

Encouragement for the Grieving

Welcome Grief.

Grief occurs when something valuable is lost forever. Grief is not only appropriate in the wake of loss, but can glorify God. It communicates to the world that life is valuable and worth mourning when lost.

Make space for grief by setting aside 30-60 minutes a day to be alone. The pain of death can attack unexpectedly and this gives you the ability to steal away and cry when you need to. Crying is good for your soul in times of mourning; don't try to avoid it. Welcome it.

Wrestle Well.

Having a Biblically-based faith in a good and sovereign God can make death and loss uncomfortable. Because we see God as rightfully sovereign over our circumstances, we are left to wrestle with the issue of how He is good in the face of tragedy.

Wrestling through your faith, doubts, and fears takes time and courage. There are no shortcuts through Peniel, the place Jacob wrestled with God (Genesis 32:24-32). Like Jacob, to move forward we must face our fears, alone with God. Still convinced there is another way? You can forge ahead with a facade of faith over your fearful, doubting heart, or refuse to move it all; but both require a hardened heart.

When your faith is tested by tragedy, wrestle well. What do I mean by that? I mean 3 things: wrestle with humility, wrestle with honesty, wrestle with patience.

- **Wrestle with humility.** While God bids us to come to Him with boldness and freedom, He is still God and therefore to be feared. God is not on trial here. Sinners like us deserve one thing from Him (eternal death and judgment) and if we know Him, He has spared us. We have no right to act as a judge to God. But, we can come to Him with questions because we don't understand. Don't bring accusations to God, bring questions to Him.
- **Wrestle with Honesty.** Please, let us be people who believe the Truth over our feelings and experiences. But in seasons of grief, I don't think it's helpful to push down feelings and forcibly speak in Bible quotes. Talk honestly with God about how you feel, the doubts you have about His promises, the anger you have about your circumstances.

But beware, not all honesty is rightly motivated. There is an honesty that seeks distance from God ("I feel betrayed by you, God! I'm done with this!") and there is an honesty that seeks nearness to Him ("I feel betrayed by you, God! I don't know how to move toward you, but if you can show me how I'll try."). Be honest with God, but do so in hopes to be reconciled with Him, not further away from Him. Let the Psalms lead the way as you learn how to draw near to God in honesty and faith.

- **Wrestle with Patience.** If you are going to ask God questions, leave space for His answers. Your prayer life cannot be all talking and no listening if you expect to hear His still small voice. (1 Kings 19:9-14) Learn the discipline of waiting on God. Create moments of active waiting through solitude and silence. Read through the Psalms and pay attention to how the Psalmists wait on God. Be patient and listen.

Help others help you.

One surprising part of grief is realizing that you often have to help your loved ones help you. We assume our friends and family will know what we need and say the right things instinctually. But most of the time, the compassion of others spills out in clueless and clumsy ways. Be prepared to tell your friends what you need, what to say, what not to say, how to help and what is unhelpful. It's counterintuitive to tell others what kind of help you need, but it will make a world of difference if you will.

"Can you call me on Thursday afternoons for a while? That's when it happened and those days are harder than usual. I think it would help to have someone to talk to."

"Please don't tell me how God is going to use this for good. It makes me feel like I should stop being sad and should move on. Instead, can you ask me how my walk with God is? Can you ask if I am humbly wrestling with Him through this?"

"It's ok that you don't know what to say. Honestly, I'd rather just have your company and not talk about this all the time. Can you come over today and we can cook dinner together and talk about something different?"

Be willing to tell others what you need. That takes humility, but it will bless you and them.

Let isolation lead you to God.

Grief is isolating. Honestly, no one will fully understand what you feel. But instead of trying to fix this and make everyone understand, let that feeling of isolation lead you to the throne room of God. He understands loss and isolation in ways we never will.

Help for Comforters

No one wants to be a sorry comforter to a friend in suffering. But this is Job's description of his friends in the aftermath of his losses:

I have heard many such things; sorry comforters are you all. Is there no limit to windy words? Or what plagues you that you answer? I too could speak like you, if I were in your place. I could compose words against you and shake my head at you. My friends are my scoffers; my eye weeps to God. O that a man might plead with God as a man with his neighbor! (Job 16:2-4, 20-21, NASB)

You can hear the longing in Job's words for friends that would stop telling him what to do and simply be in the wrestling with him, that they would plead with God with him. But shouldering the suffering of others, feeling the weight of the unanswered questions and unresolved tension, is uncomfortable. It's easier to give blanket statements and quote Bible verses. But often, those are the very promises someone in suffering is wrestling with. The question of someone in grief isn't "Do you have the answer?" it's "Will you sit with me in the dissonance of my unanswered questions?"

Here are a few practical things you can do for a love one who is grieving.

Recognize the Absence of Life.

Some times, people inadvertently minimize our losses because they think it will cheer us up.

It was God's perfect timing.
God is going to use this for so many good things.
They're in a better place now.

These statements might be true, but they are attempts to lessen the blow of life lost, to resolve the dissonance we feel between God's goodness and the tragedy at hand. This is the opposite of what someone grieving wants to hear. The grieving soul is screaming "But it mattered to me! That life was precious to me!"

Instead, find ways to show that you understand something valuable has been lost. This could be sending flowers with a simple note: "In memory of the one you lost. We love you." It could be a thoughtful note, a painted picture.

Don't Fear Sadness.

It's hard for us to see the purpose to sadness. It becomes an emotion we often hope to push past quickly, moving into the other more beneficial emotions. But sorrow is healthy in the appropriate seasons. Become a person who is comfortable with sadness, someone who doesn't respond to every grief-filled comment with, "He works all things for good!"

The latest Pixar movie, *Inside Out*, did a great job showcasing the purpose for sadness by personifying our emotions. One of my favorite scenes begins as Bingbong has lost something

precious to him. Joy attempts to move him quickly out of his grief to no avail. Then Sadness steps in and welcomes the grief to Bingbong's ultimate wellbeing.

Sadness: "I'm sorry they took your rocket. They took something that you loved. It's gone. Forever."

Bingbong: "It's all I had left of Riley"

Sadness: "I bet you and Riley had great adventures."

Bingbong: "Oh, they were wonderful. Once we flew back in time and had breakfast twice that day."

Sadness: "That sounds amazing. I bet Riley liked it."

Bingbong: "Oh She did. We were best friends."

Sadness: "Yeah, it's sad."

They both cry together.

Bingbong: "I'm ok now."

Now, it might sound silly for me to use a kid's movie for a good example of how to love a friend who is grieving, but honestly, it's such a perfect example! Sadness does the opposite of what most of us do naturally: she acknowledges what is lost, and how utterly lost that thing is. She creates a safe place for Bingbong to express why that lost thing was so precious. And she doesn't try to fix it or patch it up. So simple, yet just what we want when we're grieving.

Be a friend who doesn't get scared off by sadness, but work to become comfortable with the raw grief of others.

Offer Your Presence, Not a Solution.

Job's friends started off well by doing just this:

Now when Job's three friends heard of all this adversity that had come up on him, they came each one from his own place. and they made an appointment together to come to sympathize with him and comfort him. When they lifted up their eyes at a distance and did not recognize him, they raised their voices and wept. And each of them tore his robe and they threw dust over their heads toward the sky. Then they sat down on the ground with him for seven days and seven nights with no one speaking a word to him, for they saw that his pain was very great. (Job 2:11-13, NASB)

They simply came and sat with Job, no words necessary. What can that look like? To offer your presence to someone? It can literally look just like that: offering to come and sit in silence. I like to offer my grieving friends a hug: "If you need a hug today, let me know." All I am saying is, my presence is available if you want it. If you don't live near, this could be sending things that remind her of you, like a candle she can burn and be reminded that you're there for her.

My senior year of high school was one of my first seasons of suffering. A friend of mine came to my house while I was gone and decorated my room with colored Christmas lights, hung some of my favorite Bible verses on the wall, and left a plate of brownies. That meant the world to me. In effect, she communicated: "I want you to remember when you walk into your room that you aren't alone. I'm here for you." That changed forever how I comforted others in their grief.

Plead with God.

Be the comforter that Job wished he had: "a man that pleads with God." Know that there are lots of questions birthed in grief. It is often the entrance gate to the tumultuous field of wrestling alone with God. Plead on their behalf for strength for that journey, for courage to move forward when it's painful, for faith to listen for God's answers when they doesn't really care to hear them, for grace for the battlefield of grief. Be an intercessor, and plead with God as if it were you on that rocky path.

Stay in the Word

Whatever side you are on, grieving or comforter, stay in the Word. Not necessarily for answers, but because nothing good comes apart from a clear view of God's unchanging character expressed through His Inspired Word. If we will stay in the Word, even as we wrestle, it will revive us.

This is my comfort in my affliction,

That Your word has revived me.

Psalm 119:50