

Chapter 13

OVERCOMING GRIEF

Genesis 23: 1 – 4, 19

Olivia weighed nearly 300 pounds and her health was deteriorating. She knew she was eating herself to death but seemed powerless to exercise self control. I asked her when she had started gaining weight and what had happened about that time. She knew exactly what had happened. Her tee aged son had died of cancer 10 years prior, and since then she had been overwhelmed with grief. She had given up on life, was bitter toward God, and wanted to die. Her method of suicide was not sleeping pills or a gun, but food. Food was her escape, her expression of anger, and her comfort. And it was killing her.

The 23rd chapter of Genesis records the death of Sarah, the wife of Abraham, when she was 127 years old. Abraham married Sarah when they were both very young and living in the land of Chaldea which became the land of Babylon. She was by his side as they obeyed God and moved far away from their families and their security to the land of Canaan. It was a dangerous place of foreign people, pagans, and idolaters who lived in walled cities with big armies. Abraham and his small band of servants lived in tents, so they were very vulnerable. They simply trusted God and persevered. Sarah was by his side during the terrible drought when they moved from their land to Egypt and through some bad experiences there before they finally returned. She was with him during their time of doubting God when she encouraged him to have relations with Hagar, her maid, of whom was born Ishmael. She was with him 25 years later when in her old age God kept His promise and she had a son, Isaac. Sarah was a woman of great beauty and great faith and is commended along with other heroes of the faith in Hebrews.¹ In 1 Peter, Sarah is held up as an example of submission, righteousness, and courage.²

The time had now come when Abraham's faithful wife, his life time companion, the mother of his son, died in the land of Canaan. There were four ways that Abraham dealt with her death:

1. He mourned and wept.
2. He arose and determined to go on with his life.
3. He recognized that he was a stranger, a temporary resident, in the land.
He brought his grief to a close.
- 4.

Genesis 23:2 says *"He came to mourn for Sarah and to weep for her."* So, he mourned and wept. We also need to mourn and weep when someone we love dies. Death is a time of strong emotions, shock, numbness, and depression. Weeping is a part of the natural process God uses to heal our hearts. Sometimes church people say, "If you are a Christian you should not cry. You should rejoice when a loved one who is a Christian dies." That is a destructive teaching. We need to weep and mourn when we lose a loved one. If we repress our sadness it can make us sick emotionally and physically.

Ecclesiastes tells us *"There is a time to laugh and a time to weep."*³ Paul in Romans says we should *"Weep with those who weep."*⁴ I believe Christians make a serious mistake when they try to cheer up someone who has suffered a terrible loss, possibly by quoting promises in Scripture. Yes, they are true and tremendously comforting when spoken at the right time. But we need to learn to simply be quiet and weep with those who weep, for it is not a time for words. I need to add that during a time of loss, people normally experience a whole range of emotions, which may include:

- Shock and numbness and a sense of unreality.
- Expression of emotions, including weeping.
- Depression and loneliness.
- Panic.
- A sense of guilt.
- Anger and resentment.
- Resistance toward leaving the grief and resuming normal life.
- Hope gradually returns.

These emotions are not necessarily experienced in this sequence. They may be experienced in a series of cycles, usually of diminishing intensity. People need to talk their feelings out and to allow God time to heal their hearts. The normal course of working through a severe loss can vary from a number of weeks to a number of months, or even to several years.

The second thing Abraham did, according to Genesis 23:3, *"He arose."* He realized it was time to go on. One of the normal facets of grief for many people is a resistance toward leaving the grief and resuming normal life. Loss is devastating. We may feel that other people do not understand the loss. Everybody forgets our loved one so quickly. We may believe we are being unfaithful to the deceased loved one when we go on with our life. "I can't betray the memory of the deceased by simply allowing things to get back to normal." No one can tell you how long you need to grieve. There is a time to go on with your life. Otherwise, your life can come to a stop, and that does not honor your loved one, your family and friends, or God.

The third thing he did in Genesis 23:4 was to recognize that he was a stranger and a sojourner, or

temporary resident, in the land of Canaan. This was true of Abraham in the natural and spiritual realms. He was an outsider. There was a destiny and high purpose to his life that transcended this world. Abraham was our prototype. We too are outsiders, "peculiar people," who are misfits as far as the values and goals of this world are concerned. In the letter to the Ephesians, Paul uses these words in Genesis to make the point that our citizenship is now in heaven: "*Now, therefore, you are no longer strangers and foreigners, but fellow citizens with the saints and members of the household of God.*"⁵ Aren't you glad that this earth with all its sin and sorrows is not our home and that there is a higher purpose to our lives and a glorious destination ahead?

And then the fourth step in Abraham's dealing with grief is in Genesis 23:19 where he brought his grief to a close. He buried his wife and continued on his earthly journey. Funeral services are important. Ceremony is important. They help with closure. Among Christians there needs to be a time of committing our loved one's soul to God; a time of thanksgiving to God as well as grief; a time of celebrating the life that we have shared on earth. In one sense, our grief is never really brought to a close. We have suffered a life-altering wound because of our loss, and we have been forever changed. But with God's help we can come to a sense of inner peace and be enabled to resume our life.

Physical death is a part of our existence on earth. Ecclesiastes says, "*There is a time to be born and a time to die.*"⁶ It is always painful to lose someone you love even when you have shared a long and full life. Sometimes death comes to a loved one "out of season" when they are in middle age or youth or even as a child. It seems wrong and is difficult to accept. As a pastor, I shared a number of such times with members of the church and still feel pain as I remember some of those occasions: the 10 year old boy who drowned in a small lake back of his parents' home; the teenager who was killed in a car wreck; an 18 year old girl who drowned in a boating accident; a young wife and mother who was killed at a road crossing; and many others. All of us have stories like this. It is normal for the loved ones to cry out, "Why? God, why did you let this happen?" God does not answer our "why?" questions. If you believe that because you are a Christian God will protect you and your family from all sickness, accidents, tragedies, and death, you are mistaken. Jesus said "*In this world you will have tribulation.*"⁷

When something bad happens to you or your loved ones, if you believe that God will explain it to you and apologize, you need to reread the Book of Job. Job lost everything: his wealth, his children, his friends, and his health. What devastated him most of all was that God was silent to his questions. But God held onto Job, and Job held onto God. Jesus said, "*While in this world you will have tribulation.*" He went on to say, "*But I have overcome the world,*"⁸ and "*I will never leave you nor forsake you.*"⁹

The experience of grief can come to people not only because of death but because of divorce. People tell me that in some ways divorce is more painful than death. Grief can come because of a loss

of children through their moving away or getting married. It can come because of the loss of a job or the loss of a ministry, which is especially painful to a minister because it is interpreted as having failed God. I speak from personal experience. Grief can come because of the loss of health or the loss of youth. People have shared their struggle with grief because one of their parents was an alcoholic and was always angry. They realized they lost a relationship. They lost healthiness and normalcy in their family.

In the anecdote concerning Olivia that introduced this chapter, we learned the following things in the interview:

- She was deeply disappointed and resentful toward God. Her family had been Christians who believed in healing, but she felt God had let them down.
- Her son, she felt, had been the best Christian in their family. He had been working with the youth in their church and had planned to become a minister.
- There had been a history of cancer and early death in her husband's family. His father, grand father, several uncles and cousins had died of cancer.

We told Olivia we could not understand or explain all the ways of God. We explained that God did not take her son's life as some sort of punishment. In fact, we were sure He grieved with her over her son's untimely death. Whenever we blame God, it demonstrates a faulty understanding of who God is. Please see Phillip Yancey's outstanding treatment of this subject in his book, Disappointment with God.

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We also explained to Olivia about generational curses, which seemed to be involved in her husband's family. We learned of the heavy participation by his family in the occult, particularly in witchcraft. We were not trying to fix blame on someone. We were trying to explain that terrible things happen sometimes because the enemy has found a point of vulnerability in a family. We led Olivia through steps of ministry:

- Forgiveness of God, and repentance for blaming God.
- Forgiveness of her family and her husband's family for involvement in idolatry and witchcraft.
- Renouncing of spirits, and especially the spirit of grief and death and addiction to food – we cast out those spirits and there were strong manifestations.
- Prayer for Olivia's heart – for the trauma of the painful death of her son.

- We had her picture her son in her cupped hands as she lifted him up to God to surrender him in trust to his Heavenly Father.
- We suggested that Olivia get in a small prayer group that would help her start working on her food addiction. We suggested that she try to get with a nutritionist and read books on nutrition to help her in this struggle.
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Barbara was going through a mid life crisis. She described feelings of deep grief, but no one had died so she did not know why she was grieving. As we interviewed her, we learned that she had done a wonderful job with her two sons, who were entering into manhood. She had raised them as a single mother. Both sons were committed Christians of good character and had embarked on worthy career paths. What was the reason for her grief?

After much prayer and discussion, Barbara started seeing why she was hurting so badly. After college, she had started working in the office of a professional man. Over a period of time he had professed his love for her and his desire to leave his wife and children and marry her. She had allowed herself to be persuaded. She was seduced by him. He divorced his wife. He married Barbara, over the strong objections of her father who told her she was making a terrible mistake. Indeed she was. Her husband was verbally and emotionally abusive to her and the two sons that were born to them. Also, he was incorrigibly adulterous, as she already knew. Eventually, he left her for another woman, and another, and another. He was not interested in his two sons, so their sole responsibility was left to her.

She had done a good job with her sons, but as they grew up she could see some adverse consequences in their character because of their lack of a godly father. There had been a big hole in their lives that she could not fill. And now she was starting to realize the cost to her and to her sons because of her foolishness and selfishness. She saw how she had sinned against her ex-husband's first wife and their children. She knew God had forgiven her, but there was no way He could negate the consequences of lost possibilities.

We ministered God's forgiveness and His healing to her grieving heart. In time she was able to resume her positive, Christ-centered life.

Whatever the cause of grief, some people never rise up and move on. They find themselves trapped in grief, filled with guilt, regret, and self condemnation. They are trapped with thoughts of "if only." "If only I had loved my mother more and been there when she needed me, she wouldn't have died." These kinds of regrets are nearly always false guilt. They are lies from the enemy, the accuser. "If only I'd been a better wife or husband I wouldn't have experienced divorce." This may or may not have been true. We need to ask God's forgiveness and forgive those who have sinned against us and

decide to rise up and move on. “If only I’d been a better child my parents wouldn’t have divorced.” Again, that is just a lie of the enemy that devastates many people’s lives. “If only I hadn’t let my daughter go out that night she wouldn’t have been killed by that drunk driver.” Again, that is false guilt. “If only I’d listened to my mother, I wouldn’t have married this man.” That could be true, but that kind of regret and self recrimination, which is from the enemy as well as our own conscience, can eat on a person endlessly.

Then there is another reality to grief; a most significant point: A spirit of grief can take residence within a person. By a spirit of grief, I mean a demonic spirit from the enemy. Please understand that grief is an emotion, a normal healthy emotion which is the way we work through loss. But every emotion, whether it is anger, fear, jealousy, grief, or whatever it is, can be invaded by the enemy with a demonic spirit to exacerbate the problem and torment us. Because of guilt, anger, and resentment, some people get stuck in grief and cannot get healed. It is as if their feet are in quick sand. Instead of normal grief, they are trapped by that spirit of grief from the devil. I have seen that spirit in people’s eyes. I have cast that demonic spirit out of people, and only after that, could they find relief. Have you known people that were trapped in grief? They seem to have given up and died emotionally and spiritually.

My wife had an uncle who was born in south Texas. He was a tall, good looking young man. I have noticed that all men born in Texas are tall and good looking. Yes, you guessed it. When he was a young man he was very wild, drinking and fighting. After he was married, he and his wife had a son and little daughter. He accepted Christ in a Pentecostal church. Several years later, when his daughter was 5 years old, she was standing up in the front seat when he had to stop to avoid an accident. She hit her face on the dashboard. Not long after that, she developed cancer of the sinuses. They took her to the best hospitals and doctors. They had their church and many other churches pray for her. They knew that God heals. They were certain their daughter would be healed, but the cancer grew in a terrible way and she died. Only a few days after she died, his wife had a vision of their daughter in heaven running around in a beautiful yellow dress holding Jesus’ hand. God gave them this wonderful vision to comfort them and give them an assurance of His provision. But the father was angry at God. He was also feeling guilty because of his responsibility for the accident. Over a period of time, he started drinking. He became very bitter. He quit the church, and within a few years he died. The situation was too much for him, and I share this story not in judgment but with compassion. I don’t understand why this terrible thing happened to his little daughter and why she was not healed as a result of prayer. Frequently, God does not answer our “why?” questions. I do know that this life is temporary, this is not our home, and we are strangers and pilgrims here. Our home is eternal in the heavens where there are no more tears and no more pain. We need to cling to that truth. We need to cling to Christ.

When grief comes, and it will come, we need to let our Lord comfort us and heal our wounded hearts. We should not expect that this is going to happen instantly or even quickly. If we refuse to allow ourselves to be trapped by the lies and accusations of the enemy, then God will bring healing. We need to forgive everyone (including ourselves) involved in a situation of loss. We need to resist the spirit of grief. There have been many times when I have led people through a process of forgiveness and repentance and all the things that are involved in inner healing. Then, I had them rebuke and renounce a spirit of grief and command it to come out and they experienced something leaving them and immediately their life changed.

The book of Hebrews says that one of the reasons that Christ came was to release those who are in bondage to the fear of death.¹¹ Death is our enemy, but Paul told the Thessalonians that we should “*grieve not as others do who have no hope.*”¹² Now I would also remind you that grief is one of the root causes of much sickness, emotional and physical sickness. Remember the story I shared about the woman who had pain in her eyes. I learned that it began 4 years before when her little son had died. I led her to forgive her doctor, to forgive God, to repent of blaming God, and to forgive herself. Then I prayed for her to be healed of the trauma of that experience. I prayed for her wounded heart. I prayed for her eyes, and then I had her renounce the spirit of grief and prayed for the pain in her eyes to leave. Immediately all of the pain left. Her eyes were healed.

Time of Reflection

Abraham mourned and wept. We must allow tears to flow when we experience loss, if we can. For some people who have never been allowed to cry or express emotions when they were children or who were afraid to express those emotions, it is as if a big dam is inside of them. Pray and ask the Lord to come and open up that dam so they can express emotions and be healed. Express your emotions. Cry! Remember that Jesus wept when His friend Lazarus died. Allow the Lord to heal your emotions, to melt the ice, to tear down the walls. Be quiet before the Holy Spirit and let Him reveal the walls inside that He desires to dismantle.

If you have suffered and felt guilt because of the death of a loved one or because of another loss, realize the Lord forgives us for our sins. Repent and ask Him to forgive you. It may be false guilt. If so, you need to renounce the lies of the enemy. Maybe you have experienced guilt because of a miscarriage or an abortion. If abortion, ask the Lord to forgive you, and I suggest you ask the child to forgive you. I’m not suggesting you literally communicate with their spirit, but simply tell the Lord you want to ask that child to forgive you. This is a necessary action to bring closure for some. Maybe

you have experienced guilt because of sins of the past. You have hurt your spouse, children, or parents. All you can do is repent and ask for forgiveness from the Lord and, if possible, from those you hurt. Perhaps you have experienced a trauma because of a death, a divorce, an accident, or a physical attack. Allow the Holy Spirit to enable you to forgive all of those who hurt you or your loved ones in that experience. Ask the Lord to come in and to heal your broken heart, to put the broken pieces back together.

“And then Abraham rose up” to get on with his life. Perhaps for someone who reads this message, it is time for you to rise up and go on. *“He buried his wife.”* There is a time for grief to end. If you have been overcome with a spirit of grief, renounce it. Jesus has power over it. Recognize what it is: it is the enemy! Command that spirit to leave you by the authority of Christ.

Abraham recognized that he was a stranger, a temporary resident in the land, and that there was a higher purpose for his life. There is a higher purpose for you. You are not disqualified from fulfilling the purpose, the destiny that God has planned for your life. It is time to go on.

I suggest that you cup your hands in front of you and imagine your loved one in your hands. Now, lift your hands up to the Lord and lay your loved one at His feet. "Lord, help me to trust You and to release my loved one into Your merciful hands.

Lord Jesus, come and heal my wounded heart. Come, Holy Spirit, set me free. Amen."

Endnotes

- (1) Hebrews 11:11
- (2) I Peter 3:6
- (3) Ecclesiastes 3:4
- (4) Romans 12:15
- (5) Ephesians 2:19
- (6) John 16:33
- (7) John 16:33
- (8)
- (9) John 16:33
- (10) Hebrews 13:5
- (11) Philip Yancey, Disappointment with God, Harper Paperbooks, 1988.
- (12) Hebrews 2:15
- (13) I Thessalonians 4:13

