

Session 5: Enlarging Your Soul through Grief and Loss

As we begin our fifth session together, let's get a sense of where we have come and how this session – Enlarging your Soul through Grief and Loss – fits in. We began in the first week by looking at Saul and the problem of Emotionally Unhealthy Spirituality. Then we began the 7 pathways to an Emotionally Healthy Spirituality:

- Know Yourself that you May Know God. We looked at David as a model of someone who was knew both God and Himself well. This led us then to pathway two.
- Going Back in Order to Go Forward. – to know ourselves requires we understand and embrace where we have come from in our cultures and families of origin and its impact on us today. Often this leads us to a Wall, our third pathway.
- Journey through the Wall. Walls, or as the ancients called it “the dark night of the soul” are times in our spiritual journey God stops us through crisis or circumstances beyond our control. These are times when God deeply transforms us and our understanding of Him.
- The Wall closely relates to our theme for today – Grief and Loss.

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 10 children die suddenly in a natural disaster. He loses all his wealth – even though he is one of the richest people in the world, and he loses his health to such an extent that he is physically unrecognizable. That happens to some of us.

But 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 as we grow older.

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. A 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 25 years. Our child is born severely handicapped. A loyal friend betrays us. We experience infertility, miscarriages, broken friendships, mental illness, abuse in our childhoods. 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 even 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 the church. We discover 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.

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 70 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).

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.

That was my view. For me life –including my spirituality –was bigger, better, faster, moving forward. My job was to be a model of a sold Xian.

I prided myself on my stability. If there were setbacks, disappointments, crisis – I was solid. I'd quote Rom.8:28.....

e.g. When I met a depressed person who couldn't seem to come out of it, I would say to myself, "Where is their faith?"

e.g. When I did feel sadness or grief – I would just quote Scriptures to myself like "With his help I can scale a wall! And "I can do all things thru X who strengthens me."

Needless to say if you were hurting or in pain, I was not going to be very helpful in being compassion and present with you.

Biblically, the very opposite is 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.

I have been thinking about biblical grieving for many years. A theology for grieving can be broken down into three phases. First I pay attention to it. PP

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 2/3rds of the psalms, most written by David, are laments, complaints to God. He shouts at God. He rages 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).

We have an entire Old Testament book called 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. Thinking I was being Jesus, I stuffed all feelings of irritation, annoyance, resentment, and hatred. In doing so I missed the God in so many ways.

e,g I would let people cross my boundaries, say and do hurtful or disrespectful things to me. I would stuff my anger – rather than seeing it as an oil lite from God to respectfully say something.

e.g. I would be angry at limits that I couldn't get something done that I wanted. Didn't take time to process that before God – really impatience. That I am not in control. God is.

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 feelings,” 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 2nd 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. When we experience losses and setbacks, God invites us 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 outside of his marriage with Hagar. In doing so he birthed a baby called Ishmael. 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.

God is not in a rush. Waiting on Him is life – not just for what He can do for us.

The third phase of biblical grieving is to let the old birth the new. PP

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 grief, no matter how long it takes, God, over time, births resurrection.

Our God is alive. If we will follow the biblical process of grief ---always there is a resurrection of some sort over time.

There are many rich fruits that blossom in our lives as a result of embracing our losses. The greatest, however, concerns our relationship to God. When we grieve God's way, we are changed forever. It is one of the major ways God grows us into spiritual maturity.

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. That is God's path for all of us. Don't be discouraged.

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.