

1 Corinthians 15:35-44, 50-53; Job 2:7-13, 3:20, 24-26
 “Through the Valley with a Flashlight”

Do you find giving thanks easy? It can be easy to thank God when He does what we want. But God doesn’t always do what we want. Ask Job.

His empire collapsed, his children were killed, and what was a healthy body became a rage of boils. From where do his troubles come? And from where will he find comfort or help? Not from his wife. You can’t blame her for telling Job to curse God.

Then come his friends. They mean well, but they comfort poorly. They tell him he must have been pretty bad to get it so bad.

“With friends like you guys...,” Job says, and then he tells them to take their theology back to the dime store where they bought it.

Receiving no comfort from family or friend, Job goes straight to God and pleads his case. His head hurts. His body hurts. His heart hurts. And he can’t tolerate anymore half-baked answers. “Why is this happening to me?” he demands.

We’re talking about grief and loss today – and how *you* can be the friend who cares for those around you when they lose a loved one. We have experienced tremendous loss in recent months. In October, four from our Church have passed into the resurrection life. We continue to hear of natural disasters and families in crisis! So first, we begin describing grief with the story of Job.

READ Job 2:7-13; 3:20, 24-26

⁷ So Satan left the LORD’s presence, and he struck Job with terrible boils from head to foot.

⁸ Job scraped his skin with a piece of broken pottery as he sat among the ashes. ⁹ His wife said to him, “Are you still trying to maintain your integrity? Curse God and die.”

¹⁰ But Job replied, “You talk like a foolish woman. Should we accept only good things from the hand of God and never anything bad?” So in all this, Job said nothing wrong.

¹¹ When three of Job’s friends heard of the tragedy he had suffered, they got together and traveled from their homes to comfort and console him. Their names were Eliphaz the Temanite, Bildad the Shuhite, and Zophar the Naamathite. ¹² When they saw Job from a distance, they scarcely recognized him. Wailing loudly, they tore their robes and threw dust into the air over their heads to show their grief.

¹³ Then they sat on the ground with him for seven days and nights. No one said a word to Job, for they saw that his suffering was too great for words.

Finally Job breaks his silence with words of anger to say he regrets the day he was born!

Job 3:20, 24-26 (NLT)

²⁰ “Oh, why give light to those in misery, and life to those who are bitter?”

²⁴ “I cannot eat for sighing; my groans pour out like water.

²⁵ What I always feared has happened to me. What I dreaded has come true.

²⁶ I have no peace, no quietness. I have no rest; only trouble comes.”

Job’s wife has often received a bad rap for what some interpret as a flippant comment! She asked, “Do you still hold fast to your integrity? Curse God and die!”

But I have sympathy for her! She too, has lost! The children she bore – are all dead! The home for which she cared – is destroyed! The life-style they lived – over! *She* wants to die! She sees no reason to continue! She’s hurting and her emotions are super-charged! And that’s what

grief is!

Grief is “intense emotional suffering caused by loss, disaster, misfortune; it is a pain so intense, so profound, that we fear we can never recover!”

The experience of loss and the emotions of grief can be experienced so differently. But early in grief, people experience *shock*. The loss can be so painful, so overwhelming that our hearts and our heads find it hard to accept. And for awhile that *numbness* shields us from some of the pain. And try as you might, you can’t change what’s happened nor can you keep holding off the full fury of your loss. Eventually, raging emotions pour out!

Let’s name some of the common feelings or emotions that people experience through their loss. You may not have them all, but there’s a good chance you’ll hear a number of them that you recognize.

Panic or Helplessness. Your world has been turned upside down because someone you loved and depended on is gone! It’s normal to feel overwhelmed! And certainly this was Job and his wife’s experience!

Worry or Anxiety. You may wonder, “How will I make it?” or “What if something happens to me or to someone else I love?”

Fear. You can be frightened by intense emotions or irrational thoughts because of the changes happening over which you have no control.

Anger. Grief can stir up a huge amount of resentment, or even rage – at ourselves, at friends who may say or do hurtful things, at the person you’ve lost, or the one responsible for the loss. And sometimes we feel God has been responsible!

Guilt. You may feel guilty for what you said or did (or didn’t say or do) before or after your loved one died. You may even blame yourself for the loss you’ve suffered – or not doing something sooner to prevent it.

Failure. You may feel that somehow you let your loved one down or failed in your role as a spouse, a parent, or friend.

Emptiness or Hopelessness. The loss may leave you feeling empty and wondering, “What’s the use? Does anything really matter anymore?”

Despair or Sadness.

Loneliness. Not only are your emotions affected by your loss, but so is your social life, the place you “fit in” as a parent or as a couple ...that no longer exists for the survivor.

Relief. If your loved one had been in pain a long time, as the caregiver you may feel relief. And that’s all right. Don’t beat yourself up for reclaiming some normalcy to your life.

Happiness. You can also feel moments of happiness, thankful for your loved one as you reflect on the former blessing you shared.

The power of this list is to know that what you’re experiencing – is normal! You’re not going crazy! Despite naming these powerful, negative feelings, it’s good to know this is normal grief!

When we talk about loss and grief we’re not just thinking about those who have died. There are other experiences of loss that come through divorce, with the termination of a job or from retirement, the loss of freedom that caregivers experience, the loss of hope from a diagnosis, the loss of expectations.

All of us experience loss in some way. But many of us refuse to talk about it.

God gave us emotions for a reason! Now I know some people feel very uncomfortable with their emotions showing, and because of that they may avoid them all together. We may pretend that “everything is okay,” when we know it’s not. We may tell ourselves that “it’s not right to feel sad,” when quite the opposite is true.

One reason we may hide our emotions is because we don’t see the benefit of talking about them. But half the battle with grief is accepting the feelings and letting yourself grieve.

Some people try to intellectualize their feelings. One man said that he attempted a scholarly approach to his grief, analyzing his feelings and discussing them on an intellectual level. Then a wise friend told him, “You can’t *think* your way through grief. You need to *feel* your way through.”

That was a breakthrough, because he realized he was talking about his feelings as if they were something outside of himself that he could organize and keep from feeling.

A woman who lost her mother said she resisted grieving by taking care of everyone else – her father, her siblings, and her own children. She said, “At the time, everyone said, ‘You’re taking this so well,’ but ten years later it caught up to me and I finally broke down.”

Half the battle with loss is accepting your loss and letting yourself grieve! There’s no advantage acting stoic.

One grief counselor came upon a TV show with a cowboy describing the secret to riding a wild bronco. The rider said, “Don’t fight the horse or try to control him. Simply move along with him and let him take you wherever he wants to go.”

You can apply this bit of cowboy wisdom to your grief. Don’t fight your grief or try to control it. Simply move along with it and let it take you wherever it goes. Experience the feelings stirred by your loss and talk about what you’re experiencing.

Those who experience grief may find another kind of problem with how friends try to muffle their own emotions. Some friends will be very caring and supportive, but others just don’t know how. There are a couple mistakes we can make with friends who are experiencing grief. And keep in mind, when we talk about “grief,” we’re talking about a show of emotions!

1. **Friends may pull away.** They may be afraid of your pain, or they may be afraid they’ll hurt you by saying the wrong thing. If you tear up around them, they’ll think they made you sad again, and they’ll kick themselves and promise to stay away from people who are grieving!

A couple whose daughter died said some of their friends were very caring at first, but disappeared within a month. “People didn’t know what to say or do, so they avoided us entirely,” the wife said. The loneliness they felt from losing a child was made worse by the loss of friends.

2. **Friends may say the wrong things.** In the story of Job, we found the most compassionate expression with the arrival of his friends. The Bible said, “**When they saw Job they scarcely recognized him. Wailing loudly, they tore their robes and threw dust into the air to show their grief. Then they sat on the ground with him for seven days and nights. No one said a word to Job, for they saw that his suffering was too great for words.**”

They were really in tune with Job’s loss and grief! At first.

The compassion you express simply being present expresses a powerful love. **Job’s suffering was too great for words!** For seven days the friends were silent! It is only when they

started to talk that we discover how people can say the wrong things!

What are some of the wrong things to say?

- “It must’ve been God’s will.” Even if someone believes that, don’t tell me that it was God’s will that I should be left without the child I adored!
- We may say something like: “God needed this child, this father; God needed Grandma more than you...”

Now please! Let’s correct that misconception. God doesn’t *need* a mother or father more than a grieving school-aged child here!

We can say some pretty foolish things because we don’t know what to say! You’ve probably heard someone say, “Well, you’re still young. You can have more children!”

Or suggesting at the casket, “You’re still attractive. You’ll find another husband” is not comforting to a grieving widow!

But we say these things in order to “fix something” that can’t be fixed or to explain something that can’t be explained!

I know we can all feel clumsy around those who are grieving. And you may have kept your distance from those with whom you had been friends! But it’s not too late to reconnect!

Those of you who have experienced loss and grief can be the best friend to others! The Bible says: **God is our merciful Father and the source of all comfort. He comforts us in all our troubles so that we can comfort others. When they are troubled, we will be able to give them the same comfort God has given us.** (2 Corinthians 1:3-4)

The grief you experience from your losses isn’t something you can tie up in a nice, neat box after three weeks and tuck it away! For those who have lost loved ones, it can take at least a year as you move through the variety of emotions, back and forth, like the waves on the beach! In fact, we should expect friends to experience these waves of emotion up to three years!

In order to move to recovery, give yourself permission to *express* your feelings! Your feelings aren’t right or wrong – they just are! Feeling angry with God, jealous over someone else’s healthy child, or even relieved that your loved one has died doesn’t make you a bad person. It simply means you’re experiencing real emotions; you’re a human being!

Here’s a paradox about feelings: When you let your feelings out and feel them to the full, they lose their power over you. But when you hold your feelings inside and try to control them, they tighten their grip as you experience them as anxiety.

In order to let those feelings out you may need someone you can trust to hear you! And here’s where the Church comes in! Let me offer four principles how we can console one another:

1. **Validate their feelings.** Don’t worry about how ugly someone may express themselves! Who knows, if you were in their shoes you might do the same! Let them feel! Let them know you’re a safe person with whom they can share! Don’t try to correct them! Don’t be shocked by their grief! Love them enough to listen, believing that their expressions are the way to move them to a healthier place mentally, emotionally, and spiritually.

And if you need a verse for this principle, the Bible has one: (Matthew 7:1-2) **“Do not judge, so that you may not be judged.”**

2. **Be present.** If you don’t know what to say at the funeral home, offer a hug! Tell them you’re sorry for their loss! Be present so they don’t feel so alone! Be the shoulder on which they can rest their head. If you just hold their hand to say, “We’re thinking of you,” you’ve said

enough.

And then in the weeks or months after, continue to be the one who is present!

3. **Listen.** If your friend expresses their feelings, I believe they're offering you permission to ask about them. Ask how they're feeling from some difficult episode they experienced, and listen, because many of our friends who are grieving don't find a lot of friends who take time to listen anymore.

4. **Ask about their feelings.** One way to do this is to ask, "Is this a good day ...or a bad day? Can you tell me about it?"

The thing that makes me most nervous is the idea that I might have to answer the tough question. "Why has this awful thing happened to me?"

But think about that. Can anyone explain why a loved one died so unexpectedly? Even if I could provide an answer ...is there really any answer that would quiet the emotional storm of feelings so that a parent or a spouse could say, "Oh! I understand! Of course! That's why this awful thing happened" – and everything would be perfect?

There is no sufficient, satisfying answer to set the mind at ease! What we do know is what we can tell from the Bible: (Psalm 34:18) – **The LORD is near to the brokenhearted, and saves the crushed in spirit.** This is the promise upon which we must rely.

God comforts those who walk through the valleys of the shadows of death. He is intimately familiar with your experience! The feelings you feel – God feels them too! We are created in His image! God is not some impersonal statue that can't be involved. He lost a Son and was so overwhelmed by the brutality that His Son cried out, "Why have You forsaken Me?"

Jesus knows, too, the pain of your grief from the death of His friend, Lazarus. He knows the uncontrollable sorrow, for He wept, too. He knows the incredible power fear and death have over us! In fact, He took on that power of loss and uncontrollable sorrow and defeated it! We call His victory *Easter!*

We can let God hold us, knowing that He understands us!

So picture yourself embraced on your heavenly Father's lap, feeling Him wrap His strength and love around you! Tell Him about your grief, your anger, your despair. We call this "prayer." For it is in your openness to God that you will find the healing power of His abiding presence!

PRAYER: from "*All Will Be Well*"; edited by Lyn Klug

God of our life, there are days when the burdens we carry chafe our shoulders and weigh us down; when the road seems dreary and endless, the skies gray and threatening; when our lives have no music in them, and our hearts are lonely and our souls have lost their courage.

Flood the path with light, we beg You; turn our eyes to where the skies are full of promise; tune our hearts to brave music; give us a sense of comradeship with heroes and saints of every age; and so quicken our spirits that we may be able to encourage the souls of all who journey with us on the road to life, to Your honor and glory! Amen

– Saint Augustine, North Africa, (354-430 A.D.)