

ABOUT GRIEF

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Each morning as I open the newspaper, it seems there's another story of loss in this dreadful season of COVID-19. The reports of one's loved one dying alone in a hospital isolation room are heart-breaking, and just as heart-wrenching are accounts of family members who couldn't be physically present at their loved one's bedside. They grieve both the loss of the one they love and the loss of being there for them at their last breath.

The writer of Ecclesiastes in the Old Testament speaks of "a time to mourn." As the weeks pass, it seems this season is our time to mourn, no matter how far from us the experience of a loved one dying with the coronavirus may be. Our shared humanity with those whose stories we read draw us into their experience of grief. Their sadness becomes ours, in a manner of speaking, and it's not hard to imagine ourselves in their shoes as we think about our own grandparents, parents, siblings, spouse and children.

In this season, death and dying don't by themselves lay claim to our grief. A word for *grief* in the New Testament speaks of **being swallowed up by sadness, distress, pain or sorrow as a result of some event**. Many, and perhaps some of us, are being "swallowed up by sadness" over the loss of job or work hours and the corresponding loss of income; the loss of economic stability and what that may mean for our future; the loss of community as a result of social distancing; the loss of our normal, daily rhythms of life due to school closures and needing to work from home; the loss of feeling safe as we go to our work away from home each day; the loss of being able to celebrate a birthday, wedding, or anniversary with friends and family. The season may seem dark and uncertain and foreboding. It is, indeed, a time to mourn.

Grief is a very natural emotion in the face of crises that take from us what we view as normal, what we value, what we've assumed to be a constant in our lives. When consumed by sadness or sorrow, our distress may seem overwhelming to the point of fearing we may not make it through to the other side when the darkness becomes light again.

A common therapeutic approach to grief over the years has been to help the grieved fix their grief, make it better, as if the grief is something to be overcome. I've wondered, though, how a man grieving the loss of his wife of 53 years simply "gets over it." Surely, with time, the acuteness of his grief will fade. But I'm inclined to believe that every day for the rest of his life, he will miss her and there will be sadness.

Today, some practitioners see grief in an entirely different way. In her book *It's Ok That You're Not Ok*, Megan Divine makes the point that our approach to grief shouldn't be to fix it, but to **help people learn how to carry it**. So, in this season of pandemic, what are some ways in which we might "carry" our grief over the losses in our lives? May I suggest or remind you of a few basic ones for your consideration:

1. **Reserve time daily to draw close to God for time in His Word and prayer.** Sitting in God's presence, in quiet solitude, to reflect upon His truths and promises—and to pour out our hearts to Him—can serve to remind us of who He is and who we are as His children. A new widow wrote to me recently and remarked that her time with God each day was a lifeline for her.
2. **Stay in touch with your community**, whether it be a small group, a ministry team, close friends, or your extended family, using available resources to compensate for the loss of in-person connections. We shouldn't try to carry our grief alone. We're in this season together, and we can draw strength from one another. A Phinney Ridge resident, speaking of a weekly singalong with front porch musicians in his

neighborhood, reported to the local news, “At the very simplest level, we gather because we need each other. We need each other to mark moments, to grieve, to solve problems, to coordinate and do things we couldn’t do on our own.”

3. **Take breaks to recharge and experience anew God’s creation.** A walk, run or bike ride will help to lift the cloud by cleansing our body of some of the stuff of grief inside, enabling us to carry our grief with renewed perspective and clarity. The harsh and unsettling season we’re experiencing also just happens to be a season of new life breaking out everywhere, beautiful reminders of God’s creative love and presence with us. There’s hope in that.
4. **Read a good book or watch a great movie that inspires, redeems and restores.** Many years ago when I was grieving a significant ministry loss, friends introduced me to “It’s A Wonderful Life.” It made a difference.
5. **Seek wise counsel,** perhaps from a pastor, a therapist, or a respected mentor in your life. Even in our season of social distancing, there are ways we can be one-on-one with another who can help us navigate the grief we feel in the losses that we’re experiencing.
6. **Find a way, no matter how simple, to serve others** here at Bethany or in your neighborhood or community at large. There’s something about giving of ourselves for the sake of others that makes our own burden seem a bit lighter.

In the dark seasons of grieving loss and suffering, perhaps what we most need is hope. In this particular season, beacons of light have ministered that hope to me. I agree with Mr. Rogers when he recited what his mother said to him as a child when he would see scary things in the news: “Look for the helpers. You will always find people who are helping.”

As I look for the helpers, **I see** the nurse in Issaquah, who promised her dying patient’s family that she would be at their loved one’s bedside when she died, and when the time arrived, held a cell phone by her patient’s face so that her family could tell her they loved her. **I see** the trailer park landlord who reduced the rent of each of his tenants because of the financial stress many felt. **I see** the Target manager doing crowd control at the store entrance to ensure that the most vulnerable might do their shopping first. **I see** 80,000 volunteers in New York stepping into the fray to provide medical reinforcement, many of them retirees. **What do you see?**

Most of all, I see Jesus, who laid down his life for us, His friends, and rose again that we might know the light of life in Him, who at the end of every rough day and in the midst of every hard season is our story of hope. (Psalm 71:5, Colossians 1:27)

—In Christ,
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