

June 18, 2023

Just Breathe: Grief

Paul Gauche

"Jesus wept" is a phrase most well-known for being the shortest verse in the bible. "Jesus wept." You may recall that the original collection of scriptures didn't have chapters and verses. The writings were originally written on scrolls and in rolled manuscripts. It wasn't until the middle of the 1500s that chapters and verses were added. In the very heart of John's gospel – almost right at the center of the book is this verse: "Jesus wept." I often wonder if the gospel writer, John, got to that point in the story and just knew there wasn't any other way to say it than that: "Jesus wept."

Why did Jesus weep? Jesus wept because of the stunning news that his dearest friend, Lazarus, the brother of Mary and Martha, had died. And Jesus wept. Grief sucked the wind right out of Him. Grief washed over Him like a wave of the ocean. And Jesus wept. Nothing more could have been said at that moment to describe the pain and power of grief. So, Jesus wept. His dear friend had died. And Jesus, feeling the enormity of that loss, didn't say, "Well, at least he lived a good life." Jesus wept. Jesus didn't say, "God must have needed another [whatever Lazarus did for a living] in heaven." Jesus wept. Jesus didn't say, "Well, at least I still have Mary and Martha as friends." Jesus wept. Grief. Jesus just sat with the loss, held the sadness, and felt the grief. And Jesus wept.

We're nearing the end of our "Just Breathe" series. We're learning together how the Spirit of God meets us in every moment of our lives and gives us the breath to breathe through the challenges we experience in life. We've learned to breathe the breath of the Spirit in our anger, uncertainty, and fear. Today I want to explore how the breath of the Spirit sustains us so that we can "Just Breathe" when we're overwhelmed with grief. Grief often feels like a raging storm. The death of a loved one, the loss of a significant relationship, or a shift in some life rhythm can create an overwhelming sense of disorientation.

What I'd like to do here is make some observations about grief – things that we already know but maybe need a reminder of as we walk through the

valley of the shadow of death. Then I want to talk us through some transitions of Grief:

First: Grief is a normal and natural response to loss. Many of us may have been taught from an early age to face grief and loss with a "stiff upper lip," ... "pull it all together and be strong," ... "keep calm and carry on...." As we live with these sometimes conscious, sometimes subconscious messages, we may become fearful that any show of emotion, particularly tears, might be interpreted by others as a sign of weakness: "He's falling apart," or "She's going to pieces." One of the tragedies in our culture is that many bereaved family members and friends experience their grief alone, feeling like something must be wrong with them. Fearful of embarrassment or appearing "weak" to others, many people stuff their feelings and emotions and hide their grief. Friends, it's important for us to realize that what we experience in grief is a normal, natural, and expected response to loss in our lives.

Second, Grief has so much to teach us if we're willing to learn. Our natural wiring is to avoid pain. That's normal too. We call that fight or flight. To fight grief or to flee from it is to deny that it is affecting us or that we're even feeling anything. We might say, "I'm okay; I've got this. Don't worry about me; I just need a little time." A very helpful image for me comes from C.S. Lewis's iconic story, *The Lion, The Witch, and the Wardrobe*. Being open to what grief has to teach us is like standing in front of that wardrobe. We have an idea of what's inside and don't want to go there. If I don't open it, I won't have to deal with it; I won't have to talk about it; I won't have to face my fears and apprehensions. But if I do open it, I can see what's there and quite possibly discover a whole new world of possibility and life.

Third, Grief poses far more questions than answers. What's happening to my ordered life? How am I going to get through this? When will the pain stop? Why can't I eat? Why can't I sleep? When am I going to feel normal again? What's normal? And quite possibly the most important question of all: Where is God in all of this? Questions. A lot of questions. And answering those questions is important because the infrastructure of our emotional, psychological, and even spiritual

survival depends on us making sense of all of that. When we can't answer questions, things get very wobbly. To make sense of the wilderness of grief, we must have a starting point. And our starting point is always Jesus, the crucified and risen, Lord Jesus. And so, when we feel tossed and tumbled on our walk through the valley of the shadow of death, we do not have to fear. We may indeed fear, but the message is that God meets us in our grief, and because of that promise, grief has a starting point. And that starting point taps back into that last question I raised: "Where is God in all of this?" Our starting point is always in the resurrected Christ. Our starting point is the good news that death never has the final word. In Christ, the last word is always the first word of life, life, and more life. And when we're dealing with grief, the starting point is always that God grieves with us.

The starting point is not to ask, "Why did God do this to me?" or "What is God trying to teach me?" or to try to make sense out of a senseless statement like "God just needed another fisherman, quilter, painter, or you fill in the blank... in heaven." Instead, Romans 8:26-28 reminds us that if God is for us, who can be against us? That's quite possibly the most rhetorical question in the entire scripture! *"God's Spirit is right alongside helping us along. If we don't know how or what to pray, it doesn't matter. He does our praying in and for us, making prayer out of our wordless sighs and our aching groans. The Spirit knows us far better than we know ourselves and keeps us present before God. That's why we can be sure that God is moving in and through all the details in our life working for our good."* So, God is our starting point. That's what we hold on to. God is faithful, and by the Spirit's power, God is always moving us toward life.

When we're overwhelmed by grief, it's easy, natural, and normal to feel stuck, like we're going nowhere. What's been helpful for me when I've experienced grief is to pay attention to the movement of grief because grief is always taking us somewhere.

An important movement of grief is from irritation of insight, from darkness to light.

In the bible, darkness is always another word for misunderstanding. Our phrase, to be "in the dark," is not to have what we need to know. When we're dealing with grief, the journey is always moving from darkness to light or irritation to insight. My Dad had several irritations that turned into insights when my mom died. On the morning of my mom's memorial service, I was shadowing my dad, protecting him from well-meaning people when they said things like, "God never gives us more than we can handle," or "I know how you feel, the pain will ease," or "Think about how much you have to be grateful for...." He did pretty well with all of those. But after the service, when we were standing in a receiving line, three people at different times said, "Well, Gene, Joyce is in a better place." After the first time, I felt him bristle. After the second time, I felt the heat coming off his body. And when the third person said that to him, I was looking for a rock to crawl under. But my dad paused and then replied, *"No, she is not in a better place because the better place would be right next to me."* That was beautiful and powerfully honest. The transition from irritation to insight, from darkness to light, is learning that when people are grieving, we don't have to debate the details; we don't have to get all our mental and theological furniture in the right place. It's okay to say, "I'm so sorry for your loss." Or, "I just want you to know I'm joining you in your grief." It's okay to acknowledge that everyone is learning; not everything people say will be helpful. Grief is normal, and it just takes some time.

The second movement is from emergency to emerging, from lost to found.

When an emergency rocks our world, our worldview gets very narrow. This is when it's important to remember that, ultimately, we are not alone. God walks deeply into our grief with us. Sally called to tell me that her husband, Jack, had just died. It was a shock; no one saw it coming. Suddenly Sally was caught in the emergency of dealing with her grief, the grief of her two young grade-school-aged daughters, and hundreds of people trying to comfort her in a hundred different

ways. As we sat together early in those grief-heavy days, Sally looked at me and said, "*I don't think I have what I need to get through the rest of this week.*" She was feeling lost in the emergency of it all. As Sally looked ahead to the days she would have to endure, she felt overwhelmingly underprepared for what was to come.

Fast forward several months. Sally and I were together again and talked about feeling lost in the emergency of Jack's death. But this time, Sally looked ahead and how she was beginning to feel more and more "found" in God's comfort. She finally told me, "Right after Jack died, I had no idea how I would make it through those days. Now. Looking back, I can see how God met me in that deep grief with the promise of comfort and presence." Sally moved from the emergency of it all to where she felt like she was emerging. A passage from Psalm 34 verse 17 & 18 came to mind not as a band-aid to cover grief but as a way of connecting that grief to the hope emerging in her: "*When the people of God cry for help, the LORD hears, and rescues them from all their troubles. The LORD is near to the brokenhearted and saves the crushed in spirit.*" Sally slowly moved from being utterly lost to being found in God's care.

Last but certainly not least, there is a transition from death to life.

Grief is a powerful emotion that takes us on a ride that none of us can fully be prepared for. When it shows up, it just says, "Hang on." And most of the time, we don't even have the strength to do that. That's why people describe grief as being tossed around in the stormy waves of the ocean.

Some years ago, I was invited to help with a memorial service by a good friend, a pastor of another congregation in the area. We gathered with the grieving family just before the service began. And he said the most amazing and helpful thing that that group of people who were so heartbroken, wondering how they were going to move on, wondering how to make sense of all of the questions they had, and wondering if they'd ever emerge from the emergency that defined their life that day. My friend said, "Scripture – the bible, doesn't answer the "Why?" question. We'll get nowhere trying to figure out why all of this is

happening. But what scripture does answer is the "Who?" question, and the "Who" is Jesus Christ." Because of the life, death, resurrection, and the promise of new life to us, we are reminded that death is not the end and grief is not the last word.

Jesus wept. It's the shortest verse in the entire scripture. But it's also a verse with a deep, deep word of hope for us as we breathe through our grief –whatever form it comes. "Jesus wept" is the profound reminder that Jesus walks deeply into our lives every day, in every moment, to remind us that we are loved, cared for, treasured, known, and breathed into with the deep, deep love of God.