

“Good Grief”

The experience of grieving touches us all! It's an integral part of life here on earth. The Bible is not silent about this common human issue. Throughout the pages of Scripture we see people experiencing sadness and sorrow. The writer of Psalm 6:6-7 wrote this: “I am weary with my moaning; every night I flood my bed with tears; I drench my couch with my weeping. My eye wastes away because of grief.” Psalm 13:2 says, “How long must I bear pain in my soul, and have sorrow in my heart all the day?”

Jesus, in the Garden of Gethsemane, endured intense grief! “He took Peter and Zebedee's two sons, James and John, and he became anguished and distressed. He told them, ‘My soul is crushed with grief to the point of death’ (Matthew 26:37-38). Jesus sobbed at the tomb of Lazarus, His dear friend.

Often when we speak of grief we think of the sorrow caused by the death of a loved one. But there are many things that can produce grief – so called “little deaths”. For instance, *when a marriage fails, when there's a separation or divorce, or when a romantic relationship ends*. Some couples stay in an unhappy marriage, give up hope that things will change, and grieve the loss of the dreams they once had for that marriage.

We can grieve the loss of health, or when physical impairment comes. Even just growing old can move us to grieve the decrease in physical strength and mental alertness.

We can grieve when a friend or loved one moves away, or when we relocate. One of my moves from one church to another was an unexpected move, right after Annual Conference, when I had kind of settled in for another year where we were. I grieved that move for a full year. I didn't like the area we moved to. Seeing our one son in particular (starting 4th grade) devastated by the move, made my grief sharper.

There is a poignant scene in the Book of Acts, where the Apostle Paul says good-bye to his friends in the Ephesians church, knowing he will never see them again this side of heaven. “When Paul had finished speaking, he knelt down with all of them and prayed. They all wept as they embraced him and kissed him. What grieved them most was his statement that they would never see his face again. Then they accompanied him to the ship” (Acts 20:36-38).

Normal transitions and normal life changes can bring sorrow. Did you ever say, with sadness: “Things just aren't like they used to be”, or look back with nostalgia to a happier period of life?

We can grieve as a result of truly caring for people. The Apostle Paul, as a converted Jew, wrote to those in the church in Rome: “I have great sorrow and unceasing anguish in my heart (for the Hebrew people)” (Romans 9:2). Think about it: the more we love and care for others, and invest ourselves in their lives, the more we expose ourselves to the possibility of sorrow.

We can grieve when people we know and love do stupid and hurtful things. Proverbs 10:1 says, “A wise son makes a glad father, but a foolish son is a sorrow to his mother.”

When you think about it, losses of any kind (large or small) can bring sorrow. We lose a promotion, lose an important ball game, lose a treasured ring, etc. There are many “little deaths” we experience. The truth is, there are so many grieving people around us!

Grieving is a part of life. Remember, Ecclesiastes 3:4: “a time to weep, and a time to laugh, a time to mourn, and a time to dance.” So, it’s important to handle sorrow in a healthy way. Since we all experience grief, the key question is how we deal with it when it comes. We can grumble or crumble. We can pity ourselves. We can lash out in anger at God. Or....we can allow sorrow to shape us into a better person, and even allow God to bring good out our grief.

What are some good things that can result from our time of sorrow? Sorrow can soften us and make us more sensitive to the suffering of others. Our own grief can remind us that there are others carrying hurts and disappointments and losses too.

Sorrow can bind people together. Sometimes out of a common sorrow we are able to overlook differences, forgive and forget, and appreciate our basic oneness in the human family. Remember 9/11, when in the aftermath of that horrible event, our nation came together. Members of Congress stood on the steps of the Capitol Building and sang and prayed. New York City became a place of mercy and compassion.

Sorrow can lead us to God and bring us closer to God. Now I realize, some who experience a significant loss wind up turning away from God, feeling angry and bitter. But I believe sorrow can also lead us to God. When we lived in the Poconos, out in the country, we had a school bus driver who found out I was a pastor. He told me that he had a young son who died. The man had not attended church, and had to try to find a minister to bury his boy. He realized that he had neglected this as a young father, so he started going to church, joined a church and became active - apparently finding God, and finding new meaning and hope in his life as a result.

Sometimes a sorrow, a loss, can awaken us to a spiritual need. There’s an interesting passage of Scripture in 2 Corinthians 7:8-10. “For although I grieved you with my letter, I do not regret it. Although I did regret it (for I see that that letter caused you grief, though only briefly), now I rejoice, not because you were grieved but because your grief led to repentance, for you felt a godly grief, so that you were not harmed in any way by us. For godly grief produces a repentance that leads to salvation and brings no regret, but worldly grief produces death.” Paul distinguishes between “godly grief” and “worldly grief”. *Worldly grief* is a kind of sorrow that only leads to sadness and regret and emptiness and bitterness. *Godly grief* is a grieving that leads to repentance, and turning to God. So, sorrow pushes some away from God, but draws others closer to the Lord.

Then too, sorrow can give us an opportunity for greatness in spirit. The poet, Edwin Markham, said, “Sorrow stretches our hearts for joy.” It can do that, but it can also stretch our hearts to be a better person, to live more nobly and courageously. Many great achievements have been borne out of sorrow.

Some years ago a lady named Josephine Butler had an only child, whom she adored. One day as Josephine arrived home, her little girl came out to greet her, and suddenly fell dead at her mother's feet. Crushed, devastated, Josephine turned to a Quaker friend for help. The Quaker man's message was that even though God took the little girl whom she loved, there were many forlorn young hearts who needed a mom's love. He got her in touch with a place where 40 children without parents were being cared for. Josephine poured herself into the work, and became one of the greatest social reformers of her century. With God's mercy and help, we can allow our griefs to shape us into a better person, someone useful to God and others.

How can we move through our grief, to a better place? Here are some thoughts. *First, recognize the obvious: that sorrow comes to everyone.* We aren't being singled out special – the only one grieving! Jesus said, God “makes his sun rise on the evil and on the good, and sends rain on the just and the unjust” (Matthew 5:45). Just because we are mourning a loss doesn't mean we are evil and have done something wrong. Nor does it mean we are especially good! It just means we're human!

Next, acknowledge our grief. Own it. Grieving is a natural response to a loss. There may be a number of reasons why we have a hard time facing our losses. It hurts too much to feel it. We don't want to appear weak – we'll just have to “tough it out” – the stoic approach. Crying is for sissies and weaklings. (Men often are embarrassed if they cry). We believe Christians shouldn't feel sad, or don't have faith if we show grief. We think we “just have to move on” – yes, but not until we've done our grief work (we don't get through our grief until we've gone through it). These are some of the underlying reasons why we may not allow ourselves to own and feel our sorrow.

I get concerned about people who don't process their grief – do their “grief work”. If you deny your grief, and don't do your mourning around the time of your loss, it doesn't go away. It just hides, and later on it has a way of coming back to bite you.

Sometimes people get stuck, and can't move on. The slow healing of the grief just isn't happening. Psychologists speak of “pathological grief” or “complicated grief”, where the grieving process gets short-circuited. There may be emotional issues or situations that block the healing process.

The normal grieving process may include all kinds of emotions and behaviors: shock, denial, crying, screaming, hyperactivity, anger, guilt, loneliness, withdrawal, depression, inability to concentrate, physical symptoms, lack of desire to go anywhere or do anything, etc. All of this can be part of the normal grieving process.

What makes these symptoms *abnormal*, and an indication that we are stuck in our grief, is if (1) the symptoms continue beyond a reasonable length of time, or (2) the symptoms are unusually severe. For instance, if 2 years after the death of a child the mother may be setting the table as if the child were still alive, or hasn't cleaned the child's room since the time of death. Or 6 years after the death of a spouse, or child, or parent, a person is still feeling rage at God, or

a doctor, or the hospital staff. Or 10 years after the death of a husband or wife, the surviving partner feels guilty being happy, as if this means you've forgotten the person you lost. Sometimes professional counseling is needed to move a person beyond his or her grief.

We're looking at steps we can take to process grief in a healthy way. *Next, share your grief.* Share it with a family member, a trusted friend, a pastor, a counselor – don't try to keep it all inside of you. However, after sharing it with someone, be careful not to consume others with your story.

Make the effort to move on. It can be easy to kind of wallow in our grief, to be comfortable holed up in self-pity. Sometimes we just need to push ourselves to invest ourselves in life again.

Sometimes we wonder, "How long should I be grieving this loss?" What's normal? There are a number of factors that determine what's appropriate. Obviously, the nature of the loss helps determine this: Losing a spouse or a child is far different than losing an umbrella that we really liked! We shouldn't need hours of counselor to get over the umbrella! It can take months and years to process the loss of someone we dearly love. (We never really "get over it". Rather, it's a matter of reshaping our life, and finding a new normal, without that person physically present. While life will never be the same again after a significant loss, life can be *good* again).

Finally, we can surrender our griefs to God. The Bible calls God the "God of all comfort" (2 Corinthians 1:3). God can be our refuge, our safe place, when we face the sorrows of life.

For a Christian we can look forward to our life in heaven, where sorrow will end. Isaiah 51:11 promises, "And the ransomed of the Lord shall return, and come to Zion with singing; everlasting joy shall be upon their heads; they shall obtain joy and gladness, and *sorrow and sighing shall flee away.*" Revelation 21:4 tells us, "(God) will wipe away every tear from their eyes, and death shall be no more, neither shall there be mourning nor crying nor pain any more, for the former things have passed."

But in the meantime, God wants to be with us when we grieve the losses of life, and even bring good out of these sad and difficult experiences.

*Harry L. Kaufhold, Jr.
Community United Methodist Church
July 13, 2025*

