

Facing The Tragic Death Of A Loved One

BOB MARCAURELLE

“Our brothers, we want you to know the truth about those who have died so you will not be sad (grieve) as are those who have no hope.”
(1 Thessalonians 4:13)

When an old person dies we are sad, but mostly joyful about their release from suffering or old age. But when death takes one we love in some tragic manner, long before their time; we experience pain that seems unbearable. Psychologists tell us the worst pain in life is the loss of a child and most of us would agree. Grief, the term for this pain, is the price we pay for love, and the closer the bond, the deeper the hurt. The Bible does not tell us not to grieve, but to grieve like people to whom the Lord has given the hope of heaven.

Some misguided souls tell us it is *selfish* to grieve because we should rejoice over the good fortune of the dead. My question is, “Have they shed their humanity in becoming Christians?” The first tears mentioned in the Bible are those of Abraham when Sarah died (Genesis 23). Matthew Henry says, “*When the body is planted it should be watered.*” God bless him for saying that. God gave us tear ducts and expects us to use them. Grief is the way we say to our loved one, “I love you; I miss you; you were special; no one will ever take your place; and I am sorry I won’t see you until we meet again in heaven.” How then should we grieve?

A. Face the Facts

1. Death

The Bible says, “*It is appointed to man (human beings), first to die, and after that comes the Judgment.*” (Hebrews 9:27) People die. From the day Adam and Eve were shaken beyond belief at the sight of their boy’s body (Genesis 4), human beings have gone to cemeteries.

It is amazing how we *ignore* bad things until they happen to us. We see men and women dying in Afghanistan and change the channel to watch Andy Griffin. But when our son or daughter dies there, a million questions about that war, about God, about Christianity, fills our days and nights. It is the same with death in general. When our neighbor’s child dies, we do not cry out in anguish, “Why God, why?” In fact we might sit in judgment and criticize them for letting him ride his bicycle in the street. But when it happens to us we will bombard heaven with our “Why God, why’s.” I am not being critical; I am being honest. You and I are made that way.

In all suffering we need to move forward positively, from asking, “Why me Lord?” to “Why not me? I am a part of humanity in this world of car crashes and cancer.” Nowhere is this more applicable than when we look in a coffin with our hearts broken seemingly beyond repair.

2. The Depths of Grief

No sorrow cuts as deep as a tragic loss of someone far before their time. Edgar Jackson says, “*The pattern of our days is shattered beyond recall.*” Death is an amputation. It is a fact about which we can do nothing. All our tears, prayers and piety cannot erase the verdict, “He (She) is gone! He is dead! He is not coming back!” This hits us like a sledge hammer and never lets go of us. Grief is so painful and the loneliness is so unbearable that we often envy the one who died. The peace of death seems far better than the pain of being left behind.

3. The Complexities of Grief

1) **The Differences** Grief is a journey through a valley (Psalm 23) and for each of us it is different. Because of our genetic makeup and life experiences we handle things like this differently. One man I knew who lost his daughter, would sink to the floor all during the time friends came to visit. He wept and sobbed out loud from the time he heard the news of his daughter’s death until I watched him leave the cemetery. Another father I know, did not shed a tear, but kept talking about his daughter as though she was still there. I never saw him cry. Does that mean he cared any less? No, a thousand times, no! It means he handled this sledgehammer blow in the only way he knew how.

2) **The Common Denominators** Pastors and counselors who walk with people through grief do see, however, some common reactions. There seems to be a predictable pattern and distinct stages. We must not make the mistake of *stereotyping everyone* and squeezing them into a set mold. I am not you and you are not me. Your stages may come in the opposite order from mine. You may not even feel an emotion like anger, while that very emotion may wipe another person out. Some may have all these symptoms and some only a few.

We cannot *stereotype the emotions*, wrap all these stages up into neat little compartments and face them one by one. C. S. Lewis, facing his grief over the loss of his wife, wrote in *A Grief Observed* that the demons came at him in no particular order, spinning him around, leaving and coming back. He says, in grief, “Nothing stays put.”

C. S. Lewis, *A Grief Observed* (New York: Bantam Books, 1961) pp. 66, 67.

(From a wealth of material on this subject, *I highly recommend the little book, Good Grief by Granger E. Westberg.*)

Initially there usually is **shock and denial**. Unable to accept the finality we say, “This cannot be happening.” And for a long time we feel like it is all a dream.

Because of this, usually as Christians, there is **confusion**. We do not know how to act. We are torn by conflicting emotions. We have faith that God cares, but we are tortured by doubts that He doesn't. We feel it is alright to cry, but worry if people see it as a lack of faith. We rejoice that the person we love is with God, but we want them with us.

There is the desire to **explode emotionally**. We are caught in the tension of "holding ourselves together" or "letting ourselves go". Like a volcano, we want to blow no matter what people may think or say. Often, we don't do it because in our society and in our churches we are supposed to "hold ourselves together". The fact that we are Christians makes it tougher. Job calmly said, "*The Lord gives and the Lord takes away. Blessed be the name of the Lord.*" (Job 1:21) We give him and "A+" in spirituality, but that was not how he really felt. In chapter three he explodes emotionally and theologically and keeps it up for almost 40 chapters.

We put pressure on ourselves to keep up our image of being "good" Christians. With a thousand doubts screaming to be heard, we deny our grief; smile, and calmly say, "God never makes a mistake." If in an unguarded moment, a word of doubt sneaks to the surface; we usually have a "good" Christian friend, like Job had, ready to say, "You know Bob, God never makes a mistake." We bury our true feelings because they are not in keeping with our concept of a "good" Christian.

Now it is certainly true that God never makes a mistake. But it is not true that good Christians will always *feel* that He never makes a mistake. When life tumbles in we will feel things like pain, bitterness, anger, fear, frustration and depression. Such feelings must be honestly admitted and openly dealt with or they will surface in harmful, pathological, damaging ways.

The desire to explode is not usually constant, but seems to come and go like the waves on the seashore. Without warning there wells up within us an uncontrollable urge to express our grief. My advice is let it go. Cry until you can't cry any more. Beat your pillow until you can't beat your pillow any more. Get your best friend, one who will listen without judging or preaching, and talk to them until you can't talk any more. Go out into the woods or get into the shower and scream until you can't scream any more.

When the funeral is over and people go back to their lives as though nothing happened, almost everyone goes through the feeling of **loneliness** and **depression**. The house may be filled with people, but we are alone. We know people care but wonder if they really understand our hurt. In time this brings on despair and depression. For some there will be **anger**. We can be mad at *what happened*; for the fact that *we can't do anything* about it; at the *doctors*; at *our friends* for going back to their lives or for saying the wrong things; or at *God*.

Finally, we somehow reach not the end of the hurting, but **the end of the unbearable hurt**. One day we wake up, and as we do in all of life's other

tragedies, know that life goes on and we have to and will go on. A new term for this is finding “*a new normal.*” The only hope in grief’s dark hour is that our despair and depression will pass. We do not think it will, but it will. We do not think life is worth living, but it is. We do not think we can go on, but we can. Time is the great Healer, not of hurt, but of unbearable hurt.

B. Face the Future

“We know that all things work together for good.” (Romans 8:28)

In Genesis 23 Abraham wept over his wife and then went on with his life. He married another woman. One man carved on his wife’s tombstone, “The light of my life is gone.” When he remarried six months later, someone scratched below it, “He struck another match.”

The grief experience has the power to crush the life right out of us. The old saying is true, “*In bereavement, it is often the survivor who dies.*” We have all known people in grief who have drawn into a shell and moved from living to merely existing. They are a burden to themselves and everyone around them. On the other hand there are those who grieve deeply, keep their mental and spiritual balance, and go on to live richer, fuller lives. And they do it not *in spite of* their grief experience, but *because of* it. Working through the grief process can make us stronger, better, more loving people.

1. Gratitude

One of the healthiest things we can do is *remember the person* and all the good times we had, and to be thankful for them. It is said of romantic love, “It is better to have loved and lost, than never to have loved at all.” This applies well here. The day you can laugh about something you did together, you are on your way to new life. We can be *grateful for the friends and family we still have.* How sad it is to stop appreciating them and turn our backs on them as we wallow in self pity and loneliness.

2. Forgiveness

We must forgive *ourselves* for not being perfect. Who of us can look in a coffin without saying, “O God, why did I do thus and such?” or “Why did I not do thus and such?” We all have done and said things we regret. Accept God’s forgiveness and then accept the forgiveness of the one now in heaven. They were not perfect and would be the first to admit it.

It is not right to talk with the dead (Deuteronomy 18:11), but we can talk to the Lord, trusting Him to tell those we loved and lost, anything they need to know.

My mother and I found it hard to get along. We said and did many unkind things to each other. Knowing the regret and guilt could ruin my life as a husband, father and Pastor; I knew that would be the last thing she would want. I went to her coffin in the funeral home and stayed about an hour, talking to the Lord. I confessed my wrongs and asked for and accepted her forgiveness and the Lord's. I even talked about the things she had done to me and gave her my forgiveness. That was one of the highest and most beautiful hours of my life. I still have moments of regret, but I can hear my mother say, "Bobby, I understand. I love you. There is nothing to forgive. I was as lousy a parent as you were a son. The best thing you can do for me is to go on with your life and be a good and a happy person. The worst thing you could do would be to ruin your life and happiness because of me." If we keep holding on to our guilt we actually insult the one we love by refusing to accept their forgiveness.

We also need to get rid of the guilt of going on, the *guilt of being happy* again when life begins to take on new meaning. We often feel we owe it to our loved one, to prove our love by being miserable. How sick is that? It too is an insult to their love.

Pastor E.V. Hill remarried after his wife died and said, "I have two wives. One is in Houston and one is in heaven; and *that is close enough!*" He wasn't making light of his love for his first wife or the tragedy of her death; by his desire to bring laughter he was going on with life as God, his family, his wife in heaven, and those of us who loved and respected him, would want him to.

We are often *angry at friends* who "say the wrong things" when they try to help. The best way to overlook this is to remember you and I might say the same shallow things because we wouldn't know what to say either. Vance Havner said of the death of his wife:

"Whoever thinks he has the ways of God conveniently tabulated,
analyzed and correlated with convenient, glib answers to ease every question from
aching hearts; has not been far in this
maze of mystery we call life and death."

Vance Havner, *Though I Walk Through the Valley*,
(Old Tappan, NJ: Revell, 1974), p. 67.

3. Trust

Christians, unlike those who leave God out of their lives, must not only go through the hell of loss, but the hell of interpreting our hurt in the light of God's will. We may carry crushing questions all the way to the grave. Elie Wiesel wrote a book called "Night" expressing his loss of faith when called to go through the Holocaust as a child. When he regained his faith and wrote a book called "Day" he

was asked if he now believed. He said, “Yes, I believe in God but I am still mad at Him about the Nazis.”

Even Jesus and the Psalmist asked, “**My God! My God! Why hast thou forsaken me?**” (Psalm 22:1, Matthew 27:46) We should have enough faith in God to be honest; and to believe there is some answer or purpose even though we may never know it until we get to heaven. We must go on serving Him with our questions unanswered. When Pastor Thomas Chalmer’s wife died, he asked in his first sermon after her death: “Should I turn away from God? In heaven’s name, where could I go?” It is alright to question God; the problem is He does not usually answer. This is where faith comes in as we say:

“I will not doubt, though all my ships at sea
Come drifting home, with broken masts and sails;
I shall believe the Hand which never fails,
For seeming evil, worketh good for me;
And though I weep because these sails are battered
Still will I cry, while my best hopes lie shattered,
‘I trust in Thee!’”

Ella Wheeler Wilcox, *Faith*, (Hammond, Indiana, Rand McNally & Company).
Used by permission.

4. Ministry and Purpose

Paul wrote, “*Let us give thanks to God / the God of all comfort. He helps us in our troubles, so that we are able to help others / using the same help that we ourselves have received from God.*” (2 Corinthians 1:3-34) No matter what happens to a Christian, our duty is still to serve the Lord. When William Booth, founder of the Salvation Army, went blind, he said to his nephew, “I have served the Lord 80 years with my sight, now I will serve Him without it.” We can be of great help to *others in grief*, taking the lessons and help we received from God and sharing it with them.

L. D. Johnson, chaplain of Furman University, lost his daughter Carole in a tragic accident that took her life when she was twenty-three years old. In a beautiful book, *The Morning After Death*, which dealt with this, he talked about the beneficial effects of his grief. He talked about how his trip through the valley of grief has made him a better person. He said it helped him appreciate life, both for himself and for his other loved ones. Knowing how soon and how suddenly we, or one we love, can be taken away, grief can teach us to treasure little moments and events in our relationships.

Most of all he says, we can **become ministers** to others who grieve. He says, “The healthy-minded griever who has returned from the ranks of the grief-stricken can be a valuable ally to fallen comrades. Not only is he living proof that one can

survive the most terrible assaults, but also he may be a veteran with a kit of very useful survival tools.”

O strengthen me, that, while I stand
Firm on the rock, and strong in Thee,
I may stretch out a loving hand
To wrestlers with the troubled sea.

There is a sense in which we can minister *to the one we lost*. We can carry on some of the work they started. When Bill Cosby’s son stopped to help a stranded motorist and was murdered by the side of the road; Cosby, in his eulogy said, “My son was my hero.” Rev. Rufus Jones lost his teenage son and later recounted the time he heard him talking with his friends when he was about ten year old. They were discussing what they wanted to be when they grew up and when it came time for his son to speak, he said, “When I grow up I want to be just like my Daddy.” Is there any greater compliment for a good parent? Jones knew who his son was as a human being and said, “I want to spend the rest of my life being just like my boy, doing those things I believe he would have done, and standing for those things I believe he would have stood for.”

5. Hope

The night before He died, Jesus saw the sadness of His disciples when they knew He was going to die and said, “*Don’t let your hearts be troubled. You believe in God, so believe in Me. In My Father’s house are many rooms / If I go, I will prepare a place for you; I will come again to receive you to Myself so where I am, you may be also.*” (John 14) True of Jesus, this is true of us. Our loved ones have only gone before us to the home Jesus has prepared and when we die, they and the Lord will be there to greet us.

The week I preached this sermon, September 2009, Ruby Walls died. Her husband, Alvin, who died a few years before, pastored Concord Baptist before me. In the assisted living home, she had not spoken in years; but right before she died, she said, “Alvin”, and went home. Heaven is not “pie in the sky by and by”. It is the only thing that makes this life make any sense or have any purpose. That is why we can grieve, but do not have to do it like those with no hope in Christ. Give Jesus your sins to forgive and your life to change and control and you too will have this hope. The criminal next to Jesus prayed and Jesus told him, “*Today you will be with Me in heaven (paradise).*” (Luke 23) God and heaven are only a prayer away.

Copyright 2009

By

Bob Marcaurette

This material may be reproduced and given to those in mourning and to individuals in church classes, as long as there is no charge for the copies.