; perseverance, character; and character, hope. And hope does not disappoint us, because God has poured out His love into our hearts by the Holy Spirit, whom He has given us. (Rom. 5:3-5)

God makes real His love in the midst of our suffering. His love is made real not by understanding arbitrary stages of grief, or even by an abstract knowledge that God is supposed to be present. It is made real by the presence of God in the person of the Holy Spirit. The Holy Spirit takes what would otherwise sound like wishful thinking or absurdity. God is present in suffering. He is growing us through suffering. We can rejoice in suffering because His presence becomes a reality in our lives.

2. Know the Promises of God

God makes incredible promises to us, His children. A dozen truths merit discussion, but one is especially comforting: the sovereignty of God. When we say "God is sovereign," we simply mean that He is in control. He has a purpose for everything that happens. Many parts of Scripture teach us His many purposes in suffering.

His sovereignty provides meaning to the losses we grieve. If I lose a loved one *apart* from knowing the sovereignty of God, then that loved one's death is a total loss. There is no purpose to life; there is no hope of life after death; there is nothing for me to do but grieve; there is only emptiness, or pain, or whatever I do to numb the pain. Knowing that God is sovereign changes everything. God has a plan and a purpose for everything that happens, even the tragedy and sorrow of death. Nothing surprises God or takes Him off guard. God's sovereignty brings meaning to loss even when I can't yet understand what God's specific purpose behind the loss may be. Faith trusts God's grace and benevolence—and eventually we understand.

Scripture provides vivid examples of this. In Lamentations, the prophet Jeremiah grieves with and for his people at a time of incredible devastation and suffering. Israel has been invaded and Jerusalem destroyed. The land has been devastated; the cities have been plundered. Many of God's people have been killed or taken into captivity. Only misery and suffering remain. Jeremiah expresses the depths of grief over what has taken place.

I am the man who has seen affliction...He has besieged me and surrounded me with bitterness and hardship. He has made me dwell in darkness like those long dead.

(Lam. 3:1,5)

Jeremiah's woe reaches its lowest point in these words:

I remember my affliction and my wandering, the bitterness and the gall. I well remember them, and my soul is downcast within me. (Lam 3:19f)

Then the prophet says something that sounds absurd, that stuns us, that radically shifts gears:

Yet this I call to mind and therefore I have hope. (Lam 3: 21)

How could anyone have hope in the midst of such utter despair and grief?

Because of the Lord's great love we are not consumed, for His compassions never fail. They are new every morning, great is Your faithfulness. I say to myself, "The Lord is my portion; I will wait for Him." (Lam 3:22-24)

Jeremiah is convinced that God's love has not failed, that He is faithful to the end. How can he believe this when everything he sees denies this thought? His answer: God is sovereign. Listen to his words:

Who can speak and have it happen if the Lord has not decreed it? Is it not from the mouth of the Most High that both calamities and good things come? (Lam. 3:37-38)

While I have experienced the loss of loved ones, for me the reality of loss, despair, and grief came crashing into my life with the word of my physician, "You need major abdominal surgery." Hours of surgery and thirty-nine staples later, I lay in a hospital bed with nothing to do but ache and push the happy juice (morphine) button. Over the next two years, I required two more operations. Each one left me exhausted and out of work for weeks. Forget about work, how about just getting to the bathroom!

Lying in a hospital bed, you have a lot of time to think. Everything seems out of your control. Everything you took for granted takes on new meaning and significance. The words of Jeremiah from Lamentations have a much richer significance for me. The only way to make

sense of these past couple of years is one truth: God is sovereign. He has a purpose for everything that happens and He is in control.

3. Seek God in Prayer

God tells us that when we seek Him, we will find Him.

"Then you will call upon Me and come and pray to Me, and I will listen to you. And you will seek Me and find Me, when you search for Me with all your heart. And I will be found by you," declares the Lord. (Jer. 29:12-14)

God is committed to His people. When you cry out for Him, He responds. What does God offer to us when we seek after Him? He offers Himself. You will find Me. I will be found by you. This has a very personal emphasis.

This is what matters to the grieving person: God is present. He is sovereign. And we can access Him through prayer. You can tell God how you are hurting. You can tell Him about your emotions, your fears, and your questions. You can't interact with a grieving process, but you can interact with a God who knows exactly what you are going through and wants to hear your unique perspective on it.

4. Seek Out God's People

Finally, God helps us in our grieving through His people. When we are in the presence of God's people, God uses them to express the reality of everything we have just considered. They manifest the loving presence of God through the Holy Spirit who resides in them. They remind us of the promises of God sensitively and lovingly spoken. They pray for us and with us, seeking God in the midst of our grief.

We do not grieve alone. God's people grieve with us. As His people live out the fruit of the spirit in their lives, He uses people to bring comfort, help, and hope to the one who grieves, not objective doctrine or abstract theory.

When I think back to my experience with the two families mentioned previously, how can I or anyone even begin to comfort those parents? What meaning could there be? What words will make sense? What those parents needed was the only thing I could give to them, my Lord, and myself. Loving them by being present with them, and in loving them,

incarnating Christ for them. Not that I become Christ, but simply that I am a living extension of His love and care. As believers demonstrate the reality of Christ in their own lives, God uses them to bring comfort to grievers. I wept with those who wept; I grieved with those who grieved. In my own impotence to take away their grief, or even to help them understand the reasons why, I pointed them to Christ, the man of sorrows, the one acquainted with grief.

As you look to the Bible, you find a range of reactions experienced by those who grieve. Abraham mourned for Sarah at her death and wept over her. David grieved very vocally and publicly over the death of Saul and Jonathan. Later, when his son Absalom died, David grieved privately and prayerfully. But after his death, he quickly returned to his routine, accepting his son's fate. In the book of Ruth, Naomi's grief and her bitterness toward God was so great that she changed her name to "bitter." Jesus grieved over the death of Lazarus and wept with his family and friends. At times we see

answer to the ultimate questions of dying and of what happens to us when we die. The best that you can achieve in the Kübler-Ross approach is that the person who grieves will achieve some measure of acceptance of something for which there is no ultimate answer or hope. I come to accept that my loved one is dead and buried, period, end of story. That's cold comfort!

A biblical response centers on the person of Jesus. He knows what it is to grieve. His grief reached a level of depth that none of us can completely grasp. Not only does He know and understand our grief, but He is uniquely the mediator between God and man. He is able to help us in our time of suffering and temptation. Yes, death brings temptations, which can include things like anger at God, suicide, apostasy, substance abuse, along with temptations to denial, bargaining, anger, depression, and groundless acceptance.

For we do not have a high priest who is unable to sympathize with our weaknesses,

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God's people wear sack cloth. At other times, we see them tearing their clothes. Sometimes they avenge what has happened, or pursue justice. We see a range of experience from anger to acceptance. Scripture simply reflects the reality of human grief. People grieve differently. Christ is the decisive factor.

Elizabeth Kübler-Ross's stages and approach to grief miss the range of unique responses to grief as well as the depth of a biblical response. Her understanding of grief and suffering is arbitrary and artificial. It is arbitrary because not everyone experiences grief the way she describes it. Different people respond in different ways. To expect people to go through a prescribed set of contrived stages is foolish. It is not sensitive to the intensely personal nature of grief. It is artificial. A description of how some people experience grief gives no sufficient answer for how people can find true peace, and even joy, in the midst of their suffering.

Kübler-Ross's approach ultimately leaves the grieving person wanting. She provides no

but we have one who has been tempted in every way, just as we are—yet without sin. Let us then approach the throne of grace with confidence, so that we may receive mercy and find grace to help us in our time of need. (Heb. 4:15-16)

Jesus enters into your world of grief in a way that no one else can. As God, He knows every thing there is about you. As a man, He experienced every temptation we face. He was made like you "in every way" (Heb. 2:17). He also was tempted in what He suffered. He has an unequalled ability to sympathize with us in all of the trials, sorrows, and losses of life. A century ago, B.F. Westcott pointed out that Jesus' endurance of temptation was more, not less, than anything we face. As the Son of God, He experienced an intensity of temptation and suffering that only a sinless individual could face and could endure, "for the joy set before Him."¹

When I grieve, I can expect more than mere acceptance of an uncertain fate for my loved one and a life of pain for my loss. I can go

to Christ with confidence and know that I will receive His mercy. His grace will help me in my distress because He has been where I am. I can find something more than arbitrary and impersonal stages in grieving, I find my creator who personally responds to my loss.

When others grieve, I can comfort them

with the same comfort I received (2 Cor. 1:4). I can give them what really matters: Christ, the man of sorrows, acquainted with grief.

¹ B.F. Westcott, *The Epistle to the Hebrews* (London: MacMillan, 1903).

