Facing Loss

Lorna Baker 10 May 2024



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“Her absence is like the sky, spread over everything” – C.S. Lewis

How are we, as Christians, called to walk through the dark valley of grief at the loss of a loved one? Many of us have experienced that deep, soul-wrenching encounter with grief. And when it comes, it too often arrives unannounced, breaking into our world like a tsunami, speedily turning the landscape of our lives into an unrecognisable ground zero of destruction. Everything else of importance fades into the background as this tumultuous season of loss, confusion, pain,

disbelief, and inconsolable sorrow takes centre stage in our hearts and lives, spreading out over every aspect of our being.

Grief and loss entered the human experience when Adam and Eve sinned. Genesis describes the profound impact of that choice when, suddenly, they knew the loss of innocence (their eyes were opened to good and evil), the loss of covering and protection (they knew they were naked, so clothed themselves), separation and loss of intimacy with the Lord (they hid from the presence of the Lord), loss of peace and trust ("I was afraid because I was naked, so I hid"), the loss of unity ("the woman whom you gave me, she gave me fruit of the tree, and I ate") and the loss of paradise ("therefore the Lord sent him out from the garden of Eden to toil the ground"). And ultimately, they faced the loss of life as the reality of sin and death confronted them (Cain killed his brother, Abel). From then on, their lives, once untouched by evil, sin and the fall, became stained with ongoing loss.

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Yet that is not the end of the story for those who put their trust in Christ. The very heart of the Gospel message – that God Himself provided a way for us to be brought from darkness, alienation and death into light, reconciliation and life through the death and resurrection of His Son, Jesus – becomes our victory cry in the face of death. While we live in a world of suffering and death, suffering becomes a redemptive pathway of refining and faith (James 1:2-4; Romans 5:3-5), and death ultimately loses its sting (John 4:1-3;1 Thessalonians 4:13), because of the amazing gift of eternal life.

What can we, as believers, expect to face when we lose a loved one?

What Can We Expect?

1. Recognise that everyone processes grief differently

Most would say that we never fully get over the loss of a loved one. The overpowering ache and grief that hit us every morning as we awaken in the beginning days and weeks, gradually become more bearable as weeks turn to months. But even as months turn to years, we carry that sorrow as a trophy of love, and as a reminder that this person deeply impacted our world.

Though the process of grieving is varied, and the intensity and length of time we grieve will be

unique to each of us, there are still common stages that we can expect.

These stages of grief include:

- **Denial** – numbness, disbelief, having little emotion, not grasping the reality of what has happened; it hasn't sunk in on an emotional level.
- **Anger** – "This shouldn't have happened!", "God, how could You have allowed this?", which could be directed at a system, a person, God, or even oneself.
- **Bargaining** with God – "If you will give him back or heal him, I will serve You".
- **Depression** – despair, bleakness, getting lost in the darkness of grief with no seeming way out.
- **Acceptance**

Though people may go in and out of these various phases, we eventually, with the support of those around us, come to a place of acceptance. In this place, we are at peace with what has happened. We accept that we can't change the events, and we begin to find meaning, and even God's presence or purpose, in our suffering. We feel more hopeful for the future, and we step back into life again. This does not mean that we don't continue to grieve, feel sad or miss the person. For Christians, the anchor of our acceptance is the character of God – His goodness and faithfulness. Healthy grieving will always result in this final stage of acceptance.

2. Look for God and His goodness in the face of our loss

Our hope as believers, and what sets us apart from non-Christians, is first, that death is not the end. For those who die "in Christ", there is no more suffering for them, and we know that we will see them again in eternity. That can bring great comfort in our loss. And God Himself comes to meet us, to comfort us and speak to us in our loss. Second, we grow to understand that suffering is a part of life, and through suffering, if we look to our good Father, He will meet us and, amazingly, turn even our sorrows into something beautiful. We hold this by faith at first, but gradually, as He meets us, forms us and teaches us about His ways, the suffering becomes a doorway into learning more about who He is, and eventually we see that we have been changed, deepened, softened, healed, and matured through the trial of suffering. And His purpose is always to do us good. (Romans 5:3-5)

3. Don't be surprised if guilt and regret surface

We may face emotions that are unexpected as we grieve. Guilt and regret are very common,

particularly if the death was through a suicide, or if we had unfinished business with the person who passed. “If only” are tormenting words, as we might wish we had said “I love you” or “I am sorry”. Or we might blame ourselves by saying, “If only I had/hadn’t done _____”. To live with regret is a terrible thing. It can rob us of coming into acceptance and it holds us hostage to pain and sorrow. It is important that we work through these powerful blocks with a leader, counsellor or close friend if we are stuck. We can’t go back and we can’t change the past. God Himself knew that we would be in this place, and He wants us to come to Him to find peace and acceptance. We ask His forgiveness where needed, and we accept that forgiveness and let ourselves off the hook. And we release forgiveness to anyone else where it is preventing us from being free.

3. Realise that we will face all the “firsts”

The first year after the death of a loved one is very difficult, yet it is also an important part of our healing journey. Every moment of celebration becomes a reminder of our loss. The first Christmas, anniversary, birthday, Father’s Day, Mother’s Day etc. or special events shared with our lost loved one are painful reminders of our sorrow. But they also keep us out of denial and become opportunities to fearlessly face life without the person, to celebrate memories and treasured experiences, and to invite the Lord into this new reality.

4. Accept that many will support us, and some will disappoint us

Paul tells the Romans how to love one another, and Romans 12:15 says we are to weep with those who weep. Initially, people are great at that. They tend to rally around us as we navigate the loss of a loved one – phone calls and messages, flowers and gifts, meals sent, hugs and comforting words. We turn to those we trust for support. But, as time goes by and the funeral is over, the world carries on and slowly forgets our pain while we are still deep in the midst of our grieving. Because of this, we may experience disappointment with others. We must be prepared to forgive, as others might forget that we are still grieving and will stop asking how we are. And some will be insensitive in their comments and questions, which might tempt us to be offended or hurt, as they are not walking in our shoes. We will learn to love and forgive more. We will need grace, and even kind honesty at times. But this too is part of our healing and growth. We learn to forgive and to be sensitive to others who may walk a similar journey. In this we become more like Him, and more dependent on His nearness and care when others let us down.

5. We will either shrink back or embrace change and growth

We have no control over losing someone we love. But we do get to decide how we will respond to our loss. Although the parable of the talents was not speaking about grief and loss, the principle applies to how we steward our grief.

Will we be a good steward of our pain? Like the tale of the talents, what do we do with our suffering? Frederick Buechner, in his book, A Crazy, Holy Grace, writes of the talents being what hand life has dealt us, even loss. The man with one talent said, "I was afraid. I knew you were a hard man". And God can be hard in that He may ask or require from us things that are difficult or that we do not understand. But God is good, and He wants us to trust Him when facing hard things. But the man with one talent, being afraid of living, of risking failure or success, takes his life and buries it. He buries his experience, and the Master is angry. God gives us a chance to deal with loss in creative, redemptive, life-opening ways. He gives us a chance to risk new things; to step out where we are afraid to go. But the one-talent man, getting through life on auto-pilot, burying pain and joy, living carefully, is rebuked. To live a buried life, a closed-up life, is to not really live our life at all. The buried life is a dark and lonely life. If we bury our life, it shrinks. It is diminished.

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But to be a good steward is to take our loss and to have faith in the Master; that somehow all will be well; that it is worth taking the risk to face loss, grief, and choose to live, even if it doesn't turn out as we expected. There is forgiveness, there is compassion, there is mercy.

The other stewards went and traded with their talents. They traded their sorrows for life.

What does that look like for us? Daring to believe that good can come from our loss; risking learning new ways of living; encouraging ourselves and others to be creative and expansive out of our own suffering; being available for others who have suffered loss – we trade our losses. We help each other to steward, to look outside of ourselves and allow our losses to have meaning and bear fruit for the Lord. Death and loss, put into God's hand, birth new ways of living fruitfully.

6. Be prepared to care for ourselves as we grieve

It is important to be intentional about looking after ourselves in our season of grief. Addressing our spiritual, physical and emotional needs will help to get us through this difficult time.

a. Commit our grieving into the hands of God

God wants to meet us in our suffering and to love us, heal us and speak to us. If we will allow it, He can use suffering to refine us and form His image within us. Romans 5:3 reminds us to rejoice because, in His hands, suffering produces endurance, then character, then hope, which will not disappoint, because His love is poured into our hearts. God is trustworthy. Those of us who have learned to find the Lord in the smaller, ongoing sufferings of life will be more equipped to recognise and draw from the presence of God with us in times such as this.

b. Face our feelings and stay connected

We can suppress our grief, but we can't avoid it forever. Though each person's grieving process is unique, we must acknowledge the pain in order to heal. Avoiding feelings of sadness and loss only prolongs the grieving process. Unresolved grief can also lead to complications, such as depression, anxiety and health problems. Counselling, praying with others, speaking about the one we have lost with the Lord and with those who love us, are all ways that we can face this loss. Connection with others is vital to processing the grief and loss, and to keeping us rooted in a community bigger than ourselves.

c. Stay active – exercise, hobbies, interests, or find ways to serve

It is important that we stay healthy by taking care of our bodies and minds through exercise, healthy eating, activities and hobbies that we enjoy in order to keep us connected as a vibrant member of the Body. Looking out for others and finding ways to serve will help to fill the void of loss and to ignite purpose and hope that there is still life after our loss.

Tips for walking with someone who has lost a loved one

In speaking with several people who have lost loved ones within the faith community, they expressed tremendous appreciation for the love and support they received throughout their journeys. Interestingly, they also shared common experiences where they felt there was room for the community to grow in an understanding of how to support those grieving.

1. If you engage with someone suffering loss, don't ignore the topic because you feel

uncomfortable. Ask the person how they are doing, express your sadness at their loss, and take a few minutes to hear their experience. For you to NOT acknowledge the loss is painful for the person.

2. Realise that, initially, the person will want to talk, possibly a lot, about their loved one. Give them time, and just listen; empathise.
3. Do not give platitudes. We do this sometimes because we don't know what else to say, to try to make the person feel better. Some are: "Well, at least He was a believer", or "At least you still have two other children at home", or "God must have really wanted her if He took her", and so on. While these may be true, they minimise the deep loss they feel. Don't feel the need to pull the person out of their pain by trying to be "positive" or by looking for the silver lining.
4. In keeping with the previous point, you do not need to give advice, fix the person's feelings, or share your own story of grief (which takes the focus off their pain). Just listen.
5. And because we all grieve differently, don't say, "Are you still grieving?' or "Haven't you gotten over this yet?" While few people will be that insensitive directly, there are many forms of that. Accept where they are as "their" process. If you truly are concerned that someone is stuck in their grief, share your concern with someone they are walking closely with.
6. We all can be insensitive, forget, or say the wrong thing. If you do that, simply apologise.
7. We can support our friends by praying for them, listening, offering practical help, asking them what they might need, sending messages occasionally to encourage them, remind them that the Lord is with them through the storm, and they will come out the other side.

If we allow Him, the Lord has a redemptive purpose for us to discover as we work with our grief and allow our sorrows and pain to find their expression and comfort in Him, and in the family and friends He puts around us. As the Body works to comfort, support, nurture and love us, we can mature and grow, we can dare to risk and change, even through the terrible circumstances of death. Suffering, which wants to knock us out, becomes transformed through the love and presence of Jesus and His Body. And we discover that even in death there is life. Death, where is your sting?