

Chapter Eleven: Grief and Heartbreak

Grief over a major loss, especially loss of a loved one, can be one of the most intense kinds of pain. The permanence of death has a particular way of bringing despair. I have included heartbreak in the title of this chapter because a broken relationship can cause a very similar kind of crushing sorrow and loss as the death of a loved one.

Grief counselors agree on one thing: Nothing can be done about the pain. Keeping busy or trying to distract yourself during the acute, intense moments of the sorrow may help a little bit, but not much.

In Scripture, grief is always presented as an expected response to a major loss. It affects godly, righteous men and women just as much as anyone else.

The well-known “five stages of grief,” popularized by Elisabeth Kübler-Ross’s 1969 book *On Death and Dying*, have caused some people to take a mechanistic approach to the grieving process: “You’ve been in stage 2 a little too long; now it is time to move on to stage 3.” Recovery is not like an elevator that takes you from the basement of despair to the penthouse of joy. It is more like a maze where you go forward a bit, move back a few steps, cover the same ground again and find yourself at the beginning. You set yourself up for disappointment if you think that recovery from grief is a linear process. It is not; it has many ups and downs. When the Lord takes a loved one away, family and friends must undo the emotional ties that created the loving bond with the deceased, which can feel like Then he has to try to adapt to the loss and learn to live a different life without the loved one. There is no way to make this process either quick or painless.

Recognize wrong responses

A great deal of grace and patience should be shown to those who are grieving. However it is not loving to allow the counselee to continue in any ungodly direction. The following are some wrong responses to grief.

Anger at God

No matter how much pain the person is experiencing, it is never right to be angry at God. Becoming angry at God is evidence of a horrendous misunderstanding of the character of God. It is a statement that God has done something wrong, and that a person’s own desires are more important than His. Those who advocate anger at God (now popular among Christian integrationist counselors) justify it by saying, “God is big enough to take it.” That has to be one of the most foolish, ridiculous arguments I have ever heard in defense of a sin. God is big enough to take it? God is big enough to handle the behavior of monsters such like Hitler. God is big enough to take anything, but that does not mean we are free to do it. Regardless of the degree of pain, anger at God is never justified.

Using drugs and alcohol to relieve the suffering

The pain sorrow is something we must walk through. Numbing your mind to it will only postpone the pain.

Dropping out of life

When a person is faced with extreme pain, there is a temptation to use that as a reason for indulging in self pity. Self pity can become a habit that continues the rest of his life. One who gives in to this temptation uses his pain as an excuse to no longer function as a Christian in the church or in his family or in the world. God has not given us that option.

Blaming yourself

In the case of the death of a loved one, it is fairly common for people to start picking through the past for things they did wrong, thinking through regrets—even thinking of things they did that may have affected the circumstances surrounding the person’s death. “*If only I had (or had not) ...*”

God is sovereign over the past, and we should not secondguess His plan. Even in the case where the grieving person *did* do something wrong, once he repents of that sin it is over, and he must forget what is behind and press on toward what lies ahead. Psychotherapists love to make people relive past failures and reopen past wounds. Scripture does not call for that. We are to be looking to the future, not obsessing about the past, as if we could somehow heal ourselves by wallowing in old pain.

Blaming other people or circumstances

If a loved one was killed in a car accident, family members might start thinking, if only my brother hadn't asked for a ride ... if only my son hadn't been using the truck ... if only the other driver had been watching ... if only he hadn't gotten the phone call that made him five minutes later.... There are a thousand reasons that the person was in a particular place at a particular time in those particular circumstances. The One who orchestrated every detail is the sovereign LORD, who was accomplishing His purposes.

Experiencing guilt over not feeling sad enough

It is impossible to predict how a tragedy will affect a person emotionally. Sometimes deep, acute pain never comes even for a close loved one. A person might begin to wonder, *Why am I not more sad? Maybe it is because I resented him for this argument...maybe I didn't love him properly ... maybe something's wrong with me...*

How about this—maybe God is showing you great mercy and kindness? There is no required amount of grief over a loss. It could be that you have such a firm faith in God's plan that your emotions are driven by your faith in Him more than by your loss.

Another misconception is the idea that if you ever stop mourning or if you don't show enough sorrow, then you are somehow forgetting or abandoning the memory of the loved one. God wants you to begin the work of untangling those emotional ties and move on. If God wanted you to remain as attached to the person as you were in the past, He would not have taken him away.

How Can You Help Someone Who Is Grieving?

Begin by applying the principles on compassion and suffering covered in chapter 3.

When the grieving counselee is open to conversation, sharing biblical principles will help more than anything. He may need help understanding which reactions are wrong and which are not. The responses in the section above are wrong. There is nothing wrong, however, with feeling pain and experiencing deep sorrow, even for a long period of time. There is nothing wrong with crying out loud in public.¹

Strive to turn the counselee's attention to the one Treasure that cannot be lost. Five thoughts about God's reliability and eternity for every one thought about the loss.

¹ It is not good that we have privatized grief. In fact, in Scripture grief seems intended to be a community affair.