

Strength for the Storms of Life #3

Dealing with Loss

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Grace, mercy and peace from God our Father and from our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ.
Amen.

For better or for worse, we live in the era of the “24 hour news cycle.” We don’t have to wait for the morning paper or the 6 O’Clock News to know what’s going on in the world, we have all sorts of folks scraping the globe 24/7 and sharing the latest news. We may feel very well informed, to be sure, but let me ask: what are we being well informed about? A bus crash in Brazil, shootings in Sri Lanka, drownings in Denmark, accidents in Abilene, a plague in Peru, problems in Peoria, poisonings in Poland and bankruptcies in Boston. It’s not just information overload..... they could simply read the encyclopedia to us....we’re being immersed in the never-ending storms of life all around the world. That’s overload!

It’s not that I don’t CARE about the suffering of people around the world, it’s just that I have an emotional limit to what I can deal with. I don’t want to be so numbed by all the bad news from “out there” that it reduces my ability to deal with the storms of life that affect me personally.

As we all know, the storms of life DO come. We don’t need to be reminded of that, and that’s not my purpose this morning. Instead, I am going to walk us through our own response to losses and what we must do when they come.

Loss, from a Biblical perspective, is NOT just something we “recover from.” The goal in dealing with the losses in our lives is not to simply get back to “being happy” as quickly as possible. God didn’t simply “get over” the loss of Adam and Eve...and the rest of us after that to sin.....He set about to REDEEM the loss and to make all things right again through Jesus Christ.

If you’ll allow me one example of loss, I will share the story of Clives Staples Lewis (CS Lewis), the great Christian author. His mother died at age 9, a loss that affected him deeply. The result? He arranged his life so that he would NEVER be hurt again. He kept a safe distance from other people. He formed no close friendships. He didn’t even like to keep pets, fearing that when they died or ran away it would hurt too much.

But late in life he fell in love with an American woman, Joy Davidman, whom he married even as she was dying of cancer. In response, Lewis wrote the following: *“To love at all is to be*

vulnerable. Love ANYthing and your heart will be wrung and possibly broken. If you want to make sure it is intact, you must give your heart to NO ONE, not even an animal. Wrap it carefully around the luxuries of life. Avoid all entanglements. Lock it in the casket of selfishness. In that dark casket it will not be broken but it will become unpenetrable and unredeemable.”

I think we can all relate to Lewis’ words....because we’ve all been hurt, suffered losses and experienced griefs. The only issue remaining is how we deal with the times these things raise their ugly heads in our lives.....whether the losses are in the death of a loved one, a divorce, the loss of a job, moving to a new community, or even....believe it or not, retirement (especially for men whose self-esteem is so wrapped up in what they DO).

How can we take LOSS and make it GOOD? How can we, paraphrasing Charlie Brown, say “Grief is Good?”

Scripture never tells us not to grieve. Jesus did. For example, at the death of Lazarus He wept. (John 11:35). Paul tells us, in very plain words, that we as Christians are not to grieve *like unbelievers who have no hope*, but rather as Christians whose hope is in Christ, who has risen from the dead! (1 Thess 4)

There are many who have literally “dissected” our human reactions and responses to loss and grief and determined that there things that are common to all of us, no matter what the loss. Elizabeth Kubler-Ross did the groundbreaking study on this years ago and others have followed. The rest of what I say today comes from a small book that we use very frequently in our Stephen Ministry program. It’s written by Granger Westberg and it’s called “*Good Grief.*”

Westberg identifies “stages” of the process we call grieving. Not every person experiences them the same way or in the same order but we’re going to walk through some of them briefly and see if you can identify.

We’ll begin it this way: hypothetically (this time) the phone rings and you are presented with the loss of a dear friend or a family member.....what happens?

1. First comes Shock...the temporary anesthesia of grief. God has wired us so that our systems can only absorb so much trauma at once. When the situation is overwhelming, we go into a state of shock. This allows the grim reality of the situation to sink into us a little at a time. Remember Jesus’ mother, Mary? How much of the reality of the

crucifixion could she absorb in one afternoon? It still hadn't sunk in by Easter Sunday, when she was so absorbed that she didn't recognize her own son! The best way to deal with this stage is to stay busy.....to deal with the situation at hand, make the decisions that are necessary, and allow the reality of the loss to sink in, one hour at a time.

2. Express our Grief. Expressing grief is finally becoming more acceptable in our culture, which is a good thing. For generations boys who skinned their knees were told, "Men don't cry," and years later, when their parents died, they COULDN'T! The Scriptures clearly show us that when great calamities came to great men of faith, they wept bitterly!

We're changing here this in our culture for the better, but in other ways for the worse. It used to be that people had "periods of mourning," wore black, and wakes were held in homes. Death was up-close and personal. Now it's at arm's length....treated almost with sterility. Our graveside rites even cover the dirt of the grave with green astro-turf so we don't have to be reminded of "ashes to ashes and dust to dust." I appreciate the African tradition of each family member tossing a shovelful of dirt onto the casket as it is lowered into the grave.....often accompanied by tears!

3. Depression. Eventually we come to a place where we might feel completely alone and abandoned, as if God is no longer with us and NOBODY has EVER felt such pain. It's ironic that this aloneness is a trait common to every single person who has ever grieved. It's a tough place to be and a tough place to find a loved one, because we can't argue someone out of depression. One of the best things we can do for a friend who is depressed is to BE there, for as long as it takes, the ministry of presence.

4. Guilt. Some people, when dealing with grief, experience feelings of guilt, and sometimes it's very real guilt. If we have done something to bring about whatever happened, that guilt HURTS! King David, crying out for God to "*create in him a clean heart,*" (ps 51) KNEW he was responsible for the death of Bathsheba's husband. Parents dealing with the accidental death of a child know this to the core. This is another place where we Christians can be blessed. While we cannot gloss over our sin, we also know the joy of God's grace through confession and absolution.

Some guilt, however, is misplaced. I can't tell you how many people I've worked with who carry huge amounts of misplaced guilt. An example? They have stayed at the

bedside of a loved one in the hospital for days, to the point of exhaustion. The doctor ORDERS them to go home and take a nap and when they leave, their loved one dies.....and they blame themselves for her death. There's even a part of guilt that urges us to bargain with God. "*You fix () and I will (.... Become a monk?)*"

5. Anger and Resentment. Gradually we move through shock, depression and guilt into stronger feelings like anger and resentment, feelings that are normal for every human being experiencing loss and grief. After all, something or someone very precious has been taken from us and, let's face it, it HURTS! There's a by-product to this. The human being, from Adam and Eve onward, is ALWAYS looking for someone to blame. We can blame the doctor for operating or for not operating, the boss for this or that, the "system" or even God for letting it happen, and this does bring out anger and resentment in us.
6. Finally, with God's help, the passing of time, and the blessing of good friends who surround us with love and care, we begin moving toward a return to being "normal." It may take months or even years. We might even RESIST a return to "real life!" After all, real, everyday living is where we might encounter MORE grief and MORE loss....the last things we want to deal with. But like spring at the end of a long and difficult winter, gradually the weather breaks and HOPE shines.....slowly at first but it comes.....and with God's promise that *He will never leave us nor forsake us,*" we re-enter life.

In the season of Lent, the message of the cross is this: Jesus took upon Himself not only our SINS, but also our SUFFERING and our LOSS. He is called "*the man of sorrows and acquainted with grief.*" (Isaiah 53:3) God KNOWS suffering, pain and loss and loves those who are going through it. His heart is there, with us. In fact....God CHOSE to suffer loss for us, the loss of His Son on the cross so what no matter what, we have the hope and promise of forgiveness and restoration!

AMEN.