

Enlarging Your Soul and Church Through Grief and Loss

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When is the last time you preached or heard a message on grieving or lamenting that was not at a funeral? When is the last time your church sang a lament to God, struggling with His love and faithfulness? What have you been taught about biblical grieving as discipleship?

David is famous for being a man after God's own heart (1 Sam.13:14; Acts 13:22). What few realize is how closely this characteristic is related to the way he repeatedly *paid attention* to loss, disappointment and threats of death, and how he led Israel to God through these experiences.

In the same way, we have before us as preachers, a wonderful open door to lead our people into a genuine faith that lives in the world but is not of it. This will require, however, that we grasp the rich biblical theology of loss, both for our personal lives and for our leadership.

Grieving in our Culture

Our culture routinely interprets losses as alien invasions that interrupt our "normal" lives. Jonathan Edwards, in a famous sermon on the book of Job, noted that the story of Job is the story of us all. Job lost everything in one day—his family, his wealth, his health (see Job 1:13-2:8). Most of us experience our losses more slowly, over the span of a lifetime, until we find ourselves on the door of death, leaving everything behind – all our relationships, all our possessions, all our health.

We lose our youthfulness. No amount of plastic surgery, cosmetics, good diet or exercise routine can stop the process of growing older.

We lose our dreams. Who has not lost dreams, dreams of a career or marriage or children for which we hoped?

We experience loss in transitions of life. Each time we change jobs, or move is a loss. Our children grow more independent as they move through their life transitions. Our influence and power decreases.

Most of us, in one or more moments of our lives, experience catastrophic loss. Unexpectedly, a family member dies. A friend or son commits suicide. Our spouse has an affair. We find ourselves single again after a painful divorce or breakup. We are diagnosed with cancer. Our company suddenly downsizes and we find ourselves unemployed after twenty-five years of stable employment. Our child is born severely handicapped. A loyal friend betrays us. Infertility, miscarriages, broken friendships, loss of memory or mental acuity, abuse. They are all losses

We grieve the many things we can't do, our limits. Some people, like me, "lost a leg in that war" in their family of origin growing up and now walk with a limp.

We lose our wrong ideas of God and the church. We find out that certain ideas we had about Jesus and what it meant to follow Him are inadequate, foolish—maybe even wrong. We feel betrayed by a church tradition, a leader, or even God himself.

We lose our illusions about this new family of Jesus, the church. It is not the perfect family with perfect people as we expected. In fact, people disappoint us. At times, we are bewildered and shocked. Every person who lives in community with other believers, sooner or later, experiences this disillusionment and the grief that accompanies it.

Yet we all face many deaths within our lives. The choice is whether these deaths will be terminal (crushing our spirit and life) or open us up to new possibilities and depths of transformation in Christ.

Every culture and family deals with grieving differently. Some of us come from families/cultures where sadness was a sign of weakness. You weren't allowed to be depressed. The expectation was that you would stuff it and move on. Others, like mine, did a lot of screaming and wailing but there was very little hope in God. People generally froze in time.

In our culture, addiction has become the most common way to deal with pain. We watch television for hours to not feel. We keep busy, running from one activity to another. We work seventy hours a week, indulge in pornography, overeat, drink, take pills—anything to help us avoid the pain. Some of us demand that someone or something (a marriage, sexual partner, an ideal family, children, an achievement, a career, or a church) take our pain away.

On top of this, in the church, we have little theology for anger, sadness, waiting, and depression. "How are you?" we are asked after a loss or disappointment in our lives. "Couldn't be better!" "God's working all things for good. I just can't see it all yet." We feel guilty for not obeying Scripture's commands to "rejoice in the Lord always" (Philippians 4:4a) and to "come before him with joyful songs" (Psalm 100:2b).

We so often in the church today associate anger, sadness, grieving with being unspiritual, as if something is wrong with our walk with Christ. We're convinced that we are failing and going backwards. Biblically, the very opposite may be true. This is a central discipleship issue for all of us. It is meant to be one of the main ways God "enlarges" our soul and transforms us into lovers of Him and others.

Biblical grieving has three phases. First, I pay attention.

We see this in the prayers of David in the Psalms, of Job, of Jeremiah. Job, for example, screams out in his pain, holding nothing back. He cursed the day of his birth: “May the day of my birth perish... If only my anguish could be weighed and all the misery be placed on the scales! It would surely outweigh the sand of the seas. . . .The arrows of the Almighty are in me... (Job3:3-4 and 6:2-3, 4).

We forget that two thirds of the psalms, most of which are written by David, are laments, complaints to God. He shouts at God. He prays wild prayers. He tells God exactly what he was feeling. And this is the one prayer book/worship manual in all Scripture!

David wrote poetry after the death of Saul and his best friend, Jonathan, commanding his army to sing a lament to God (see 2 Samuel 1:17-27).

Jeremiah wrote an entire Old Testament book entitled Lamentations. Ezekiel lamented. Daniel grieved. Jesus wept over Lazarus and cried out in grief over Jerusalem (see John 11:35 and Luke 13: 34).

Biblical grieving calls us to pour out our feelings and losses to God. When I became a Christian, I was taught that anger was a sin. Wanting to be like Jesus, I stuffed all feelings of irritation, annoyance, resentment, and hatred. They were sins, right?

Yes and no.

When we do not process before God the very feelings that make us human, such as fear or sadness or anger, we leak.⁶ Our churches are filled with “leaking” Christians who have not treated their emotions as a discipleship issue. Grieving is not possible without paying attention to our anger and sadness.

Most people who fill churches are “nice” and “respectable. Few explode in anger—at least in public. The majority, like me, stuff these “difficult feeling,” trusting that God will honor our noble efforts. The result is that we leak through in soft ways such as passive-aggressive behavior (e.g., showing up late), sarcastic remarks, a nasty tone of voice, and the giving of the “silent treatment.”

The second phase of biblical grieving is: Waiting in the Confusing In-Between

I hate waiting for subways, buses, airplanes, and people. Like most New Yorkers, I struggle not to finish other people’s sentences. I talk too fast.

David in the Psalms waits on God as he flees Saul or hides in the desert from his enemies. He knows God is good and His love endures forever. The problem is that circumstances don’t look that way. We experience the same struggle. The call of grieving is to wait.

I hate waiting. I prefer control. I understand why Abraham, after waiting eleven years for God's promise of a son to come true, took matters in his own hands and had a baby the "natural way." Birthing Ishmaels is common in both our churches and personal lives. "Be still before the lord and wait patiently for him" (Psalm 37:7) remains one of the most radical commands of our day. It requires enormous humility.

The confusing in-between resists all earthly categories and quick solutions. It runs contrary to our entire culture.

What now enables me to remain faithful in the disorientating "in-between" times is the powerful truth that God uses all things for our good, his glory, and others' good."

John Milton in *Paradise Lost* describes the evil of history as a compost pile--a mixture of decaying substances such as animal excrement, vegetable and fruit peels, potato skins, egg shells, dead leaves, and banana peels. If you cover it with dirt, after a few years it smells wonderful. The soil has become a rich, natural fertilizer and is tremendous for growing fruit and vegetables. But you have to be willing to wait five to ten years!

Milton's point is that the worst events of human history that we cannot understand, even hell itself, are only compost in God's wonderful eternal plan. Out of the greatest evil, the death of Jesus, came the greatest good. God transform evils into good without diminishing the awfulness of the evil.

The third phase of biblical grieving is to let the old birth the new. Good grieving is not just letting go, but also letting it bless us.

The central message of Jesus and the Bible is that suffering and death brings resurrection and transformation. Jesus himself said, "I tell you the truth, unless a kernel of wheat falls to the ground and dies, it remains only a single seed. But if it dies, it produces many seeds" (John 12:24).

But remember, resurrection only comes out of death—real death. Our losses are real, very real. But as we pay attention and wait on God in our losses and griefs, no matter how long it takes, God over time births resurrection.

Startling shifts and inner changes result in us as we take this strange path downward into mourning. New, inner births, or changes, resulting from grieving include:

We become compassionate as our Father in heaven is compassionate. Henri Nouwen rightly says grief is the way to compassion. "There is no compassion without many tears....To become like the Father whose only authority is compassion, I have to shed countless tears and so prepare my

heart to receive anyone, whatever their journey has been, and forgive them from the heart.” Absorbing our own pain, we learn to forgive.

We have a greater concern for the poor, the widow, the orphan, the marginalized, the wounded. We understand them.

We are less covetous, less idolatrous. We rarely say, “I’ve got to have this or I’ll die.” Life is stripped of its pretense and non-essentials. We are more apt to rid ourselves of the unimportant things in life others so desperately want—power, control, money, or approval.

We are liberated from living with the motivation of having to impress someone. We can follow God’s plan with a new freedom because we are not as motivated to please people.

We are able to live more comfortably with mystery when it comes to God and his plans.

We are not afraid to say, “I don’t know” when people ask us questions about God. We become much more flexible regarding God’s plans for our lives and for our churches.

There is an enhanced sense of living in the immediate present, rather than postponing life until retirement. There is a new vivid appreciation of the basic facts of life- the changing seasons, the wind, the falling of the leaves, the last Christmas, people made in God’s image.

A love flows out of us that is not based on peoples intelligence, success, money, appearance or how much they have love us. The communities we lead become less judgmental and controlling. We understand what bonds us as followers of Jesus living in community is our brokenness.

Most importantly, by God’s grace, the church will become known as a place with mature people who love a wonderful, good God in the midst of the pain and suffering of life.

Loss marks the place where self-knowledge and powerful transformation happen—if we have the courage to participate fully in the process.

We all face many “deaths” within our lives. The choice is whether these deaths will be terminal (crushing our spirit and life) or will open us up to new possibilities and depths of transformation in Christ.

Begin living and preaching about the need to embrace loss and grief from Scripture. Invite your people to write their own laments. And I believe, that like myself, you will find yourself shocked by the depths of the songs and poems they write back to God.

And most importantly, you will find that the truth not only sets people free but sheds the pretense and superficiality that so permeates our culture and churches.