

Our Present Grief

Psalm 121

A song of ascents.

- ¹ I lift up my eyes to the mountains—
where does my help come from?
- ² My help comes from the LORD,
the Maker of heaven and earth.
- ³ He will not let your foot slip—
he who watches over you will not slumber;
- ⁴ indeed, he who watches over Israel
will neither slumber nor sleep.
- ⁵ The LORD watches over you—
the LORD is your shade at your right hand;
- ⁶ the sun will not harm you by day,
nor the moon by night.
- ⁷ The LORD will keep you from all harm—
he will watch over your life;
- ⁸ the LORD will watch over your coming and going
both now and forevermore.

What is Grief?

Consider this past twelve months. What has been a potential source of grief for you or others around?

Grief is a certainty in life. It is related to the loss of something valuable and is almost always seen in the loss of loved ones. Along with death, other causes of grief include events such as divorce, miscarriage, disability, illness, or the loss of independence, job, friendship or property. People may also experience grief as a result of a dramatic event, such as a natural disaster (i.e. bushfires event, flooding, drought, pandemic etc.), hostage situation or the witnessing of something grave like a fatal accident or massacre.

Why do we experience grief? Well, because we care. We care about people, we care about the things that we do, we care about causes that we are involved with – and when something changes, we grieve. Our normal expectations are not met. We experience a disconnect between

what we expect and *what we now experience*.¹ And with this comes a whole new way of life – most things look the same, yet our reality is different: the loved one is no longer with us, a way of life is adjusted, a comfort is removed, an endeavour is ended. And in its place, we are forced to make changes.

Grief should be treated with seriousness and compassion and with an understanding that it is a natural part of life. Although not a pleasant experience, it is necessary and should not be denied. For that reason, the more we understand about grief, the more we can be of help to someone coping with their loss.

It is also in situations of grief that people frequently ask ‘Why?’ This means that Christians have a unique opportunity to care and support people and proclaim Christ to them as they learn to live with grief.

Reactions of those Grieving

EMOTIONAL	PHYSICAL	MENTAL	BEHAVIOURAL
Anxiety	Hollowness in Stomach	Disbelief	Crying
Fear	Tightness in Chest/Throat	Confusion	Sleep Disturbance
Sadness	Over sensitivity to Noise	Preoccupation	Sighing
Anger	Sense of depersonalisation	Sense of Deceased’s presence	Restlessness/Overactivity
Guilt	Breathlessness	Hallucinations	Appetite disturbances
Inadequacy	Muscle weakness		Absent-mindedness
Hurt	Lack of energy		Social withdrawal
Relief	Dry Mouth		Dreams of the deceased
Loneliness			Avoiding reminders of the deceased
Apathy			Searching and calling out for the deceased
			Visiting places and carrying reminders of the deceased

(Glasscock G. & Gressor, M. 1992)

What is happening when we grieve?

There are ‘aspects’ to grief. By ‘aspect’ we mean an experience of grief that a person may feel – and there may be numerous times when that feeling is experienced. Sometimes grief is talked about in ‘stages’ – helpful as it indicates that there may be a pattern to what a person feels, but unhelpful in that grief is not necessarily something that you want to ‘get over’ (why let go of someone or something that you love). Perhaps a better way to think about it is to consider the ‘aspect’ a person may experience as they move to acceptance of this new reality (e.g. life without that something or someone).

¹ In this respect, ‘grief’ is very much like ‘culture shock’.

Aspect 1: Shock, Numbness and Denial (*experienced most acutely initially*)

Shows itself by...

Best approach...

Aspects 2: Emotional Understanding

Shows itself by...

Best approach...

Aspect 3: Acceptance

Shows itself by...

Best approach...

Caring for yourself when grieving

Here are four suggestions to help ourselves when we personally grieve.

1. _____

Suffering will come in all different forms and to all different degrees. Everyone will suffer at some point. Christians can suffer in hope (Rom 5:1-5).

To live and die, is something that all people will experience. To live and die and live again is something that Christian person knows and can look forward too. (1 Peter 1:3-9).

Hope sits before the person – it is realised in the coming days. For the Christian there is nothing in doubt about what comes in those coming days. That is the certainty of Christian hope:

³⁴ Who then is the one who condemns? No one. Christ Jesus who died—more than that, who was raised to life—is at the right hand of God and is also interceding for us. ³⁵ Who shall separate us from the love of Christ? Shall trouble or hardship or persecution or famine or nakedness or danger or sword? ³⁶ As it is written:

*“For your sake we face death all day long;
we are considered as sheep to be slaughtered.”^[a]*

³⁷ No, in all these things we are more than conquerors through him who loved us. ³⁸ For I am convinced that neither death nor life, neither angels nor demons,^[a] neither the present nor the future, nor any powers, ³⁹ neither height nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God that is in Christ Jesus our Lord. (Romans 8:34-39)

2. _____

When we experience grief, we are experiencing an emotional response. That can be exhausting. Cut yourself some slack. Your capacity will be reduced, your emotions will be more erratic and inconsistent. The things that you previously felt competent or comfortable in may now be different and with that comes a whole new set of learnings and time will be required to put things into place. It is okay to feel anxious.

3. _____

The extent of the trauma will often be linked to the extent of the number of ‘normal’ things that are changed. The more that changes, the deeper the grief.

Yet, in all circumstances there will be some things that are ‘normal’. Value that which remains normal. For example, for Christians, God is there, his word still speaks, you can cry out to him. He will always hear. And depending on what the event is that has caused the grief there will be other things that have remained normal. For example, you might still be able to enjoy mealtimes, do exercise, watch TV, read a book etc.). Look for and value that which is still normal. Look to return to your regular activities.

4. _____

As grief shakes that which we have come to expect (especially if it comes as a surprise or a shock). Recognise that God has not been shaken nor surprised. You might feel out of control, he doesn’t. As we rest in him, we have every reason to cast our burden on him, draw close to him, be patient and be thankful (Rom 12:12; Phil 4:6).

All disasters will come to an end eventually and even if the ‘worst’ was to happen, he has promised to hold you and claim you (Ps 40:1-3; 2 Thess 3:5; Jam 5:7; 2 Pet 3:9).

What follows turns our attention to how to help others who are grieving.

How to help a person grieving?

To care, support (or even evangelise) someone who is grieving, the person's needs should be considered for each stage. Ultimately, the goal should be to comfort them with an eternal hope which comes with faith in Jesus. It is only in Jesus that a person can truly have hope beyond the limitations of this sinful world.

Timing is key. What needs to be said may need to wait in order to care for the person – so that what needs to be said will be heard, ultimately.

'The grieving person has just lost (someone/something they love), they don't want to lose an argument as well.'

STAGE	CARE NEED	BIBLE INPUT (of which could be read or Bible Studies prepared)	CARE ACTIVITY
Traumatic Event causing Grief	To be supported and for what has happened to be communicated.	Rom 8:28-38 1 Thess 4:13-18 Resources: <i>What Grieving People Wish You Knew</i> (Nancy Guthrie)	~ Pray ~ Identify the person/s to be cared for (incl. those supporting). ~ Prepare yourself. ~ Find people who are best suited to care.
Aspect 1 - Shock, Numbness and Denial	To be Protected, not forced to make decisions	Proverbs 14:13 Job 3:1-19 Psalm 13, 22, 77, 88 Resources: <i>At a Time like this</i> (Simon Manchester) <i>Letters to Emma</i> (Lee Carter) <i>My Tears in your Bottle</i> (Bible Society) <i>The Moon is Always Round</i> (Jonathan Gibson & Joe Hox) – excellent for kids	~ Pray ~ Make contact with the person/s. ~ Be willing to listen ~ Resist the urge to advise or defend or argue. ~ Offer assistance (shopping, laundry, funeral arrangements, phone calls, cook, caring for children, financial etc.)
Aspect 2 - Emotional Understanding	To have Fellowship	Lamentations 3:31-33 John 16:20 Psalm 23 Resources: <i>2 Ways to Live</i> (Matthias Media) <i>A Shelter in the Time of Storm</i> (Paul David Tripp)	~ Pray ~ Be willing to listen & talk ~ Encourage others to be involved ~ Invite to Church events (i.e. Gatherings, Growth Group, invite for meals etc.) ~ Ask to read the Bible together (even though they may show no interest at times)
Aspect 3 - Acceptance	See Hope in Future	1 Peter 1:3-7 Romans 8:18-28 2 Corinthians 7:6-10 Psalm 16 Resources: <i>JesusWORKS</i> (KDN) <i>7 reason to (re)consider Christianity</i> (Ben Shaw) <i>How Long O Lord</i> (Don Carson) <i>If I were God I'd end all the Pain</i> (John Dickson) <i>Resilient Grieving</i> (Lucy Hone)	~ Pray ~ Be willing to talk (start talking about the future) ~ Invite to join an introductory Christian course (e.g. JesusWORKS) ~ Continue reading the Bible together ~ Invite them to social events

A death in a family would be treated very differently to a community disaster (i.e. a bushfire) and yet the people involved would still experience the stages of grief recovery. There is a difference when an individual is experiencing some form of grief compared to when a whole community is experiencing grief.

We do not want to take advantage of someone when they are most down, rather aim to care, support and give the message of the Gospel that ultimately will free them from eternal suffering.

Provide the person with a belief system that will help them to understand how to cope with the changes to their world. Give them support and fellowship in a loving Christian environment.

To think about...

1. How would you respond to someone who is 'angry with God'?
2. Think of those who you know are most affected by recent loss/crisis – what signals are they giving? How can you most help them in their loss right now?
3. Which passages in the Bible do you consider most helpful in thinking about the future? Why?

Bibliography

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