Discover the Treasures Buried in Grief and Loss

Anyone lost a loved one? My father was a wonderful man. He was not without his faults, but he was my best friend. He was a leader in our community and he was the glue that held our whole family together. Not just my mom and my sisters, but cousins, uncles and aunts as well. Every Sunday we would gather with family for a *souvla* which is a Greek barbeque. The thing was that these family times that my dad organized, were great times of sealing us all together as family. My dad was my best friend, we worked together, played together, and saw each other daily. He called every morning at 6:45, which drove Mandy crazy. Why would he call every morning, you saw him yesterday and will see him later today. What I would do to hear the phone ring at 6:45 and hear his voice, "Boytjie, how you doing?" We spent the last three years of his life together. We worked and played together, almost every day. I am eternally grateful for that time.

After twenty-seven years of my mom's prayers, Dad gave his life to the Lord. Hey man, wow! But the Lord chose to take him home only three days after that critical commitment in his life. When that telephone call came through at 5am it was unbelievable. "Mr Christie, please come through, your dad has been shot…" I asked if he was ok and the policeman's response was, "No. He is dead. Could you please come through?" It was as if my very heart had been ripped out of my chest… my dad, shot? His death left a hole in my life. Who will I call when things go wrong? Who will be there for me? Who is my security and backstop? Who will give me advice? It is not true that we become less through loss—unless we allow the loss to make us less, grinding our soul down until there is nothing left. . . . *Loss can also make us more. . . .* I did not get over the loss of my father; rather, I absorbed the loss into my life, like when we eat something and it get absorbed into our bodies, until it became part of who I am. Sorrow took up permanent residence in my soul *and enlarged it*. . . .

THE SOUL IS ELASTIC, LIKE A BALLOON. *IT CAN GROW LARGER THROUGH SUFFERING* – Peter Scazzero

I discovered the painful truth that loss offers a pathway into God's mysterious way of forming us through "*I will give you the treasures of darkness, riches stored in secret places, so that you may know that I am the LORD, the God of Israel, who summons you by name*" (Isaiah 45:3 NIV).

This truth took me a very long time to discover. *In fact, I covered over my grief for years***,** unaware of how they were shaping my relationships and stunting my discipleship. God was seeking to enlarge my soul and deeply transform me; I was looking for a quick end to pain. **I saw losses as obstacles I had to overcome to mature in Christ; God saw my losses as requirements to mature in Christ.**

Little did I know that the treasures buried deep in my sorrows contained the gifts I needed to grow into an emotional and spiritual adult. It was the last place I wanted to go.

THE WIDE-RANGING NATURE OF OUR LOSSES

Consider for a moment the vast array of losses we accumulate in a lifetime. There are devastating losses such as the death of a child, the premature death of a loved one, a disability, divorce, rape, emotional or sexual abuse, incurable disease, infertility, the shattering of a lifelong dream, suicide, betrayal, and so many more. Other times, losses come in more natural or expected ways. For example, we might leave school or graduate from university and experience a loss in emotional support and relationships from friends and mentors . Perhaps we move to a new place and our former friendships fade away.

Our children become less dependent on us as they grow older. There are leadership changes in our church. Our small group ends. A grandparent dies. All of these might be considered normal losses, but that doesn't make them any less worthy of being grieved. Losses that are not grieved accumulate in our soul like heavy stones that weigh us down. When we fail to attend to them, they prevent us from living freely and honestly with God and others.

However it comes, loss is loss. No one escapes suffering and pain in this life. **What may feel like an insignificant loss for you could feel like a catastrophic loss for me.** That's because God has made each of us unique, with our own temperaments and our own histories. The fact that we are affected differently by loss does not change the fact that what we experience as loss is real, even if others don't experience it as we do. Each of us responds differently.

If I lost one my dearly loved doggies I would be devastated, but others wouldn't bat an eyelid at the loss of a pet. Learning to welcome and hold sorrow and grief before God is central to the work of discipleship. The question, then, is how did we get the idea that we could grow in spiritual maturity without learning how to deal with loss God's way?

OUR PROBLEMATIC RESPONSE TO GRIEF AND LOSS

Few Christians understand loss and grief, especially as it relates to God, spiritual maturity, and the expansion of Jesus's mission. We wrongly believe embracing our grief will slow us down and hinder us in achieving God's mission in the world. Actually, the opposite is true. **Embracing our grief, God's way, actually advances his mission.** The question, then, is why are we so allergic to loss and grief and the many treasures buried within them?

There are two primary reasons: our resistance to losing control and a faulty theology that interprets losses as interruptions.

We Resist Losing Control

Western culture devalues loss and grief because it puts such a high value on control and continued climbing through life. But, grief and loss need us to surrender and descend. We like things going "up and to the right"—whether that be the stock market, the economy, our finances, bigger, faster, better, or even our sense of mastery in the spiritual life. So, when pain enters our lives, we reflexively deny or minimize it by distracting or numbing ourselves. Sometimes, we blame others. Our defensive maneuvers against loss and grief are endless.

None of us wants to face up to the fact we were never really in control to begin with. It is not an exaggeration to say that our culture is loss denying and grief phobic.

Our society has trained us well to pay attention to success but not to loss and pain. And yet, loss demands to be grieved and pain cries out to be felt. In order to keep these feelings at bay, we develop a variety of coping strategies, many of which take the form of substance abuse.

That substance could be almost anything—work, movies, drugs, alcohol, shopping, food, busyness, sexual escapades, unhealthy relational attachments, even exercise—as long as it redirects our attention away from whatever painful reality we might be facing.

We View Grief as an Interruption

Many peoples counsel for those struggling with bitterness is a dismissive, "Forgive and forget, that's what the Bible says!" After a painful loss, do we feel pressure to return to normal and get back to things as quickly as possible. Do we apologize when we feel sad. Why? I would suggest that **we believe that grief is a problem to be solved, and our role is to solve problems!** This tendency to view loss and grief as an interruption also happens in our churches.

For example, when Willow Hill moved into a new building, there was a group of people who struggle with the move. We had four worship teams, many preachers, a large youth and children's church and ended up moving with maybe 30 people and a lady who could play the piano. They didn't feel right about it somehow and so interpret their unease as a sign from God the church shouldn't have moved.

In actuality, however, what they needed was time and an opportunity to grieve leaving a place where God had done many wonderful works. Instead of honoring their loss by going through the old building—to remember those who were transformed in the church, the babies dedicated, people healed, and folks baptized—I saw their resistance as rebellion or an unwillingness to participate in the future work of God.

We celebrate Mother's Day and Father's Day but neglect to be sensitive to those for whom these may be among the most difficult days of the year—infertile couples, singles who long to have children of their own, those who have recently lost a parent or a child, or those whose parents were absent or abusive.

We cover over it by glibly quoting verses such as, "Rejoice in the Lord always. I will say it again: Rejoice!" (Philippians 4:4), or "Give thanks in all circumstances" (1 Thessalonians 5:18).

All of these are examples of ignoring the painful realities of loss and grief. God, however, has another pathway for us, one he has clearly revealed in Scripture.

GOD'S THREE PHASES FOR PROCESSING GRIEF AND LOSS

Elisabeth Kübler-Ross has made famous five stages of response to death and loss: denial, anger, bargaining, depression, and acceptance. A sixth stage was added later—finding meaning. While Kübler-Ross's work is very helpful, God offers us a comprehensive biblical theology as our first and primary framework.

Scripture describes three biblical phases to process grief and sorrow:

Phase One: Pay Attention to Pain

When a loss enters our life, we often become annoyed or angry at God and treat it as an alien invasion from outer space. We forget that attending to the pain of grief and loss has been a distinctive of God's people since the beginning. There are many examples.

• **The ancient Hebrews** expressed their laments dramatically and physically by tearing their clothes, putting on sackcloth, and sitting in ashes (Esther 4:1–3; Daniel 9:3).

• **During Noah's generation**, Scripture indicates that God himself was "grieved in His heart" about the wickedness of humanity (Genesis 6:6 NASB).

• **Thirty-five chapters in the book of Job** describe a man who was anguished, angry, suicidal at times, depressed, and bewildered (Job 4:1–36:33).

• **King Solomon tells us**, "There is a time for everything, and a season for every activity under the heavens," including "a time to weep" and "a time to mourn" (Ecclesiastes 3:1, 4).

• The **prophet Jeremiah** wrote an entire book in the Bible called Lamentations

• **Jesus himself prayed** with "loud cries and tears" (Hebrews 5:7 NRSV). In Gethsemane, Jesus was anguished, sorrowful, and spiritually overwhelmed, not emotionally frozen or shut down (Luke 22:39–44).

From Genesis to Revelation, the Scriptures invite us to integrate seasons of grief and sadness as a central aspect of the spiritual life. To reject these seasons is to live only half of life, and to live a spirituality marked by unreality.And **if an authentic spiritual life is anything, it is an absolute commitment to reality, not an escape from it.** Perhaps the most compelling and instructive examples we have of paying attention to loss and grief are found in what has been the most popular book of the Bible throughout history, the book of Psalms.

Learn to Lament from the Psalms

Half to two-thirds of the 150 psalms are classified as laments. They were gifted to God's people in order to teach us how to pray our emotions and struggles back to God. The dictionary defines lament this way: A passionate expression of grief or sorrow.

Lamenting requires that we refuse to live frozen and numb, to put on a mask, or to bottle up our feelings—even if that has been our choice for decades. Until we

are willing to learn to feel our emotions, the great revelation and treasure found in God's way of processing grief will be lost to us.

Learn to Feel

When our pain and grief goes unexpressed or unfelt, it gets buried alive. As a result, we lose access to the depth and range of feelings given to us by God and our emotional lives are compressed into box. Eventually, the feelings we bury claw their way back up and manifest in symptoms such as depression, anxiety, emptiness, and loneliness.

I don't know if you've ever tried to bury a tire, but if you do, you'll soon find out that the tire won't stay in the ground. Depending on the depth in which you will bury it, they will eventually rise to the top in some years' time. In fact, if a tire is buried 1,5m below the surface, it will – under normal conditions "float" to the surface in about 10 years. It is the same thing with our grief…To begin the journey of emotionally healthy discipleship, one of the first things we need to do is allow ourselves to feel.

Phase Two: Wait in the Confusing In-Between

Loss and grief force us to stop, to wait, to change our plans. That can be especially hard for those of us who live in a culture that esteems busyness, productivity, and predictability. For this reason, learning to wait is perhaps one of the most difficult lessons we learn as followers of Jesus.

Scripture is full of examples of those who had to learn to wait on God:

- **Noah waited** a long time for the rains to come and the waters to recede.

- **Abraham and Sarah** waited almost twenty-five years for God to follow through on his promise of a son.

- **Joseph waited over twenty years**—most of which were spent in slavery, servitude, and prison—before realizing God's purposes in, through, and in spite of his great sufferings.

- **Moses waited forty years** in the desert before receiving God's call to lead his people out of Egyptian slavery, and then waited another forty years before reaching the promised land.

- **Hannah waited years** for an answer to her prayers for a child.

- **Elizabeth** waited decades before the birth of her son, John.

- **Job waited years**, not months, for God to reveal himself and usher him into a new beginning.

- **The apostles waited**, confused and bewildered, between the cross of Good Friday and Pentecost.

What makes waiting so difficult is that we are not sure where God is, what he is doing, or when this waiting will end—if ever. We are helpless and thrust on

him in total dependence. We can't see the future and there is no way back to the past where we had a sense of stability and order.

In these confusing in-between times that God uproots our self-will, strips us of layers of our false self, and frees us from unhealthy attachments. It is in these in-between seasons that we are emptied, and this emptying has one primary purpose—to make room for something new and better.Let's face it: waiting on God in the midst of loss defies human instincts and quick solutions. It is contrary to Western culture and our own bent toward self-will. That is why we so desperately need the Holy Spirit to sustain us in these times. Waiting in the confusing-in-between during loss is so challenging, if not almost impossible, without the Holy Spirit?

Most of my spiritual growth has come out of these painful, mysterious, and confusing experiences—the in-between times—over which I had so little control. I can identify a few significant dark nights in my thirty-five-year journey with Christ. One of the ways I know I am in a dark night is when my prayers sound something like this: "Lord, I can't go on. You overdid it with me. You have given me more than I can bear—even though you promised not to! Just take me home. Amen."

When I have resisted God by simply getting busier and trying to hold everything together, I short-circuited the preparation I needed in order to receive the new beginnings God had for me. When I have waited with him, I discovered this in-between confusion was rich in insights and mercies. When we are faithful to the confusing in-between, we eventually move on to the next phase of responding to grief and loss…

Phase Three: Allow the Old to Birth the New

The central truth of Christianity is that Jesus died a real death on the cross and rose from the dead. He is risen! This is what enables us to affirm that our losses and endings are gateways to new beginnings—even when we can't see anything good that could possibly emerge from them. Our losses are real. But so is the resurrection our living God brings from our losses.God invites us to trust him with the many grief issues we experience in our lives.

Jesus himself said: "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).

This certainty of God's promise anchors us even when we feel we have descended into hell and there is no hope for a good future.

What makes this third phase so different from the previous phases is that we transition to something new.

Here are four questions which can help us start the process:

1. What are you *angry* about (a betrayal, a coworker's hurtful comment, a car breakdown, unanswered prayer, etc.)?

2. What are you *sad* about (a small or big loss, disappointment, or a choice you or others have made)?
3. What are you *anxious* about (your finances, future, family, health, church)?
4. What are you *glad* about (your family, an opportunity, our church)?

As an option, you may also consider exploring the questions with a safe friend.

Pay attention to pain; Wait in the confusing in-between; Allow the old to birth the new